

VALUES FOR OUR
LIFE TOGETHER



Part Five: Encouragement

*A Chat for Faith Teams
Accompanying the Devotional Series
“G.R.A.C.E. Values for our life together”*

By The Rev. Dr. Walt Lichtenberger

NOTE to Faith Team Leaders: This Faith Chat is the final in a series of five that feature Christ-centered values for living with others in community. It contains a variety of options allowing its use either at a monthly or even weekly gathering of a Faith Team. Faith Team leaders are encouraged to use bits and pieces as they see fit. The goal is to have a meaningful conversation that is supportive and allows participants to explore and deepen their faith. By design, there is more material than could possibly be used in a single session.

Gathering (15 minutes: 0:00-0:15)

Coming Together - (12 minutes: 0:00- 0:12)

Introduce yourself around the table. Share your name and something about yourself that others may not know.

Light a candle and invite God's Spirit to be present.

Opening Prayer: *Ask for a volunteer to pray the following...*

Gracious God, help us in our learning to be kind, inquisitive, and responsive to your grace. Make us aware in our listening and speaking that you have gifted each of us with wisdom and experiences to share. Give us the courage that we need to welcome change and transformation. Through Jesus Christ, amen.

Introduction: (3 minutes: 0:12- 0:15)

The final Faith Chat in the G.R.A.C.E. series focuses on the value of encouragement. The Lord knows that we could all use an encouraging word. Life can bog us down with worries and tasks that exhaust our bodies and drain our energy. Or, we can find ourselves in the equally frustrating place of having nothing to do, mired in boredom.

It is easy to get stuck in various scenarios of both our choosing/doing and those that are involuntarily thrust upon us. When we do, we might be discouraged, wanting to stop, give up, or hide.

And yet, it is incredible the effect that encouragement can have on our predicament. A well-intentioned and placed word, note, cheer, or loving touch on a shoulder can make a world of difference. When loved ones, friends, even strangers encourage us, we find the strength within to keep going. We take one more step, and then another. We continue, persevering to reach the proverbial finish line.

The value of encouragement reminds us that we are not islands unto ourselves. Instead, God created the human creature to be in a community connected with others. Encouragement is one way that we lend mutual support to one another. Walking alongside each other, cheering each other on, we face uncertain and undesirable futures with renewed strength.

Engaging God’s Word: (10 minutes: 0:15- 0:25)

Reading God’s Word: (5 minutes: 0:15-0:20)

Romans 1: 8-12 (NRSV)

“First, I thank my God through Jesus Christ for all of you, because your faith is proclaimed throughout the world. For God, whom I serve with my spirit by announcing the gospel of his Son, is my witness that without ceasing I remember you always in my prayers, asking that by God’s will I may somehow at last succeed in coming to you. For I am longing to see you so that I may share with you some spiritual gift to strengthen you— or rather so that we may be mutually encouraged by each other’s faith, both yours and mine.”

For those who are using this Faith Chat for more than one session, you may choose either to repeat the verse above or choose one of the alternate options. Use the same questions below to guide your reflection upon each of these sayings of Jesus.

- “For those who live according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh, but those who live according to the Spirit set their minds on the things of the Spirit. To set the mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace. For this reason the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God; it does not submit to God’s law—indeed it cannot, and those who are in the flesh cannot please God. But you are not in the flesh; you are in the Spirit, since the Spirit of God dwells in you.” Romans 8:5-9 (NRSV)
- “Besides this, you know what time it is, how it is now the moment for you to wake from sleep. For salvation is nearer to us now than when we became believers; the night is far gone, the day is near. Let us then lay aside the works of darkness and put on the armor of light; let us live honorably as in the day, not in reveling and drunkenness, not in debauchery and licentiousness, not in quarreling and jealousy. Instead, put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires.” Romans 13:11-14 (NRSV)
- “We who are strong ought to put up with the failings of the weak, and not to please ourselves. Each of us must please our neighbor for the good purpose of building up the neighbor. For Christ did not please himself; but, as it is written, “The insults of those who insult you have fallen on me.” For whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, so that by steadfastness and by the encouragement of the scriptures we might have hope. May the God of steadfastness and encouragement grant you to live in harmony with one another, in accordance with Christ Jesus, so that together you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.” Romans 15:1-6 (NRSV)

Responding to God’s Word: (5 minutes: 0:20- 0:25)

What stands out for you in these words from Paul to the Christians in Rome?

What initial questions emerge? What is confusing or hard to grasp?

How does it make you feel?

What does it teach us about our relationship with God? With others?

How does it challenge you?

