

**4 Pentecost**  
**June 28, 2020**

**In the name of God, who in Jesus,  
taught us the meaning of unconditional Love.  
AMEN**

I think most of you know the old cowboy song ... "Oh give me a home where the buffalo roam , and the deer and the antelope play... where seldom is heard a discouraging word, and the skies are not cloudy all day." Well,

One of my all- time favorite cartoons shows a scene from the Western prairie. A large herd of buffalo stand on one side. A single buffalo stands all alone, far away, on the other side. One buffalo in the herd motions toward the single buffalo and says to another buffalo in the herd, "What's the deal with him?" The other buffalo replies, "Oh he just heard a discouraging word."

We hear lots of discouraging words these days. Discouraging words about the tenacity of the Covid-19 virus. Discouraging words about the economic hardships of so many people. Discouraging words giving different and confusing interpretations about moving into new phases to deal with the virus, discouraging words about Americans whose desire for personal freedom overrides their sense of social responsibility, discouraging words of hate emanating from some of God's children as if they never heard of The Golden Rule. All very discouraging.

So, where can we find EN-couraging words? I think there are places to find encouragement. First, we can be grateful for the people who give us support, confidence and hope. Look up the list of synonyms for the word "encourage" and you will find words such as "cheer up," "uplift," and "inspire." Those words come to mind when we look at the heroic essential workers who courageously go to work each day so that we can live with some sense of normalcy. Or we look at the medical workers who care for the victims of this virus, or for our own ongoing medical needs, or when we look at the scientists and researchers who are working tirelessly to find therapies and a vaccine for this disease. They all encourage US to do our best to deal with this new reality of our lives now. Who are the people in your own life who do not say a discouraging word, but rather give you encouragement? Give thanks to God for them. And be sure to thank them.

In our scripture readings this morning, we have encouraging words from Paul. He is continuing his theme of life *before* Jesus Christ and life lived *with* him. Roman life had a kind of sickness that was spreading in society, especially at its affluent levels. There was an increasing loss of meaning and purpose, both in the affairs of the government and in personal life. Some would say Rome was at a point not unlike Western culture in our own lifetime. It was as if a whole civilization had grown weary. I think all of us are experiencing some sense of weariness as this pandemic and the profound reality and sickness of racism and privilege rages on. At such times, life can be characterized by meaninglessness. Certainly there was a strong sense of degradation in the empire of Paul's time.

But again and again we are encouraged to hear the call to abandon lower living and to retain a sense of higher purpose. Paul offers Jesus Christ as the way of personal renewal. When he says to the people, "The free GIFT of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord, he is not speaking of a reward

after death. Paul is offering the encouraging words of a focus for living and a source of grace that gives new meaning to life lived in the here and now of our world.

The noted theologian, Richard Rohr encourages us to be more mindful of the presence of God and to be more intentional in unveiling the Image and Likeness of God in all that we see and all that we do. Being the IMAGO DEI, made in the image of God, is our inherent identity. Rohr suggests that since we are made in the likeness of God, we should increasingly find more opportunities to incarnate LOVE in each of our unique contexts.

Think of it: as the Gospel said: “Whoever welcomes you, welcomes me –and therefore, welcomes the one who sent me!! That’s talking about God. God to whom all our prayers are addressed. So, when we welcome the stranger/the new one, or – the oh so other – we are welcoming in the name of God alive in us as God was alive in Jesus! It comes down to just – stop it -stop it – if there is any feeling at all within us that another child of God – another Human being is somehow less than, because they are different or because of their living circumstances. Just think of our Christmas message of Emmanuel, which means God with us.... Which we prayerfully sing every Christmastide when we welcome the Incarnation, that God has come to dwell with us.

When I was in Seminary in New York City, I was blessed that the Dean of the Seminary, Jim Fenhagen was my Mentor. Our very first meeting was about prayer and one of the other Seminarians, rather sheepishly said, he never really knew if he was really praying when he tried to pray. The Dean simply said, “Go out into the streets of New York City, look into the faces of the people; you will find yourself praying. In fact, look at them as though you are looking at Christ, because each one of us, no matter what, is a child of God.” Well, at that time I had a part time job as a microbiologist at a Veteran’s Hospital. That next morning, I had the experience of riding in the elevator with a Veteran who had no limbs, no arms and no legs, just a head on a torso strapped in a wheel chair. It was an unforgettable experience for me. But the Good News is that, as I said Good Morning to him, I nearly added “Christ.” I looked into his eyes and realized that what the Dean had said had become real for me. And suddenly I remembered that when Dick and I were first married, we lived in Bavaria while he was at the Army Language School there. There, rather than say “Good Morning,” people greeted each other with “Gruss Gott”, which meant Greet God!! How much more succinctly could we acknowledge that we are all children of God!

