

Morrison Zion Evangelical Lutheran Church

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September 25, 2005
19th Sunday after Pentecost
Philippians 2:1-5
Pastor Randy Ott

First Lesson: Ezekiel 18:1-4, 25-32
Psalm of the Day: Psalm 25
Second Lesson: Philippians 2:1-11
Gospel: Matthew 21:28-32

Got Encouragement?

You have all seen the ads on billboards or in magazines or in the newspaper. Some celebrity, some athlete, some entertainer standing there holding a glass and they have some white gunk on their lip that you are supposed to believe is milk and it says up there in big white letters, “Got milk?” And of course, it is implied that you should get milk so you end up rich, famous, wealthy and in one of these ads like they are. Of course the whole purpose of those ads is to get you to buy more milk and drink milk, right? The question isn’t asked for any other reason.

This morning as we look at these words that I read to you from Philippians, in a sense, our God is coming to us and saying “Got encouragement?” That’s what Paul was saying to the Philippians and that is what he is saying to us—got encouragement? He is not saying it because he is encouraging us to go out and get some. But he is reminding us that as people that are connected to the life and death of Jesus Christ, we do have it. This morning, I wonder, as we consider these words, if we realize it. At times do we go through life with just head knowledge that we have encouragement, compassion, and all these things that comfort, and things like that that our God speaks about in Philippians 2. Or do we go through life having head knowledge that it is there, but as we live our day to day life, do we kind of forget it from time to time. So maybe it becomes more of a real question—got encouragement?

This morning our God reminds us where to find encouragement, comfort, fellowship, tenderness and compassion. Then he also reminds us what a difference it makes, especially in the life of a group of believers—a group of believers like in a congregation. It makes a huge difference because the more we focus on this encouragement and comfort and things like this that our God has for us in Christ Jesus, the more we will be like-minded in having the same purpose—being one in spirit and purpose.

These are rhetorical questions that Paul is asking. The answer he is expecting is “Well, yes. Of course you do.” It’s just a device or way of asking the question to highlight the certainty that you do have it. *If you have any encouragement from being united with Christ, if any comfort from his love, if any fellowship with the Spirit, if any tenderness and compassion*—he is saying, “You know you have these things. You are united to Jesus Christ, you people in Philippi.” As he writes to them, they were concerned about him because he was in prison. So he writes them this letter that says, “Rejoice in the Lord always. I’ll say it again—rejoice.” And he tells them to focus on the encouragement and love and comfort and things like that that you have so that you continue to be like-minded.

Think about who we are by nature. We are born into this world separated from our God. We are born separated from the one in whose image mankind was originally created because Adam and Eve sinned. Because we are born in sin, once we are born, we start sinning. We become very self-centered and things like that that he talks about in our text. We think the world revolves around us as though we are the sun at the center of our solar system. Even though we are that way, our God acted in time. He promised and then he sent the Savior who lived in our place and died in our place and took away every last sin that we ever have committed and ever will commit, and he says, "I love you. You are my own. Here is how much I love you. Here is a meal where you can come and receive my very body and blood that takes away your sins because I want you to know not only from the Word, not only from baptism, but also from the wine and the wafer that I love you intensely and that I have made you my own." When we recognize that, then of course we've got encouragement—of course we've got comfort—of course we've got fellowship—of course we've got tenderness and compassion when we realize who we are and what our God has done for us.

But honestly, do you wake up every morning encouraged? You can't wait to get out of bed and go and face the day? Do you wake up with a "let me at 'em" attitude every day of your life? Or do you need encouragement at times? Do you live outside of this encouragement from time to time where you are going through the motions of day to day life and inside your heart feels like it is shriveling and you are looking at the difficulties that are in front of you. Whether it is in relationships or at work or with your family or with your health and you feel anything but encouraged—I have got to believe that we all have times like that, don't we? If you ever wondered, "Where in the world can I find encouragement?" Then you turn on Dr. Phil and say, "That doesn't work." Do you look at the bottom of a glass and try to find your encouragement there? Do you look for some thrill or excitement—sex outside of marriage—to find encouragement or something to make you feel alive and discover it's not there? Our God comes to us this morning and reminds us that if we want encouragement he says, "Find it in being united with Christ."

I have got to believe that when I don't feel encouragement, it is probably because I'm not spending enough time being united with Christ—that I'm busy with my work as a Pastor—working with the Word but not doing it personally—bringing it to others but not applying it to myself. So I go through those times where the ministry doesn't feel like a great career choice. It's because I am not being united with Christ. I have to believe that it is the same for you. If you are going through days and difficult times and you are wondering and you are worrying and you are stressing and you are fretting, it is probably because you are not being united with Christ enough. You are not finding time for his Word. You are not rejoicing in your baptism every day where Christ washed away your sins and made you his own through something as simple as water and his promise in his Word. Maybe we are not rejoicing and finding encouragement in that Word in worship regularly or outside of worship with fellow Christians, as we study God's Word together so that as iron sharpens iron, one man sharpens another.