What do these words teach you about encouragement?

Exploring Connection (45 minutes: 0:25- 1:10)

Choose one or more of the following options to generate group discussion. For those who are using this Faith Chat over multiple sessions, you might want to do one of the supporting Bible stories in Option A for each session.

Option A: Encouragement Abounds in Jesus-Stories

Choose one of the following stories from the gospels in which Jesus exhibits the value of encouragement. If you are using this Faith Chat for more than one week, you might want to select a different story for each session.

I. The Greatest Commandment.

Each of the gospel writers highlights the tradition and ethical legacy of Judaism in telling the story of Jesus's life and ministry. Jesus's teaching is consistent with the law of Moses even if his interpretation goes beyond the legalism of the Pharisees and scribes, who are portrayed as his most verbal critics.

When asked what is the greatest of all the commandments, Jesus holds up love and relationships. The way we relate to God and neighbor matters. When we love, we participate in the creative and redemptive work of God's own spirit. New possibilities emerge as forgiveness, reconciliation, compassion, and encouragement interact and engage..

Read the story and use the questions below to discuss.

“One of the scribes came near and heard them disputing with one another, and seeing that he answered them well, he asked him, “Which commandment is the first of all?” Jesus answered, “The first is, ‘Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one; you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.’ The second is this, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ There is no other commandment greater than these.” Then the scribe said to him, “You are right, Teacher; you have truly said that ‘he is one, and besides him there is no other’; and ‘to love him with all the heart, and with all the understanding, and with all the strength,’ and ‘to love one’s neighbor as oneself,’—this is much more important than all whole burnt offerings and sacrifices.” When

Jesus saw that he answered wisely, he said to him, “You are not far from the kingdom of God.” After that no one dared to ask him any question.”

Mark 12: 28-34 (NRSV)

Questions for discussion:

Where do you see the value of encouragement displayed in this Jesus-story? Where do you see a lack of encouragement?

What is the role of encouragement in this story? What actions encourage? What lessons does encouragement as a value teach? Why is it important for the followers of Jesus to encourage one another and others?

What is the interaction between God’s grace and encouragement?

How does this story relate to **Romans 1: 8-12** (or the guiding verse chosen for this session)?

II. Watch

There is an apocalyptic edge to Jesus’s final teaching segments in the gospels. “End of the world” language and images might seem frightening or conjure up thoughts of judgement making us feel uneasy. It might seem like a herald of doom, “shape up or else.”

What is often overlooked with such passages is that they are part of a religious genre that was in use prior to Jesus’s earthly ministry. Apocalyptic literature was particularly popular during times when great calamity and struggle faced the people. They were overwhelmed by conditions that seemed out of control.

In the midst of such chaos, they turned to God’s action to bring about justice, balance, and peace. At the end of time, God would rectify all wrongs. Instead of dread, the future redemptive work of God brought hope. Even though we may not be able to imagine things working out in the near future, God will not let things go indefinitely.

The role of those who trust in God’s ultimate triumph is to wait. We are to watch and wait for God to do what we can’t accomplish ourselves.

Read the story and use the questions below to discuss.

“But about that day or hour no one knows, neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. Beware, keep alert; for you do not know when the time will come. It is like a man going on a journey, when he leaves home and puts his slaves in charge, each with his work, and commands the doorkeeper to be on the watch. Therefore, keep awake—for you do not know when the master of the house will come, in the evening, or at midnight, or at cockcrow, or at dawn, or else he may find you asleep when he comes suddenly. And what I say to you I say to all: Keep awake.”

Mark 13:32-37 (NRSV)

Questions for discussion:

Where do you see the value of encouragement displayed in this Jesus-story? Where do you see a lack of encouragement?

What is the role of encouragement in this story? What actions encourage? What lessons does encouragement as a value teach? Why is it important for the followers of Jesus to encourage one another and others?

What is the interaction between God’s grace and encouragement?

How does this story relate to **Romans 1: 8-12** (or the guiding verse chosen for this session)?

III. Walking on Water

The story of Jesus walking on water is one that is known by Christians and non-Christians alike. Every now and then, references to it pop up in popular culture. There is something about “walking” on water that both fascinates and boggles our minds. It is impossible to stand on water without sinking never mind walking on it. Yet, the gospels of Matthew, Mark, and John mention that Jesus performs such a miracle.

Beyond the “wow” factor that firmly establishes Jesus as powerful and possessive of divine (superhuman) abilities, control over unruly wind and waves has further significance. These are the primordial forces that have vexed humanity and posed a threat since the beginning of time. Among the ancient cultures surrounding the Mediterranean Sea, stories of creation involved the taming of the chaos embodied in stormy seas.

