



Sermon delivered by  
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Quail Hollow Presbyterian Church  
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"The Encouraged Life"  
(I Thessalonians 2: 9-13)

As the young child came down the Preschool hallway, he was holding a watercolor still wet and fresh from the easel, and in the other hand he juggled his coat and lunch bag. Half way to his mother, the coat fell out of his grasp, followed by the lunch bag, at which point the young man stopped and began to cry. His mother called to him, encouraging him to pick up the coat and the lunch bag. His mother told him he could do it, but he was not buying what his mother was encouraging him to do. Finally, the little man collapsed on the floor. His mother went to him, and gathering him into her arms, she told her son, *We'll do it together*. And together they picked up the coat and the lunch bag and the wet painting, and off they went to conquer the day.

I have a distant memory of a comparable experience. Back in my early years when life seemed so overwhelming, I recall my parents providing the helping hand when I needed the helping hand. Later on, when I got into making model airplanes, I would ask my father for help, and he would sit beside me reading the instructions and when needed applying the glue. My father proved to be a great help in my model airplane enterprise. And, then, of course, there was the time I learned to drive a car, and our father was right there beside me telling me what to do, how to do it, and his helping encouragement made the difference for when I took my driver's test.

I would like to believe that my experience and the experience of that Preschool student is the rule and not the exception, but I know it is far from being the rule. Sadly, I have met too many people who did not have the helping hand

they needed, people who were not encouraged when it came to building model airplanes or driving a car. Over the years, I have come to know too many people whose mother did not embrace them and tell them, *We'll do it together*. Instead, I have known people who have learned the hard way, people who were students in the “school of hard knocks,” and I have often wondered what became of those people.

Being a Christian, walking the walk and talking the talk, is a lot harder than it may seem or appear. Amen? Being a Christian involves obeying a bunch of rules such as the Ten Commandments and the Sermon on the Mount and the Great Commandment. And yet, being a Christian also means this: we take the Lord at His word, we believe Him when He says, *I am with you, always*, which is His way of saying, *We'll do it together*. That is the good news of the gospel. The theology of the Christian faith is that in Jesus Christ and empowered by Holy Spirit God gives us the “helping hand” we need to live a life not just pleasing to God but highly enjoyable to us.

When St. Paul organized those early congregations, he did not give them a set of blue prints and expect them to be the church of Jesus Christ. Paul did for them what was done for him. Paul was there, in person; he was with them. He showed up, he helped them, he taught them how to live life as God has designed life to be lived. I like what Paul says when he tells the church in Thessalonica, *We dealt with you like a father with his children*. I know what that means. I have been there. I know what it feels like to be encouraged by a parent. Paul goes on to describe how he dealt with those people, and he did so by encouraging, by standing beside them with a helping hand. Paul helped them personally, literally, faithfully, generously so they would not miss living the life made available to them through the sacrificial love of Jesus Christ. Paul showed them, he taught them what the Christian life is all about by living it with them, together. The Greek word “to encourage” means to stand beside in order to help.

Another memory from years ago: I recall how my father taught me how to swing a baseball bat. Even now, I can recall how he positioned the bat in my hands and how he swung the bat with me, *with me* so I might hit the ball, which is, of course, the point of baseball. If you don't hit the ball in the seventh game of the World Series, you end up playing for the Dodgers.

Paul and Timothy and Silvanus, they went to those Christians in Thessalonica, and they showed them what the Christian life looked like, and they did it first-hand. They did by helping them one-on-one to understand what Christian living is all about and why Christian living makes the difference that it makes, a difference far different from other religions, a difference defined by a God Who comes to us *personally* to show us how to live and to live abundantly, generously, joyfully; how to live the life won, redeemed, reserved for us in Jesus Christ. And if we don't live that life, we end up living a life that will be overwhelming. If we don't live that life, we end up like that Preschool boy in the hallway, then on the floor, in tears, and not unwilling to pull it all together but unable, unless someone was willing to help him.

Friends, there are people today who are trying their best to pull it together, to keep it together, and they are going at it all by themselves. We need to pray for such people. There are religions that make it quite clear that if you can't get it together and keep it together, there is a place reserved just for you, and it isn't a place any of us want to be part of, not even for 5 minutes. The Christian faith is called good news because it is good, good for us, and what is good is that God is with us. According to some religions, you have to find God, so good luck. The good news of Christianity is that God has come looking for whom? For us! And once the Lord finds us, once we allow ourselves to be found, it is then we hear the Lord say to us, *We'll live this life together*. Because as we know by now, together is better. Together is the way God has designed life to be lived.

Now, if you ask the world, you will get a different answer. If you ask the rough and tumble world, it's everyone for themselves. Dog eat dog, last man, last woman standing. But the good and faithful word, the encouraging word, not the human word but God's word is that we are not alone. God is with us, and once God has found us, God's promise is to never leave us, never. The encouraging word is not what we are able to do. If left up to you and me, we are on that Preschool hallway floor for a long, long time. That's a lot of tears! But that's not God's word. God's word is that we are not alone. God's word is that we live and move and have our very being *with* God. Time and again, God says to us, God reminds us, *We'll do it together*. And God is willing to live this life with us not because we are so incompetent, though at times we are; rather, God lives this life with us because that is how the good Lord has designed life, this life to be lived.

That's the good news we want to proclaim for one more year. That's the news we want more and more people and children to believe in and to read and to share and to live because far too often it is easy to believe the complete opposite, that this life is simply overwhelming, and when this life breaks your heart, no one will come to your rescue. The good news is that we have been rescued. One day long ago at a place called Calvary, God made a promise that has been kept for over 2000 years, a promise that will never be broken, a promise the echo of which can be heard today, *We'll live this life together*.

Last week, I asked one of you how you were doing. 2017 has been a challenging year for you. You looked me in the eye, and you said, "With Christ, I can do anything." I wasn't expecting you to say that, but when I heard *that* I smiled because that isn't a human answer. That's a God answer. I smiled because you're living the life, a life worthy of a God Who is willing, very willing to drop to His knees to help us back to our feet; the God Who has made it so very clear that we are doing this thing called life, and we are doing it *together*.

Any god who is willing, *willing* to live my life with me is worthy of my worship, my praise, my life, my all, and the last time I checked, the only God willing to do that for me and *with* me is a God by the Name of Jesus Christ.

**Let us pray:** Ever faithful God, by Holy Spirit encourage us to live lives of faith, hope and love, not according to our best effort but according to the good news that You are always with us; that with You all things are possible, and all to the glory of Christ, the exclusive Saviour of the human race. Amen.