

Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost, Year A
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St. Mark's Episcopal Church | Milwaukee, WI
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Sometimes living up to what a Christian ought to be can be daunting. When I think about Christian virtues like prudence, justice, temperance, or fortitude...not to mention faith, hope, and love...I can get a little worried that I'm not living up to the ideal. They feel large, these virtues. Bright, somehow, and living in a world that I don't always recognize. How would one cleave to virtuous Christian living in a time of such stress and confusion? I can't manage temperance or prudence at the moment, though I'm clinging to hope, which feels like quite an accomplishment.

Last week, I preached on Paul's letter to the Philippians, and this week we're going to go back to that letter. I was wondering about my draw to it, and I think it might have something to do with the encouragement Paul gives the church there. He is sending them love and giving them a fortifying reminder of the reason they exist in the first place — to follow their Lord Christ, no matter what comes up. If you haven't read Philippians in a while, I would recommend it. It's 4 chapters and takes about 10 minutes. What if these words are the exact ones we need to hear this morning? What if encouragement is more of a Christian virtue that we've given it credit for? It's not as sexy as faith, hope, and love, but right now, encouragement might be exactly what we need.

I want to tell you about my friend Barbara. Barbara has thick white hair and teaches senior yoga. She also runs the youth program at a church I attended many years ago. She's a fantastic broad, and we hit it off really well when she was in her 50s and I was in my 20s. At the time, I really wasn't sure whether I wanted to go through the rigamarole of the priesthood — it seemed like a lot of hoops to jump through, a lot of committees to meet, and a lot of bother. At the same time, I had this little tug in me that told me I ought to pursue it, but I had a pretty serious case of cold feet.

Enter Barbara. Over a few years, she would just tell me, straight to my face, that I had to do it. And then she would tell me it would all work out. I have to admit I never shared her faith, but in a way that didn't matter. Barbara had faith enough for both of us, and she used her time and energy to offer me encouragement, as I imagine she did to people all over the church.

I may have told you this once already, but it's a good story, so I'll tell it again. Once, Barbara and I were taking a group of high school kids to a really gorgeous monastery at the seaside. Were the high school kids interested in the monastery? Sort of yes and sort of no. Regardless, Barbara and I kept them all safe, well fed, taught them their prayers, and returned them to their parents in one piece. On the last day of our pilgrimage, Barbara and I went into the gift shop at the

monastery, and I saw a beautiful stole there that I just loved. I thought about buying it, and then I decided not to. After all, I hadn't been ordained, and it seemed like a really long road before I could put that stole to use, if ever. She looked me in the eyes and told me right then and there that I was going to buy it and that I was going to be a priest. Her encouragement was an absolute blessing to me that day. It was a special kind of love that she showed me; she was able to have faith in a future that I didn't share. And she was able to carry me along with her.

And this is, I think, what St. Paul is trying to do with the Philippians. Keep it up, church, he says. Keep doing what you're doing even when it is difficult. Remember to follow Jesus and to be supportive of one another. He mentioned people by name: Euodia and Syntyche and Clement. He might as well be saying Barbara and Georgia and Vince. He's trying to have faith for them when they don't always have faith enough for themselves. And I think he might be reaching out across time and space to do the same thing to us. St. Paul says: "Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus."

Sometimes we need God's messenger to offer encouragement. I had my wonderful Barbara. We all have the words of St. Paul. These saints can hold enough faith for all of us, even when it seems like the circumstances of the day are overwhelming.

We are absolutely going to make it through this time of exile. We are absolutely going to sing and worship together again in our sanctuary. And in the meantime, we are going to continue to exercise our Christian virtues and respond to the call of God in our lives. I don't think our encouragers are telling us that the road won't be long and hard. I think what they are telling us is that with our mind in Christ, we are empowered to walk it.

So do not be afraid. Rejoice in the Lord. Look for encouragement when you need it. And when you have a little extra faith to share, be the encourager for someone else. We will come to the other side of this strange time stronger, wiser, more nimble, and more faithful to our calling as followers of Christ. Amen.