When Jesus walks on the water and calms the sea, he demonstrates God's creative power to control turbulent forces by pushing them back and allowing a space for life. Evil and all that challenges life would not have free rein in the face of God's purposes to renew and generate life. Here was something in which we could place hope. Here was something in which people of faith could find encouragement.

Read the story and use the questions below to discuss.

“When evening came, the boat was out on the sea, and he was alone on the land. When he saw that they were straining at the oars against an adverse wind, he came towards them early in the morning, walking on the sea. He intended to pass them by. But when they saw him walking on the sea, they thought it was a ghost and cried out; for they all saw him and were terrified. But immediately he spoke to them and said, “Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid.” Then he got into the boat with them and the wind ceased. And they were utterly astounded, for they did not understand about the loaves, but their hearts were hardened.”

Mark 6: 47-51 (NRSV)

Questions for discussion:

Where do you see the value of encouragement displayed in this Jesus-story? Where do you see a lack of encouragement?

What is the role of encouragement in this story? What actions encourage? What lessons does encouragement as a value teach? Why is it important for the followers of Jesus to encourage one another and others?

What is the interaction between God's grace and encouragement?

How does this story relate to **Romans 1: 8-12** (or the guiding verse chosen for this session)?

IV. “Be Opened”

Throughout this G.R.A.C.E. series, we have looked at many Jesus stories involving healing. As has been mentioned before, the healing stories of Jesus are signs of God's inbreaking reign of restoration and renewal. Recall that at the time of Jesus, folks thought that illness indicated a

“separation” from God, evidence that someone ‘sinned.’ Through healing, Jesus demonstrated God’s willingness to reconnect with a broken humanity.

In this Jesus story, there is more. Deafness is used symbolically to describe an inability to understand God’s word. When the pharisees and scribes fail to recognize in Jesus’s ministry the truth of God’s life, they are portrayed as deaf. Unable to “hear” they cannot accept his teaching and follow in the path of discipleship.

When Jesus heals the deaf, he removes the obstacle that prevents them from listening, understanding, and following up on the word of God. Healed, they are able to return to the community and “sing” God’s praise.

Read the story and use the questions below to discuss..

“Then he returned from the region of Tyre, and went by way of Sidon towards the Sea of Galilee, in the region of the Decapolis. They brought to him a deaf man who had an impediment in his speech; and they begged him to lay his hand on him. He took him aside in private, away from the crowd, and put his fingers into his ears, and he spat and touched his tongue. Then looking up to heaven, he sighed and said to him, “Ephphatha,” that is, “Be opened.” And immediately his ears were opened, his tongue was released, and he spoke plainly. Then Jesus ordered them to tell no one; but the more he ordered them, the more zealously they proclaimed it. They were astounded beyond measure, saying, “He has done everything well; he even makes the deaf to hear and the mute to speak.”

Mark 7:31-37 (NRSV)

Questions for discussion:

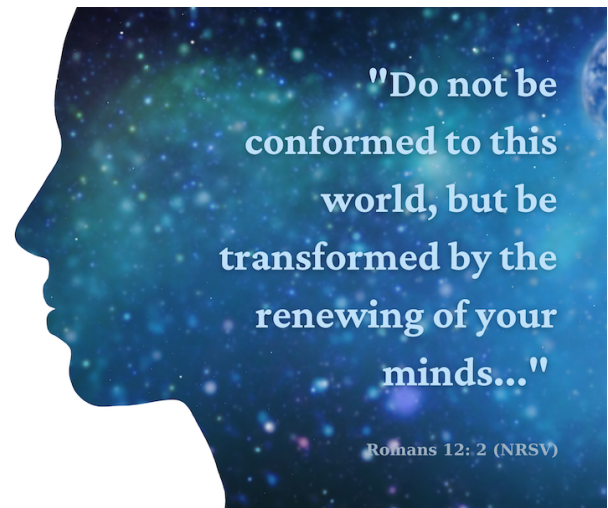
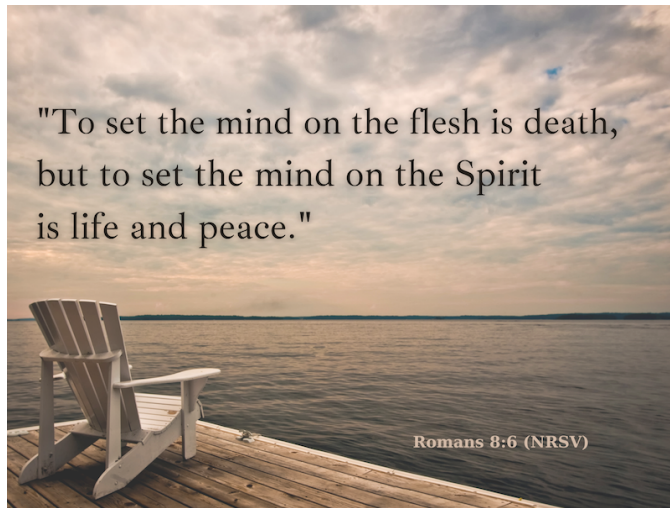
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How does this story relate to **Romans 1: 8-12** (or the guiding verse chosen for this session)?

