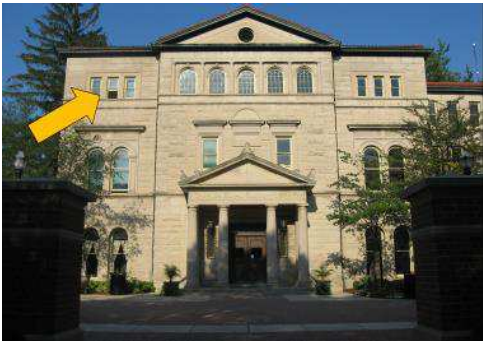




Assembly Required

Vienna Presbyterian Church
The Rev. Dr. Peter G. James
Hebrews 10:19-25

April 24, 2016



I had a flashback this week. I'm back in college. It's the spring semester of my junior year. I'm taking an upper level religion class that meets on the third floor of Slocum Hall. If I remember correctly, the class is less than ten students.

The class is taught by Dr. Vulgamore. He's heralded as a young, energetic professor back in the day. He went on to become a prolific writer and college president.

Until this class, I was a rather unspectacular student. My grades were nothing special—mostly B's and C's. My identity was tied to playing football and maintaining an active social life. My study skills were atrocious. I chose this elective on religion largely on account of my newfound faith and interest in reading the Bible.

Something awakened in me in this class. I shifted from apathetic student to enthusiastic learner. What happened? In a word, it was encouragement. Since the class was small, we presented our papers to the entire class. Dr. Vulgamore took me seriously. He seemed genuinely interested in what I had to contribute. He encouraged me to read and ask questions. It wasn't any one thing he said; what stood out was his I-care manner. His encouragement changed the trajectory of my life leading me to seminary and, ultimately, here to this church. God used Dr. Vulgamore to introduce me to loving God with my mind. Last week, we read "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind" (Deuteronomy 6:5; Mathew 22:37).

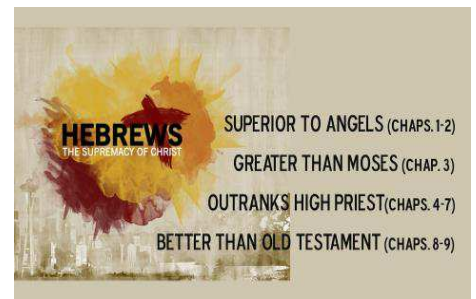
I'll talk later in this sermon about the importance of encouraging each other. Who encourages you? Who can you encourage?

Our focus is renewal. Jesus wants to renew his church. Lord knows we need it! Just as licenses and leases must be renewed, so we need God's renewal.

We want you to read Scripture about renewal and pray for God's revival in our church. Renew me. Renew my family. Renew my church.

Yesterday's reading, from our *Ready for Renewal* devotional, directed us to a book called Hebrews. While I call it a book, it reads more like a sermon.

The writer (no one is quite sure who wrote it) devotes ten chapters to Jesus' supremacy. Jesus is superior to the angels (Hebrews 1-2). He is greater than Moses (Hebrews 3). He outranks any other high priest who serves the temple (Hebrews 4-7). The new covenant he mediates is much better than the old one made with Abraham (Hebrews 8-9). Jesus is in a class all by himself. He's ideally-suited to serve as our Savior and Lord.



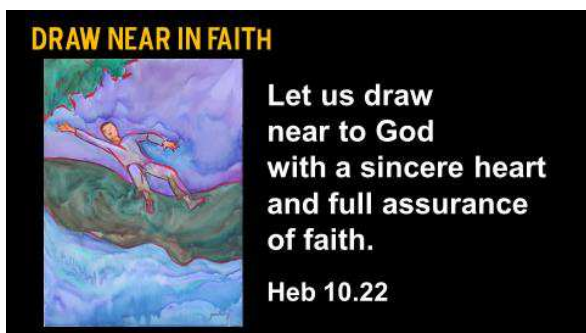
In our Scripture lesson, the author states one last time the difference Jesus can make in our lives. He writes, "We have confidence to enter the Most Holy Place by the blood of Jesus, by a new and living way open for us through his body (Hebrews 10:19-25).

Next, the author addresses the so-what question. Some of you know that I ask this question in virtually every sermon I preach. So what difference does this sermon make in my life? Verses 22-25 address this same question. So what difference does this sermon from Hebrews make in my life?

There are three so-what applications in these verses; each of which is introduced with the words "let us." If you will indulge me a moment. All three applications are written in

the hortatory subjunctive mood. If the author was writing in the imperative mood, he would simply command us to do something. But in the hortatory subjunctive mood, the writer invites us to join him in something. It's a polite form of expressing the imperative mood.

First application: "Let us draw near to God with a sincere heart and full assurance of faith" (10:22). Jesus Christ has given us complete, unhindered access to God. With apologies to priests and bishops, we don't need human intermediaries. We can approach God directly with confidence because Jesus is our mediator.



