

Sadly, then as now, many ignored these meetings. They felt that they didn't need them. But we need the fellowship of community. We need the encouragement of fellow believers. We need to be in the place where we can be spurred on toward love and good deeds. In short, we need to be where God's people are.

My dad once shared with me the story of a pastor who went to visit a member who had stopped coming to church. He found him sitting in front of the fireplace. Without saying a word, the pastor went over to the fire, picked up the tongs, and put a glowing ember on the hearth. In silence they watched it die out together. All at once the member exclaimed, "Don't say a word, Pastor; I'll be there next Sunday."

How about we make it our goal to encourage one person this week? How about we do it every week? How about we give some thought to being part of an effort to encourage two or three fellow members who need a connection to their church family? Check the blank on the *Connection Card* or talk to me, if you're willing to be an encourager.

4. Finally, why is there such an urgency to encourage? The last verse of our text ends on a rather foreboding note, when it says, **"...and all the more as you see the Day approaching."** If we take Jesus at his word, we know that things are only going to get worse as we approach Judgment Day. With the Last Day rapidly drawing near, there's a need, an urgency, for us to encourage.

We live in a fractured world. There's corruption in politics, crime in our streets, liberalism in the church, immorality at every turn, the legalization and promotion of sin. We are more anxious, more lonely, and more stressed out than ever before. Suicide rates are at an all-time high. Our natural response is to get angry, critical, and bitter. We want to tuck our heads under our wings and run away and hide. We want to close the doors of our church and not let anyone in. We want to take refuge in our citadel of safety and security.

But none of these responses is an encouraging one. None cures fear and worry. None solves the problem of sin. Only Jesus does that. Only Jesus paid for it, and only Jesus says, **"Come to me, all who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest" (Mt 11:28).** Jesus didn't run away and hide. He loved and he encouraged. Let's do the same—and all the more as we see the Day approaching.

Encouragement: It's not only important; it's vital, for survival. And it finds its rightful place in the community of believers. Amen.

Hebrews 10:19-25—*Revolution: Change Your World—Community*
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Encouragement: It's not only important, it's vital, for survival.

In 1995 twin baby girls, Kyrie and Brielle, were born prematurely. They weighed only two pounds each and were placed into separate incubators. While Kyrie experienced no major problems, Brielle struggled mightily. She cried and cried, which left her gasping for breath and blue in the face. They wrapped her in blankets. Her mother held her. Her father held her. Nothing they did helped. Finally, a nurse broke protocol and placed both babies in the same incubator. Kyrie nonchalantly threw one of her arms over her sister in an endearing embrace. Almost immediately Brielle's frantic crying stopped, her pinkish color returned, her heart rate stabilized, and her temperature rose to normal. True story.

Encouragement: It's not only important, it's vital, for our survival. And so, as we continue to marvel at the revolutionary nature of the gospel, how the good news of God's love and forgiveness in Christ changes us and the world around us, we today learn the lesson that:

In Community We Embrace Encouragement

- 1. What is encouragement?**
- 2. Who should encourage?**
- 3. Where should we encourage?**
- 4. Why the urgency to encourage?**

1. In Lutheran circles we like to joke that there are two important questions to ask when it comes to discussing something of a biblical nature. The first is "What does this mean?" and the other, "Where is this written?" If you're at all familiar with Luther's Small Catechism, you know how these were questions he loved to ask.

And so, we begin by asking the first of these questions: "What is encouragement?" Our text says, **"Let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds."** By God's own definition, encouragement is spurring people on toward a specific end. It's stirring people up toward some particular action. Often this is seen as a negative thing, like it's part of a revolution or a revolt. Think, for instance, of what happens when a rider digs his spurs into the side of a horse. Such action causes the horse to feel discomfort and pain. But it also causes the horse to "giddy up and go."

That's how the inspired writer uses the word in our text. His intent is to sharpen, to stimulate, and to inspire. He means to motivate—not in a negative way but in a positive one. He means to instill in others the desire to move ahead and get back into the swing of life.

Living in 21st century America, we have so much at our disposal, don't we? We live in one of the most prosperous countries in the world. The standard of living that we enjoy is surpassed by none. What God once said of the Promised Land of Palestine we can say of our land today: *"A good land—a land with brooks, streams, and deep springs gushing out into valleys and hills; a land with wheat and barley, vines and fig trees, pomegranates, olive oil, and honey; a land where bread [is] not scarce and [we] lack nothing; a land where the rocks are iron and [we] can dig copper out of the hills" (Dt 8:7-9).* Oh, yes, we live in a land that has been materially blessed by God hundreds and thousands of times over.

And yet, what is it that so often characterizes our lives today? What is it that disappoints, discourages, and even leads us to despair? Isn't it the lack of community, the loss of personal interaction with others, the failure to feel the fellowship of family? Isn't it what baby Brielle experienced in her own personal incubator, isolated from others, separated from the endearing embrace of her sister? Encouragement is important, even vital, for our survival, for God himself says, *"Let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds."* Let's look for ways to get others out of their funk, out of their own personal pit in life, and back into the service of a living and loving God.

2. In good Lutheran practice, I now ask the second question, namely, "Who should encourage?" The short answer is every single Christian. Why do I say that?

The first verse of our text states, *"Therefore, brothers and sisters, since we have confidence to enter the Most Holy Place by the blood of Jesus, by a new and living way opened for us through the curtain, that is, his body, and since we have a great priest over the house of God..."* Our text is taking us back to Old Testament times and to the Ceremonial Law established by God. Under that old covenant, sinners dared not draw near to the symbol of God's presence in the Most Holy Place, the Holy of Holies, in the Tabernacle. Only the high priest could do that, and that he could do only once a year, and he did it with great fear and trembling.

Our text says that, because of Jesus, our great High Priest, who entered the Most Holy Place of heaven, we now can come before God anytime, for any reason, without fear or trembling. Because of Jesus—who he is and what he has done for us—there's nothing that stands between us and God. *"In him and through faith in him we may approach God with freedom and confidence," (3:12),* Paul writes to the Ephesians. Every one of us who trusts the blood of Jesus can have this confidence and enjoys the privilege of approaching God's throne of grace and power. Since we have that kind of access to God's power, our text says, *"Let us draw near to God with a sincere heart and with the full assurance that faith brings, heaving our hearts sprinkled" (Catch the reference to Holy Baptism?) "to cleanse us from a guilty conscience and having our bodies washed with pure water. Let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess, for he who promised is faithful."* We can always take God at his word.

What an awesome privilege we have! Because of the holy, precious blood of Jesus, washing us clean of all our sins, and because of the sprinkled water of baptism, wrapping us up in Jesus' great work of salvation, we have the power of God and all the resources of his Spirit at our disposal. We can encourage others. We can lift up the downhearted and raise up the fallen. We can be God's tools to restore our brothers and sisters to a blessed relationship with God. In Christ we are all community, one family in him.

And so, pray. All of us in the community of believers can pray. Encourage. All of us as part of God's family in Christ can offer words of encouragement to others. Listen. Sometimes the greatest encouragement we can give is simply to listen. And be willing to restore. For Jesus once said, *"I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven; whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven" (Mt 16:19).*

3. We ask next, "Where should we encourage?" The short answer is everywhere, but our text speaks of something specific. It says, *"...not giving up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but encouraging one another."*

The word for "meeting" in our text comes from the Greek word for "synagogue" and conveys the sense of a formal gathering. Today these formal gatherings are our worship services and, by extension, our small group gatherings. These gatherings, these places of meeting together, are meant to spur one another on and to encourage God's people.