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Developing a Ministry of Encouragement

By
Claudette Wilson

I don't remember deciding I would develop a ministry of encouragement, but I do remember well the beginning of my understanding of what it meant to be encouraged. It is a memory that goes back to a rocking chair my grandmother had in her kitchen on a farm in Tennessee, a rocker I still have in my own home. I remember sitting in her lap as she rocked me many times for several years until I was old enough that my feet drug the floor. I loved what happened in that chair. It created a longing I often wish I could reclaim. In that rocker my grandmother wisely took time to encourage and strengthen me. She literally inspired me with courage.

She knew my parents were young and immature. They had two babies before they were twenty years old and were still growing up. Still, she took time out of her busy days to help me see the character she saw within me. In doing so she gave me her own life model, a model that went beyond survival. Her model demonstrated a concern to

draw out of others and make known to them the rich characters within themselves. She was the mother of ten children, a wife of a husband who had been paralyzed by a stroke at the peak of his working years. She knew from personal experience the power of a ministry of encouragement.

I learned two things from her. First, she chose her words carefully. This is not to say that encouraging others is mystifying or difficult, but I have been strengthened most when someone has carefully worded what they saw in me. For example, for most of my life others have described me as "sweet" or "nice." Those words are meant as compliments but for some reason they don't inspire me. Quite the opposite, such words make me question myself. "Have I come this far in life simply by being 'sweet' and 'nice'?" Do we make encouragement specific? My grandmother did. She told me specifically how I was learning to be patient or sensitive.

Let me illustrate. One of my responsibilities at Grandmother's house was to gather eggs each day. Some of the hens were excitable and would peck at me from their nests, but I learned that if I remained quiet soon they would be distracted by the corn I had placed outside of the coop. My grandmother noticed this and told me that my patience was unusual for a city girl. She told me that patience and

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perseverance were probably two of my most valuable virtues which would serve me well. Today, I still recall her words as I exercise patience and perseverance in simplifying my days, especially now as I work on my doctoral dissertation. A proverb states, “A word fitly spoken is like apples of gold in pictures of silver” (Prov 25:11). My grandmother’s carefully chosen thoughts, fitly spoken words, were like taking a warm bath.

Second, she taught me that a ministry of encouragement must be practiced. I am amazed! As I write in my warm study equipped with a computer, printer, modem, desk, paper, and stamps I am able to look back forty years to a kitchen table above which a light bulb hung on a cord from the ceiling, and there I see my grandmother early in the morning penning a note on scraps of paper that didn’t match. When finished, she rushed out to the mailbox—in all kinds of weather—to leave her note with some change for the mailman. Her day had just begun. She then hitched two mules to a plow and worked the garden. She taught me to schedule into each day a time to write notes of encouragement to those my spirit was prompted to inspire with strength.

Self-Encouragers

My grandmother demonstrated to me the value of being strengthened by others. But another important influence has shaped my ministry of encouragement. It grew out of two graduate studies experiences. The first happened during an exciting interview I had in my master’s program in counseling. My professor told me she was worried about me. I seemed to need support and encouragement from others, something, she observed, I could not count on finding often in higher education. I was entering, she told me, a strongly competitive arena which would require me to be thick-skinned. From her perspective, I needed to take care of myself. In one sense my professor was right. To have energy to reach out to others, I needed to be a self-encouraged person. Her suggestion caused me to think carefully about the role of an encourager and particularly about the marks of a self-encourager. The second experience which augmented the first was reading Don Dinkmeyer, *The Encouragement Process* and Lewis Losoncy, *Turning People On*, two scholars who explore the topic of self-encouragement. I pursued and integrated their ideas. As a result, I now equate self-encouragement with self-talk, i.e. I talk to myself in ways that inspire inner strength and provide emotional energy to inspire courage in others. Becoming a self-encourager has helped me encourage others.

Barnabas

The biblical example of Barnabas is a third source that has influenced my ministry of encouragement. I delight and take pleasure in Barnabas’ ministry. Led by God, he encouraged others and was a self-encourager. Barnabas is known in Acts as the “son of encouragement.” Quietly, without fanfare about his generosity, he helped others by selling a field and laying the proceeds at the apostles’ feet. He encouraged early Christians to remain true to the Lord with all of their hearts. Barnabas was a good man, full of the holy spirit and faith.

Barnabas encouraged Paul. He sought Paul, mentored him, and shared his good reputation on Paul’s behalf even when Paul was feared by others. Barnabas accepted Paul and had confidence in him. Nothing seemed to diminish their friendship. Barnabas took Paul to his home on Cyprus. In the presence of Barnabas, Paul blossomed. He appreciated Paul’s unique characteristics even when there was disagreement about John Mark. Barnabas didn’t promote himself. Rather, he found delight in promoting the growth and skill of Paul. Acts begins addressing the two as “Barnabas and Paul” and ends addressing them as “Paul and Barnabas.”

A Ministry in Action—Suggestions and Examples

These three influences, my grandmother, my graduate school experiences, and the biblical example of Barnabas have greatly shaped my ministry of encouragement. Let me now say a few practical words about my ministry in the form of four suggestions and three examples.

1. Practical suggestions:

- a. I keep a daily journal, and as I replay the day, names and actions of people, what they have done or said, come to mind.
- b. On my desk I keep note cards and stamps to write notes.
- c. I carry a pad in my briefcase to jot down promptings during the course of the day. I follow up these promptings with phone calls or notes within the week.
- d. I strive not to quench any promptings for encouragement.

2. Three examples of notes I have written:

Dear _____

I have been thinking about you and praying for you all week as you struggle with a career—actually a complete life-style—change. I believe your motives are pure in this matter. Obviously, you truly are putting the welfare of your own young children above your own desires in this decision. I believe God will bless you in this move because you are making personal sacrifices to insure the spiritual growth of your family.

You are a model of christian integrity and we will miss your example.

Warmly,

Dear _____

It fills me with great joy to know you are to lecture in Poland as a Fulbright Fellow. Those who make decisions about these Fellowships obviously see in you the same things your friends see in you. Let me be specific. First I think of your sincere desire to serve others. That service knows no language barrier and will cross international date lines because it comes from God. Second, I think of your well-developed teaching skills which you have earnestly and conscientiously stretched to accomplish through the years. And finally, I think of your effort to stay current in your field while maintaining an exhausting administrative schedule. All of this has paid off in this prestigious selection.

I am so very happy for you. Praise God from whom all blessings come.

Dear _____

Our phone conversation last night has led me to put into written words some of the things churning in my mind. Once more I am impressed with your steadfastness in the face of great odds. In my opinion it is a miracle that you have maintained a sense of humor in the midst of the disasters that have beset you. Humor is your major link with sanity. That and your mature belief in God.

Please allow me to do some of your errands that might zap your energy. I grocery shop two times a week and could include your list with mine. The cleaners and the drug store are regular stops and it would delight me to lighten your load in this way. I will call you this week to make arrangements.

In His Name,

I have shared sources of influence, practical suggestions, and examples of ways I express my ministry of encouragement. They are mine. They may not be yours. But in the end those of us who find complete contentment in the role of being an encourager will daily look for specific goodness in our colleagues and friends. What we observe we will take time to communicate and thus become sons and daughters of encouragement.