Let me speak for a moment to our guests and those new to our church. If you have never opened your life to God through Jesus Christ, consider this verse as God's personal invitation to you. James writes in his letter, "Draw near to God and He will draw near to you" (4:8). You don't have to grovel. You don't have to beg. You can come confidently to God because Christ has given us access.

Second application: "Let us hold fast firmly to the hope we profess, for he who promised is faithful" (10:23). For any of you going through difficulty right now, I commend this invitation to hold fast in hope. When you are going through the storm, hang onto God for dear life.

Earlier in Hebrews, we read, "We have this hope as an anchor for the soul" (Hebrews 6:19). Any of you who are Navy or sailors at heart will appreciate the metaphor. Hope anchors our souls. When we are buffeted by the storm and need to drop anchor, Jesus holds us steady. Notice in the center of the verse that "the one who promised is faithful."

Third application: “Let us consider how to stir one another on toward love and good deeds” (10:24). Stir is sometimes used negatively in the Bible. Some people like to stir things up and agitate. But here the word is used positively. We are called to stir each other toward love and good deeds.

The next phrase in the sentence is instructive: “Not giving up meeting together as some are in the habit of doing, but encouraging one another.” We’re not sure why

people are dropping out of church. Whether it is on account of religious persecution on the outside or strife internally, we don’t know. Yet it’s an instructive word for our day when people change churches about as often as they do dry cleaners or lawn service. At the first whiff of conflict, some people are “out the back, Jack.” They hustle to another church where the grass is no greener.



I suspect some people are more charmed by the ideal church than the real church. Dietrich Bonhoeffer warned us about this tendency in his book *Life Together*. He wrote, “Nothing is more dangerous to real community than our dreams for it.” We come to church with utopian dreams for perfect community. There can be no perfect community when it is comprised only of imperfect people.

Some people tell me, “I don’t believe in the institutional church.” So, I ask them whether they feel the same way about institutional medicine and institutional hospitals. Or is only organized religion to blame?

I’ve invested my adult life in organized religion. Yes, organized religion has its distinctive flaws as Jesus enumerated. But the only alternative to organized religion is unorganized religion. To my way of thinking, unorganized

religion hasn't built any orphanages or run any hypothermia shelters. Hungry people will starve unless we become organized to feed them.



Encourage is made up of the prefix “en,” meaning to put into something, and the root word courage. Encourage means to put courage or confidence into someone. Earlier in Hebrews, we are told to “encourage one another daily” (3:13).

Do not minimize the value of encouraging each other in this church. We meet together to put courage and confidence into each other to live for Christ. You are not likely to hear any such encouragement in the secular world.

This brings me back to the way I began this sermon. Who encourages you? Why not tell this person if it possible to do so. Hearing from you will encourage them. And who can you encourage? You never know how an encouraging word spoken today in someone's life can make a difference tomorrow.

I don't want to leave you with the impression that encouragement ignores conflict. Encouragement is not fake niceness. You know the drill. We are nice to someone to their face but belittle and demean them behind their backs. I think of the Proverb, “Better is open rebuke than hidden love” (27:5).

The New Testament letters are a virtual treasure trove of counsel as to how Christians can push through conflict to deeper levels of trust and good will. It's not the absence of conflict that identifies a healthy church in Scripture, but the presence of a reconciling spirit.

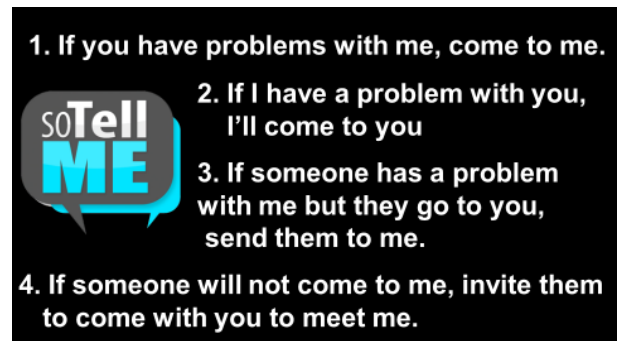
A young pastor noticed that many older members of his church preferred to talk among themselves rather than talk directly to him. He brought this matter to his leaders and together they came up with Ten Rules of Respect that is signed annually as a covenant of communication in their congregation. While I will highlight only the first four, you can find all ten on our website in the section marked sermons.

1. If you have a problem with me, come to me.

2. If I have a problem with you, I'll come to you.

3. If someone has a problem with me but they come to you, send them to me.

4. If the person will not come to me, I want you to say to this person, let's go to this person together so he or she can hear what you have to say.



Most often, when there is conflict in the church, people have the tendency to tell everyone but the person most immediately involved. In psychological circles it's called "triangulating." Don't go around the barn and talk to someone who is not directly involved. Go to the source. Come to me and I'll go to you.

What will kill the fire of renewal in this church is not likely be any monstrous evil. More often, it happens when people run each other down and talk trash to one another. The devil uses dissension to throw a wet blanket on fires of renewal.

Draw near to God. Hold fast in faith. Stimulate to love by encouraging one another toward love and good deeds.

