

“Building a Strong Family of God: Invest in Each Other”

October 17, 2021

One of the foundational themes of this series is that God’s desire is to make us stronger in our relationships with each other - whether it’s with family, our community, our congregation, or the larger Body of Christ. We’re created for connection with each other - and with God. In the words of renowned social worker, professor, and researcher Brené Brown, “Connection is why we’re here.” In the Creation account in Genesis, God says it’s not good for us to be alone. Our connections may not all look the same, but nurturing those connections and relationships is vital.

I’m so grateful for Nancy’s witness to us about how God can use even the challenges of this past year-plus to bring us together in new ways and help us see the gift of one another. Nancy’s willingness to step out in faith and join us online for worship - and then get involved in supporting mission and ministry, praying with us, and joining us on Tuesday morning Bible study on Zoom has been a powerful reminder me that God is at work in mighty ways that I never would have imagined.

As we’re talking about building a strong family of God, we also have to consider how we’re reflecting God’s love to the world around us. As a Christian, do I honor others? As a community of faith, do we honor one another? As a part of the Body of Christ, how are we showing others what it means to follow Jesus daily - not just saying that we do, but inviting Jesus to form our lives around the call to love God and love others?

We claim our faith in Christ, which informs our lives. We do the work of asking for and offering forgiveness - grounded in God’s forgiveness. We make commitments and keep them - and again I want to lift up that opportunity we have to prayerfully consider our commitment to God through this congregation - prayers, presence, gifts, service, and witness. We commit because God is committed to us. Those commitments push us to invest in life together.

Last week we celebrated a baptism in our church family, which is a great reminder of our commitment to love and care for one another, including the promises we make to nurture one another in our Christian faith and life in baptism.

We know it’s true in the early church as the people shared with each other. Cultivating community requires time, energy, and a willingness to risk engaging with new people. That sometimes requires some vulnerability on our part. And all of it was happening in an unsettled time when new converts were trying to keep the faith. They needed God’s help, but their presence with each other was a gift - and an offering of encouragement. In I Thessalonians, one of the earliest New Testament letters, it says,

SLIDE: *Therefore encourage one another and build each other up, just as in fact you are doing.*

And again, it's all grounded in God who loves us first. God is deeply invested in our lives as Creator, Redeemer, Sustainer - always with us, seeking us, helping us, challenging us - and ultimately transforming our hearts day by day as we offer God our lives and trust in God's care.

Living out our faith means that we are with each other – even when it's difficult, uncomfortable, or convicting. Have you ever felt that in the church community? Maybe you've heard this verse from Proverbs before - a powerful reminder for us - **SLIDE:** *Just as iron sharpens iron, friends sharpen the minds of each other.* When we invest in spiritual friendships, we help each other and build the Kingdom of God.

We focused on the faith chapter in Hebrews when we began this series a few weeks ago. Remember that the writer of this letter is trying to rally God's people - many of them new Christians who had converted from Judaism. And the appeal is especially focused on Jesus - who Jesus is and how he makes it possible for us to stand before God. One of the titles for Jesus used in this letter is the Great High Priest. For those who were familiar with Temple worship, including the readers of this letter, the high priest was allowed into the most holy place to offer sacrifices to God.

So, there's a call to confidence in the work of Jesus - to claim that his sacrifice is all that's needed for our salvation. And there's a call to unwavering hope in God's faithfulness. But then there's a call that goes beyond just God's work in Jesus. The writer turns to the community of faith and tells them to show love and to do good deeds - a response to their faith in Christ.

And it would seem that their response is connected to their being together, showing up for each other, especially as they anticipate the return of Jesus any time. Their perspective may be different than ours; we don't know when Jesus will come again, though we're called to be ready. Even so, this word about encouragement is vital to our life together. Sometimes we forget that call to encourage one another.

SLIDE: Chuck Swindoll says, *Encouragement is awesome. It can actually change the course of another person's day, week, or life.* We know that's true, and I hope you can think of some examples for yourself of someone who has encouraged you. We know the opposite is true – discouragement is powerful, too.

When I started thinking about the word - *courage/encourage* - I realized that it literally means - to put courage into, to make strong. It actually comes from the word for heart - cor (coronary). And we know that when Scripture talks about the heart, it's talking about motivation and intention rather than an actual organ.

