

Si, Se Puede!

Romans 12: 9-18
1 Thessalonians 5:11, 14-18

Elon Community Church
May 2, 2010

When I was in high school, I worked for a summer in the northern woods of Maine with the Youth Conservation Corps. This was in the seventies, in the dawning years of the modern environmental movement. We learned to chop wood, use a chain saw, clear brush, build wood duck houses and board walks, and even help catch and band some kinds of birds. As a teenager, I thought all of this was mostly fun, but I quickly found that it could be hard, dirty work.

That summer was also one of my first experiences working with other people on a team. We would be randomly assigned each week to a crew of six to eight folks and given a project or task to complete. I will never forget Karen, one of the best natural leaders I have ever met. She was a quiet, tall girl from Hamden, Maine who had grown up learning how to hunt, fish, and use a hammer and nail. She could chop wood like nobody's business! If there was an animal track in the mud, she could tell what creature made the imprint. Although she wasn't much of a talker, people were naturally drawn to her. One of the reasons for this was because she instinctively knew the art of encouragement.

I remember that at the beginning of one particular week, our crew was assigned a project that involved clearing brush and building a boardwalk over a marshy area. This was NOT a fun job. The area was remote. It was hot. We were dropped off at the site in the morning and left to the mercy of the black flies and mosquitos. And, the task itself seemed impossible. It seemed we would never get it done. We started working with low spirits and the hope we might be assigned somewhere else the next day. By midmorning whining had started in earnest, and tempers were flaring.

But then, Karen rose to the occasion. She was actually enthusiastic about this job. In her own quiet way, she was able to suggest different tasks for each person that allowed us to work more efficiently. She smiled, told jokes, complimented the ones doing well and encouraged those of us who were struggling. By the end of the day, she had persuaded everyone that we actually wanted to come back to this job the next morning, and the next, and the next. And by the end of the week, we had finished something that had seemed initially impossible.

Encouragement is an act of great power. The word, "encourage" comes from a Middle French root, "coeur", meaning "heart". Literally, it means "to **give heart**" to someone. The leader of the band of pilgrims in John Bunyan's seventeenth century Christian allegory, Pilgrim's Progress, is called "Great Heart". He is the one who gives heart to the rest, urging them on toward their goal.

We all know people who are natural encouragers. They seem to have a knack for offering the right words when we need them most. They have an ability to be emotionally "in tune" with other people, and a desire to see the best in another. They are liberal in their praise and generous with expressions of sympathy or notes of support. These "naturals" seem to draw others to them. They are not easily offended and are quick to offer another the benefit of the doubt. If they are teachers, then their students blossom. If they work as managers, their employees are happy and productive.

We probably also know people who are natural critics. They have a sharp eye for faults and are quick to point them out. Other people always fall short of their expectations. Nothing will ever quite please them, and they will always see the negative in any situation, organization or person. They can dampen the enthusiasm of a group with a word and bruise fragile egos with a glance. Natural critics plow through life leaving casualties in their wake.

Now, most of don't fit into either category. We are somewhere in the middle. We really do care about each other, but we aren't naturals at encouragement. Sometimes we need to be reminded to step outside our skins and give heart to our fellow pilgrims who are journeying beside us.

Just how do we give heart to one another? Listen to Paul's words to the churches in Rome and Thessalonians:

"Do not let your love for each other be a mere pretense...Love each other as much as brothers and sisters should. Have a profound respect for each other....Rejoice with those who rejoice and be sad with those in sorrow. ..Treat everyone with equal kindness, never be condescending, but make real friends with the poor....give encouragement to each other, and keep strengthening one another, as you do already...give courage to those who are apprehensive, care for the weak and be patient with everyone."

Carlyle Marney, in his book, *Priests To Each Other*, reminds us that we are intimately bound to one another and that every Christian has the responsibility and the privilege to be a priest to others. Only when we strengthen each other through mutually supportive relationships can we go out into the world to work for justice and peace. He writes: "Life in the church is koinonia (fellowship). This is what we mean when we speak of persons as means of grace. We mean that we meet God in each other." (Marney, *Priests To Each Other*, Judson Press, Pennsylvania, 1974, p.20)

So how do we encourage one another, priest one another, give heart to one another? By taking the time to be truly present to someone else, even when we feel totally occupied with our own work and worries. By showing interest in another person's struggles or joys. By offering reassurance. Sometimes it is as simple as supporting one another as we travel together on similar journeys. Other times, it could be the hard task of holding up a light when someone else can see only shadows.