I tell you, the times when I feel most encouraged and most ready to go take on Satan and the world are when I am in the Word with my fellow believers as we discuss God's Word and I see how it has touched their hearts and how it has shaped them and made

them what they are, and I see the encouragement and the comfort they find from it. Then it reminds me that I need to get into that Word more often myself.

I think we have head knowledge of this. I think we have head knowledge that when I am in God's Word, God's Spirit is going to strengthen me. I think at times that we don't have the day to day knowledge—the heart knowledge of it—so that we actually live it. And because we have a sinful nature that can find all kinds of excuses why I don't need to be at worship, why I don't need to be in the Word, why I don't need to focus on Christ because I got too busy with this and too busy with that, we deprive ourselves of the encouragement and the joy that God wants us to have in day to day life. It's sad but it's true. We do that. I think each and every one of us does it at one time or another. We know it but sometimes just the day to day things can switch our priorities around.

Let me give you an example. This last week in our congregation we had eight Bible studies. Five regular Bible studies, two women's Bible studies—the widow's group and the Bread of Life last Saturday—and the Youth Group Bible study. So that is eight different opportunities for people to gather together and have iron sharpen iron, right? We had 90 people at those. That's pretty good. That is something to thank the Lord for—90 people sharpening each other. We had one soccer scrimmage last Tuesday. I counted 90 people at the soccer scrimmage. Now I am not saying, "Don't go to soccer." I'm not saying that soccer is the enemy. What I am saying is that at times do we have our priorities turned around? If we can't find time to get to one of those eight opportunities, but the one opportunity is there, and we can get the same number of people there? I know that we are busy. I know that we have things to do. But if we want to face day to day life with encouragement, with comfort, with tenderness and compassion, our God tells us it comes from being united with Christ. The only way that we are united with Christ is through Word and Sacrament. It's not through looking at how fuzzy a caterpillar is and saying "Isn't that interesting how God made them?" It is from Word and Sacrament.

In Word and Sacrament we find that every time we have despised God's Word, every time that we have turned some other place for comfort, encouragement and all these other things, our God says to us, "I forgive you. I have lived and died to take away that sin of despising preaching and the Word"—as Luther put it in the Third Commandment. Our God loves us. Our God wants to welcome us back with open arms and give us encouragement and comfort so that we can face day to day life and let our light shine so that it attracts other people to say, "Hey, I can see those people are different. They live with an attitude, they live with a confidence that I don't have, and I want it." Because we are going to face difficulties in life and we, as Christians, face them with a trust that God loves us and God will see to it that all things will work out for our good—that will attract others to want to know why and how. Then we will be able to carry out the purpose that God has given us because he says that as we have encouragement from being united with him, we will grow in this unity and we will focus on that purpose that he has given us.

The purpose God has given us is simply this—to glorify him by growing in knowledge of him and by going in that knowledge and sharing it with others. To nurture those who believe and to reach out to those who don't yet believe so that they may know that

Jesus Christ has taken away their sins. The more we are encouraged from this unity with God, the more we will see that this is what our ultimate purpose is. This is what we are all about.

So as we grow through this encouragement, then some of the other little petty things that at times go on within a congregation—being upset because they decided to put a different color than we wanted in a carpet some place, and so they didn't make the decision I wanted so I am going to now show them that they are wrong and I am going to stop worshipping or I am going to stop coming to different things or I am going to stop supporting the work of the Gospel with my offerings because I don't like what they are doing—recognize it as the work of the devil and not a fruit of the Spirit. The more we are encouraged through our unity with Christ, the more we are going to say, "I want the Gospel to go forward to believers and unbelievers alike because that is the purpose that God has given us. I want to put others' interests ahead of my own because I want others to know the Gospel of Jesus and how it saved them."

Within congregations we have sinners among sinners and at times we get caught up in things that in the scheme of things don't matter. We get caught up in things when a decision was made that we didn't like so we don't want to support anything anymore. Our God tells us that that is why he wants us to have encouragement from being united with Christ so that we become one in spirit and purpose—so that we become like-minded—so that we have the same love—so that we put others ahead of ourselves. And that won't happen more often until we are united with Christ in finding that encouragement. Then we will see that what truly matters is that the children among us learn to know who is Jesus, and that the adults among us learn to know more and more who is Jesus, and that the people that don't know Christ that we come into contact with every day learn to know who is Jesus. That is our purpose.

Our privilege is that we get to know him better day by day, and our privilege is that we get to share him.