

Sunday, October 14, 2018 – Twenty-First Sunday after Pentecost
“Encourage One Another”

Hebrews 3: 12-19

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Text/Application

Grace, mercy and peace to you from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, Amen.

One of the sad commentaries about life in the West, in particular in the United States today is loneliness. Loneliness is everywhere. Despite our hundreds or thousands in social networks, our increasing urbanization, the 7.5 billion people and growing population of the planet, other things are true, too. In more transient areas like ours, a good proportion of seniors have no family nearby and don't know who they'd turn to in an emergency. Men, in particular, are often starved for deep, meaningful friendships – rates of depression and suicide rising quickly among middle aged and otherwise healthy, productive men. For all of the connectedness and accessibility that our technology brings it also diminishes the need for human contact, as we'll prioritize the blinking notification light or buzzing of our phones for the flesh and blood people right in front of us.

Of course none of this was born in a vacuum – American culture, in particular, is uniquely disposed to this. Our hero is the self-made man, who pulled himself up by the bootstraps with help from no one. Or the stoic, quiet cowboy in the white hat, riding off on his horse into the sunset, alone. We're descended from people who often craved isolation, sought out faraway places with no one else around to tell us how to live or what to do.

Doing things our own way, with no one telling us how to live or what to do – that fits rather nicely with our sinful hearts that rebel against God calling us to a different kind of existence. God's design was not solitary strength or holding up on our own alone. God's design is to make us one in Christ. Yes, to take you, with all your gifts, all your quirks and all your flaws and combine you with a bunch of other people with their own gifts, quirks and flaws, centered in Jesus and turn not away from each other to punish each other into submission but to turn toward the living God.

But you know, there are some aggravations to this arrangement, this being put together by God with other people. Yes, they complement your gifts, that's nice. They notice your quirks, and probably comment on them. Depending on your mood that can be fun, or that can be

annoying. But then there's that third one – they call out your flaws. They'll see the lies you tell yourself, the elephant in the room to which you're turning a blind eye, the shame you try to hide. Yes, they'll poke at your heart and call out the deceitfulness, that rotten fruit borne out of your sin. Not only that but you'll notice their quirks and probably comment on them, which depending on their mood will be fun or annoying. And you'll call out their flaws, the lies they're telling themselves, the elephant in the room to which they're turning a blind eye, the shame they're trying to hide, and you'll poke at their heart. It all has this very combustibility, explosiveness to it, doesn't it? Life with other people can be hard. If you don't believe me, all you have to do is live with other people. One of the biggest philosophers of the 20th century, Sartre, famously summed it up – "Others are hell."

Maybe, just maybe, getting burned by these bad experiences is part of why people try to soothe that aggravation by isolating with our technology, our anonymity in busy cities – but the Faustian bargain, that selling our soul to the devil thing, is that the only thing worse than doing life with others is that we do life alone. And for the faithful life alone is dangerous. Think of those massive redwoods in northern California – literal pillars of strength, right, awe-inspiring and majestic – but they do not stand under their own power. Their roots run just under the surface, hardly sufficient on their own to hold up such a massive tree. The same with a Christian not doing life with other Christians – when we buy into this cultural message to be strong and go it alone we're in danger of falling over. God calls us to a life together and the redwoods are a good model. Their roots get all tangled up with each other – it's chaotic and messy but they lean on and depend on each other for their strength, for their very life. On our own we're weak and vulnerable but together, rooted in Christ, we are strong.

Blast away at the lie: God didn't make us social, relational creatures to subject us to aggravation or annoyance, explosions or "hell." In fact in our Old Testament reading last week He said, "It is not good for man to be alone – let us make a helper suitable for him." It was God who told humankind to be fruitful and multiply, fill the earth and subdue it. It was God who worked through and put up with dysfunctional families, a dysfunctional chosen national Israel, dysfunctional religious faithfulness, dysfunctional kings, dysfunctional priests and dysfunctional prophets to do life with us – the crooked, meandering path through the Old Testament leading to

Jesus, God's Word made flesh who made His dwelling among us. Yes, living right here in relationship, in community with the dysfunctional people of God to forgive, to renew, to encourage with the very best news of all – all that deceitfulness of sin and dysfunction, all that unbelief and doubt and turning away from God was nailed to the cross and judged and put to death. Yes, others were hell for Him, a living hell on earth, enduring the very absence of His Father in Heaven, back turned in judgment on His own Son because of our sin. But then Jesus went to hell, not as punishment but as His victory march over hell, and sin with its' deceit, and death, so that now others aren't hell, but others are the very place we receive community and encouragement.

Friends, God gives this to you today in Jesus. He builds you together with His church – full of people with their own gifts and quirks and flaws, all already judged by Jesus. Jesus encourages you today – and He uses those very people who are sometimes wonderful but sometimes aggravate and annoy, just as you do them. We share in Christ today – not off by ourselves, isolated away but gathered here in this sanctuary. And other people need YOU today, too. They need your encouragement – if you're not here, others are missing out on the gift of God that you are.

Are you feeling isolated, alone, not knowing where you can turn? Do you have people in your life but there's something you've been holding back, expecting to be rejected for your flaw? Would you take a chance, as long as it is called Today? Would you purposefully go out of your way to get to know someone you've been meaning to know a little better? Would you reach out, as long as it is called Today, to a stranger you've never met and start the risky process of putting yourself out there? Yes, literally here in the sanctuary, today, that'd be great but barring that, call up an old friend, or take a chance with someone new, and reject the lie that others are hell for the truth that Jesus suffered hell for us. It's not good for humans to do life alone and this whole Christianity thing is all about being One with a community – all doing life together, Today and for all the todays to come, as one body under the Head of Jesus Christ, our Lord. In His name, Amen.