

## "A Word of Encouragement"

1 John 1:1-5; Acts 4:32-37

Highlands Presbyterian Church, Columbus

April 8, 2018 – 2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday of Easter – Rev. Ronald Botts

Do you remember that old cowboy song “Home on the Range”? It describes a place “Where seldom is heard a discouraging word, and the skies are not cloudy all day.”

Well, where exactly is that place? Does it exist anymore? Did it ever? Certainly there is no shortage of discouraging words in our world today. All you’ve got to do is check the daily newspaper to get plenty of them. Lots of people won’t even watch the evening news because they don’t want to end the day on a downer. It’s not that they don’t care what’s going on in the world, but that it’s painful to hear more of the same day after day after day.

Most of us find that discouraging words are draining. It takes a lot out of us, especially when we feel helpless to do anything about things on the national and international levels. Sometimes all we can seem to do is shake our heads and try to move on.

Isn’t it true that many of us come to church, in part, to hear an encouraging word, something positive? Most of us have enough negativity going on that we yearn for a true word on the positive side. Well, I think that is an important part of what we do in congregational life.

Well, yes. I know we have these symbolic candles on our altar today to recall the horrors of the holocaust. It’s not pleasant to think about man’s inhumanity to man. That may seem contrary to what I just said about finding encouragement here, but I think not.

We participate in the Yom HaShoah for several reasons: First, to remember and honor all those for whom life was taken away from them for nothing they had done. All six million that are represented by these flames were individual persons, like the two names we lifted up in specific today: Elsa and Suzy. They are not abstract statistics, but flesh and blood individuals like you and me. They were forced from their homes and crowded onto trains bound for consecration camps.

Yes, we remember the past to honor and keep alive the memory of millions of persons from the not so long ago past. Secondly, we remember this difficult time because some individuals truly did heroic things and endangered themselves to help others.

The Dispatch carried an article last week about a Dutch schoolteacher named Johan van Hulst, who died recently at the amazing age of 107. His story is significant in that van Hulst was credited with saving the lives of more than 600 Jewish children by hiding them in his building | right under the nose of German forces. He never sought credit for his dangerous acts, but later said to a reporter, “I actually only think about what I have not been able to do... [of] those... children that I could not... save.”

Simon Wiesenthal, from whom the quote is taken is our bulletin today, was himself a holocaust survivor and dedicated his life to raising public awareness of the need to rightfully prosecute those who evaded justice for their part in Germany’s past. His tenacity for tracking

down perpetrators inspired survivors of the Holocaust, and other genocides, to believe that justice can and will prevail, even with the passage of time.

Yes, we join in Yom HaShoah remembrance to honor and remember those who were the victims, those who heroically responded to the needs at hand and, finally, so that we do not recreate and repeat past horrors in our world today. If we truly commit ourselves to a different course, then we engage in bringing hope now and in the future. This tragic story then can serve to bring encouragement as we move ahead in our time. Things can change if people of good will commit themselves to that.

Today our New Testament reading tells of first-century Christians who also sought encouragement and where they found it. The text from Acts says, "There was not a needy person among them." That's because those who owned property sold it and gave the proceeds to the apostles for distribution "to each as any had need."

We also find there a mention of one of those who sold his property for the good of others. His name was Barnabas. He demonstrates the depth of his faith by sharing his money for the common betterment. This man was an example in trying times.

Now Barnabas actually was a nickname. This man's given name was Joseph. But the apostles called him Barnabas, because it was a compliment and meant "Son of Encouragement."

What an interesting and descriptive name! Barnabas must have had a real gift for encouraging people when they needed it the most. In fact, the passage for today tells us that Barnabas sold a field he owned and gave the money to the church to help those members who were in need.

Sometime later, after the persecution of Christians caused many believers to leave their homes and settle elsewhere, Christians started telling their new neighbors about Jesus, and some were converted. When the apostles in Jerusalem heard of this, they sent Barnabas to help, and the Bible points out that Barnabas strongly encouraged these new converts to remain true to Christ.

The ability to truly encourage other people is not a gift that comes natural to everyone. If it were, nobody would have bothered to give Joseph this nickname of Barnabas, because his ability would have been so common. No, he was noted as an encourager precisely because this gift is often missing.

To some degree, however, all of us can be Barnabas-like, too. We can be ones who encourage others, often with more capacity for this than we might think.

You might ask, "What can I do?" Perhaps the first thing is to see the importance of an encouraging word in the lives of others. It can be very obvious to us when it is missing from our lives. So if we need it, why wouldn't others need it?

What are the characteristics of an encourager? First, we can build people up. It's so easy to be critical and to tear people down, but we're told to do just the opposite. We're instructed to build up.

Adults are often quick to lavish praise on children, and kids need that. That seems to come rather natural. And that should be a model for how we deal with adults as well. A lot of people are carrying big loads or have heavy hearts. A sincere word of praise can be very encouraging. Just to express your interest in them and concern for them can often go a long way to making a bad situation better.

Another form of encouragement we can undertake is through prayer. I know it helps me when someone takes just a few moments to say, "I'm praying for you." It might be only part of a brief conversation, but the lift they give can last for days. So you can pray for people and let them know you are doing it. Then you have to carry through.

One person, whose wife was undergoing chemotherapy, was having great trouble. Problems which he could have handled rather easily under normal circumstances seemed to loom in all directions. Discouragement lurked around every corner.

He wrote: "[My prayers... were multiplied by the prayers of others. Friendships were deepened as I was forced to allow people to assure me with [their] words.... No day went by without a conversation, letter or phone call giving me love and hope. The greatest discovery is that I can have joy when I don't feel like it."

With the ups and downs life brings, there are times when all of us can best fulfill Christ's call to love our neighbor by being a Barnabas to them — offering a word of encouragement. And there are other times when we are the ones who need to hear that word, and we shouldn't be reluctant to accept it when offered.

Fortunately none of us will have to endure a crisis of the magnitude of the holocaust, but that doesn't mean life can't have a devastating impact upon us. Some former prisoners in concentration camps point to others who gave them the strength and courage to face just that one day and to move on to tomorrow. If there is encouragement, hope in the midst of almost total hopelessness, then it can surely make a difference in our lives as well.

Giving a hopeful word when needed is one of the most important things that the people of a church can do. The second most important thing is being ready to accept it when offered. At the heart of both is the realization that we can care and also be cared for. That, after all, is something Jesus taught us. Caring, encouraging people are at the heart of good congregations. Let that be said of us at Highlands!