In today’s Gospel, when our Lord turns toward an actual little one or to ones considered “little”, and says, “Whoever gives even a cup of water to one of these little ones in the name of a disciple,” he is pointing out that Love, hospitality and caring begin with something as utterly simple as the offer of a drink of water...things that we CAN do if we let Love rule our actions. We hear Jesus sound this theme that is central to all his teaching. We may speak eloquently of Love. We may pass laws making love mandatory. But at the end of the day, Love is really only shown in the ACTS of Love. I think of the once popular song: “Don’t talk about Love, Show me!” We find Love as an action in the story of the Good Samaritan, and we certainly find it in other Gospel stories which lift up the uncompromising demand of our Lord...that we ACT in Love towards others. Yes, Love IS a verb... As in the story of the Good Samaritan where we are told to “Go and do likewise.”

Of all the things that Jesus said, some of the most important are in the Gospel of Matthew, a part of which we are considering this morning. For example, “Whoever welcomes you, welcomes me, and

whoever welcomes me, welcomes the one who sent me.” The end of his earthly ministry is approaching, so Jesus has gathered his closest friends, his disciples, around him. And to help them understand his life and his work, he spoke to them from his heart, knowing that what he had to say would be some of the last words they would hear from him. And included in what he said were these words from the beginning of today’s reading. So, let’s really pay attention to these words of Jesus because in them there is a great blessing for us if we really get it right that we now are the only hands and feet and words to convey the Love of God manifested in Jesus. Remember earlier in this same Gospel where Philip said, “Help us understand who God is and that will be enough for us.” And Jesus responded, “Have I been with you all this time and still you do not know me? Whoever has seen ME *has* seen God the Father. Imagine that! If you know Jesus, you know God. So, let’s see what we know about Jesus. First of all, we know that Jesus is Love personified. When we see Jesus, we see Love in action. We see Love reaching out a caring hand. We see Love healing the sick, accepting those who are not accepted by other people. We see Love challenging those who have hate in their hearts. We see Love freeing those who are prisoners in any way, and giving new life to all. Remember what Jesus said to the disciples when they came saying that John the Baptist wanted to know if he was the Messiah, if he was sent by God? Jesus said, “Go tell John what you see and hear. The blind can see, the crippled can walk, the deaf can hear, and good news is preached to the poor.” There is no doubt about it: when we see Jesus, we see Love in action.

Jesus’ words then are an invitation to know God. They are intended to draw us closer to God, as well as be a pattern for how to live our lives. He says, “The one who believes in me will also DO the works that I do. And we know his Great Commandment to us where he said, “This commandment I leave with you: that you love one another as I have loved you.” It is important for us to remember that for Jesus, Love was not primarily a feeling. For him, Love was much more concrete than that. That’s why he said, “You are my friends when you DO what I command, and that is to Love one another.” For Jesus, Love was expressed in action. Love is the words and the deeds of our lives, our attitudes and our actions toward others. In Jesus we find the blessings that God has ready for us. By following Jesus and therefore, following God made known to us in Jesus, we find the very heart of life itself. Do not let your hearts be troubled. Be not discouraged.

A favorite birthday card of mine has this encouraging wisdom from a poem, called “The Gate of the Year.” This poem by a previously unknown poet, named Minnie Haskins, became firmly established in 1939 when King George VI used it in his Royal Christmas Broadcast, as Britain was plunged into the uncertainty of war. King George said, “A new year is at hand. We cannot know what it will bring. If it brings peace, how thankful we shall all be. If it brings us continued struggle, we shall remain undaunted.” And then he read these lines of the poem, which I think are totally appropriate for our times:

I said to the man who stood at the gate of the year,  
“Give me light, that I may tread safely into the unknown.”  
And he replied:  
“Go out into the darkness, and put your hand in the hand of God.  
That shall be to you better than light and safer than a known way.”

Yes, let us put our hand in the hand of God and remain undaunted, NOT discouraged.

AMEN