William Arthur Ward said, "Flatter me, and I may not believe you. Criticize me, and I may not like you. Ignore me, and I may not forgive you. Encourage me, and I will not forget you." I will always remember my friend Karen. And, I also remember the words of Clarissa Pinkola Estes, a psychoanalyst and community activist, another natural encourager. She seems to know exactly how to offer hope to those of us who find our idealism fading in the face of sad and difficult circumstances.

Let me read to you from her "Letter to a Young Activist During Troubled Times", (copyright 2003). Estes writes:

Do not lose heart. We were made for these times...

I grew up on the Great Lakes and recognize a seaworthy vessel when I see one. Regarding awakened souls, there have never been more able crafts in the waters than there are right now across the world...Despite your stints of doubt, your frustrations in arighting all that needs change right now...you are not without resource, you are not alone. Look out over the prow; there are millions of boats of righteous souls on the waters with you....

*We have a history of being gutted, and yet remember this especially ... we have also, of necessity, perfected the knack of resurrection. Over and over again we have been the living proof that that which has been exiled, lost, or foundered - can be restored to life again.
....Are you still standing? The answer is, Yes! (And no adverbs like "barely" are allowed here). If you are still standing, ragged flags or no, you are able. Thus, you have passed the bar. And even raised it. You are seaworthy.*

One of the lines that most encourages me from this passage is: "You are not without resource, you are not alone. Look out over the prow; there are millions of boats of righteous souls on the waters with you!"

Whenever times are hard and the struggles feel almost too heavy to bear, I am glad to think that I do not have to carry the weight alone. It is a comfort to know of all the boats around me, people who also are pressing on toward a better world. It is good to feel that if the wind has been knocked out of me and my own sails start to drag, another good soul can throw me a line and help me catch the breeze again. And then we are back on the water, each of us continuing to perfect the knack of resurrection, restoring to life what has been exiled, lost or foundered.

Five years ago, I was glad to experience firsthand a moment of resurrection that was largely due to the hard work and mutual encouragement of many righteous souls working for better conditions for farmworkers. After five years, the boycott of Mt. Olive Pickle Company came to an end with the signing of a three-way agreement that unionized thousands of farm workers. Mt. Olive increased what it paid for cucumbers and offered a financial incentive for growers to provide workers compensation for farm laborers. Farmworkers received better pay, grievance procedures, and assistance in establishing medical clinics and other programs.

In a state where there is a long history of anti-union sentiment, the fact that this agreement was reached at all is simply amazing. The process had been one in which lots of players had bit parts, including churches. In my position on staff with the North Carolina Council of Churches, I had collaborated with representatives from a variety of groups concerned about farm worker issues. One of the joys of my job was meeting people like Baldemar Velasquez, the founder and president of FLOC, the Farm Labor Organizing Committee.

Baldemar is a former farm worker from California, a minister and a musician. He is short, with grey hair, and flashing brown eyes. He is a natural leader and encourager. When he speaks, his passion for the plight of farm workers is expressed in every word and gesture. His optimism is contagious. And his "can do" attitude kept scores of volunteers and organizers working at migrant camps through years of difficult and even dangerous conditions.

I know FLOC organizers who were threatened by farmers when they visited migrant workers, one who was assaulted, and another who was chased from a farm by a gun-toting grower in a pickup truck. These courageous souls had lots of reasons to quit.

Yet, there is a phrase which many members of FLOC use at the end of meetings, rallies, or even email messages. It is "Si se puede", which means "Yes, it can be done!" or "Yes, we can!" It is attributed to Cesar Chavez when he tried to rally farm workers years ago in California to the seemingly impossible task of changing oppressive working conditions.

Sometimes, when times are dark, we need to hear someone say, "si se puede", it can be done! Peace is elusive, but "si se puede." Children still live in poverty, but "si se puede." Racism, sexism, and homophobia still tear at the fabric of our society, but "si se puede".

And we as the church must teach each other to rally to the cry of "Yes, it can be done!" We must learn better the art of encouragement, how to offer each other heart and strength for the journey. For, we cannot do it alone. We need each other as we help and heal one another into wholeness. When we are connected, then my sorrow doesn't need to feel overwhelming. You can offer me your presence. Your despair doesn't have to feel hopeless. I can give you heart. "Si se puede"... you can do it! You will make it!

And so, I encourage you this morning to keep sailing on. We are not alone. Look out over the prow; there are millions of boats of righteous souls on the waters with us! And as we journey on, may we be priests to each other. May we practice the art of encouragement, and as we do so, perfect the knack of resurrection!

Amen.