Option B: Inspirational Images



Discuss the Inspirational Images above.

How do you connect or disconnect with them?

In what ways are the images encouraging? How might the value of encouragement be either supported or not supported by what is contained in the image?

What other images would you choose to go with these scripture texts?

Option C: Gleaning Wisdom from Experience:

Look at the following questions through the lens of your Faith Team. Allow for recurring foci and conversations of the group to guide your conversation.

Where do you find yourself when it comes to encouragement? Do you apply this value easily? What situations or persons make encouragement easier or more difficult? How do you encourage others?

How do you feel when others encourage you? Describe a situation when encouragement came as an unexpected gift?

Where might God's presence be found in encouraging others? What good can God create in a encouraging environment? How might God help transform discouraging situations?

What does being a disciple of Jesus mean for you? How does this identity shape and influence the ways you relate to others as you encourage?

Option D: “Making Unknown Romans into Friends”

Throughout this Faith Chat series on Christian values, Paul's letter to the Romans will be used as our biblical foundation. This epistle, which is the longest of all the correspondence attributed to Paul, has long been read as a theological treatise on matters of faith that were of critical importance to the reformers (including Luther) of the sixteenth century. Recently, scholars such as Douglas Moo, have suggested other lenses through which we might access the wisdom and import of this letter.

As mentioned in previous Faith Chats, Paul had not been to Rome when he wrote the Christians there. Biblical scholars speculate that he wanted to set up a base of operations there for a mission to Spain. He needed their support and welcome and yearned to visit them to build rapport and relationship.

Paul had friends in Rome such as Prisca and Aquila (Cf. Rom. 16:3,) who were leaders in one of the house churches there. No doubt, they told stories of his ministry among the Gentiles from their days together in Corinth.

There was probably a caution among the Jewish Christians in Rome, for Paul's reputation was not unblemished. His Gentile mission was controversial among the Jewish Christians in Jerusalem. Conflicts over the keeping of Torah and kosher dietary practices were real throughout the ancient world.

Yet, to a largely unknown audience, Paul strikes an encouraging tone in his letter. He wants to get to know the Roman Christians and enter into a mutually supportive relationship with both the Gentile and Jewish believers there. To do this, he seeks to build bridges over conflicts and divisions.

For building materials, Paul chooses the love of Jesus, which comes as a grace-filled gift of God to both Jew and Gentile. Faith in a loving God encourages Paul to locate common ground for the Roman church.

In this manner, Paul's letter to the Romans remains a good resource for our faith amid the divisive struggles of our time. Instead of getting bogged down in the partisan, social, and economic divisions among believers, God's love in Christ encourages us to carry on efforts to build a community where we practice and share all of the G.R.A.C.E. values.

Questions for discussion:

What do you think of Paul's encouraging tone at the start of his letter to the Romans? What benefit might such an approach have among those who were strangers to or suspicious of Paul?

As we face discouraging news and tension in our current political/pandemic environment, how do Paul's encouraging words speak to us? How might following Paul's lead help to repair and reconnect broken relationships and hurt feelings?

How might encouragement foster hope?

Sending (15 minutes: 1:10- 1:25)

Sharing of Appreciation for Learning (5 minutes: 1:10-1:15)

Ask each person to name a single insight or learning that they will take home with them.

What can you do differently going forward based on these insights/learning from this Faith Chat?

Bringing Our Time to a Close (10 minutes: 1:15-1:25)

Salt, Light, and Prayer: Go around the table a second time. Ask folks to share three things: 1) something positive from their week; 2) something with which they are struggling; 3) someone who is in their prayers.

The Lord's Prayer: Close with saying Jesus' prayer together (choose a version as a group)

Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as in heaven. Give us today our daily bread. Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us. Save us from the time of trial and deliver us from evil. For the kingdom, the power, and the glory are yours, now and forever. Amen.

-or-

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name, thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us; and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, forever and ever. Amen.