Who is a person who has put courage into you? When I thought about that, a lot of people came to mind – people who have affirmed and helped me along the way. Brené Brown would say that courage is our ability to tell the story of who we are with our whole heart. That seems like what God asks from us - to live whole-heartedly. And it's clear that we can't do that alone. It requires relationships and help and investment from one another.

I don't know how many of you know this man. **SLIDE:** Ted Lasso
This is Ted Lasso - a character from a very popular TV show that just swept the Emmy Awards. I'm a little late getting to this show, but it has captured me.

Lasso is a football coach who is hired to coach soccer in England with the club owner's intent that he will run the team into the ground to spite her ex-husband because Lasso doesn't know much about soccer. And it's true - Lasso doesn't know about soccer rules, but he does know coaching and people well.

Things don't turn out as planned, and Lasso endears himself to the club owner, his team, and everyone around him. His ability to be a true coach - to bring out the best in others - is miraculous. And part of his work is really the epitome of what encouragement is - to put courage into others, to help them live whole-heartedly. If you watch it, know that it is not child-appropriate, but it is a really good story about how we invest in each other and how that changes our lives for the better.

Ted Lasso is a feel-good show in many ways, but it also tells the truth - that investing in one another isn't always easy. There are moments of deep pain, dishonesty, disregard for others' feelings and struggles, and displays of forgiveness. The hope is that we wouldn't experience those difficulties, but we do - no matter if it's the people closest to us, groups we belong to, or other connections we have.

I shared a quote from a pastor-colleague that bears repeating: *To join a church is to commit to a social circle you do not get to choose.* It's our faith in Christ that connects us, but we have to go beyond that, too. Growing deeper in our faith means that we open up to God - even though God knows us intimately. That relationship can only be strengthened when we're vulnerable with God - not holding back and knowing that God calls us beloved just as we are.

How difficult would it be for you and me to look Jesus in the eye and speak our hearts to him? If you were sitting with you right now, what would you say? I think of people who took the risk to come to him for healing - making themselves completely vulnerable and fully seen by him. We start with God's full investment in us as beloved children of God - brought together in a family of God. We see it over and over again in the work of Jesus.

We have to be willing to be vulnerable with each other - to open our hearts and share ourselves. Brené Brown explains it this way: *In order for connection to happen, we have to allow ourselves to be seen - really seen.* That's what Jesus did – he saw people fully so that they could receive his love fully.

For many of us, that can be scary because it's a risk. Will we be embraced or rejected? Will we be welcomed or turned away? Will we be taken seriously or laughed off? God loves me, but will everyone else? As we struggle with those questions, we can also claim our need for encouragement. It's part of investing in each other. We all need encouragement. **SLIDE:** *How do you identify someone who needs encouragement? That person is breathing.*

In our life together, those opportunities to be vulnerable and be encouraged happen best in smaller groups - Bible studies, Worship brainstorming, music, Youth Group, Sunday School, teams and committees where we work together and pray for each other. Many of you have strong spiritual friendships because of time you've invested together learning, serving, helping, and sharing. That's one way we invest in each other - and build a strong family of God.

I was with one of our charter members this week. She is a person of deep wisdom and prayer. She loves God and others. And as I prayed with her, I was reminded of how much she's invested in her life with God and in this congregation.

When we're asked to invest in something, what do we want to know? The return! If we're talking about a community of faith, sometimes we see the return right away, but many times we don't. I've been thinking about that as we continue to celebrate 65 years of ministry here - and all of the people who invested their hearts and resources to make this congregation a reality. I wonder if they understood the legacy of encouragement they were leaving behind.

I often wonder if the people who were encouragers for me know how much they helped me to grow in faith. There are countless moments when a word of encouragement has come at just at the right time. Beyond those personal connections, we can claim the spiritual work of encouragement and investing in each other. It matters. **SLIDE:** *What we have done for ourselves, alone, dies with us; what we have done for others and the world, remains and is immortal.* Our loving, serving, and giving is never in vain, even if we don't see the return immediately.

As we're considering our faith commitments, I hope we'll especially consider those opportunities to connect to others, to encourage - to put courage in, to invest, and to know that it matters for God's sake and the work of God to build the Kingdom.

We invest in each other because God works wonders through the community of faith - through the Body of Christ. We're witnesses to that because there are times

when the Body of Christ has been a source of encouragement for us – praying, helping, holding us up. That’s a gift we offer to each other. Let’s invest in each other because it matters.

Thanks be to God. AMEN.