

Scripture reference: 2 Thessalonians 3:6-13 and Matthew 7:21; 24-27

Ever have a tough day? A day when you can't quite seem to hide that fact from others? And then, because it scares them when you have a bad day that you can't push back, they try to be helpful and say things to you like: Hold your head up high... Buck up... keep your chin up?

These are all words of encouragement meant to remind us one of two things: either of the person others need us to be, or that even in the most difficult times in our lives, we should stand tall, be confident in who we are, be proud and strong in the face of adversity...

Those words sound good, don't they? It's good to hear somebody else show confidence in you through these words - they wouldn't say them if they didn't think you were capable of it - capable of bucking up, of holding your head up high. Hearing these words can be empowering... It is also good, and a bit empowering, to give those words as advice: "Chin up! Be strong! Move forward with confidence!". I have done this several times over the years - I have offered this sage advice to a few students over the years, to my own children and to dear friends... What I have come to terms with at this point in my life is that I am pretty good at offering words of encouragement, but I'm not so good at giving people reason to follow my advice.

Two of my three boys had a few difficult years somewhere between middle school and high school. Although very different, they wanted much the same thing. They both wanted to be accepted and well liked - and it wouldn't have hurt to be considered popular... And although both easily moved in that group of the most popular, neither of them held permanent spots on that roster... Twelve years apart in age, I used the same words of advice for both... "Be confident in the person you want to be - so much of this "who's who" in school will not matter even your first year out of high school. - Lighten up a bit, you know who you are, you will get through this..." As much as they appreciated the fact that I cared enough to listen and then encourage, neither of them really believed me - at the time... They have both since that time, thanked me and told me they remember those words even now when they struggle, because the most important thing is knowing who you are - knowing who you want to be...

So, yay me, right? But here's the thing, I never finished. I never finished the conversation about who you are and who you want to be - sure, I alluded to it, but never said it out loud. I never voiced the fact that getting through struggles is about who we are IN CHRIST. Who we want to be as children of God.

The other day I heard a song made famous by both Elvis Presley and Jerry Lewis, and I realized that this song is the rest of what my conversation with the boys should have been.

"When you walk through a storm hold your head up high and don't be afraid of the dark." I did that part just fine, but then I stopped and missed telling them that: "At the end of a storm is a golden sky and the sweet silver song of a lark."

The storm that those boys were experiencing, the darkness that those young boys felt trying to "fit in" in school, might seem a little trivial for those of us who have been "adulthood" for a number of years, but their darkness was real and equally as important as the darkness felt by the father of six children being laid off for the 2nd time this year; or the mother who lost her oldest son in a car accident; or the family struggling to find their identity after a divorce... Darkness is darkness and everybody's darkness looks a little different... And we can tell people to "buck up", to "hold their heads up high", but unless we help them to see the light that can penetrate their darkness, we are not really helping them, we are just offering them words... We have to tell them that God is

with them, every step of the way. Even in their darkness, they need to cling to His love and He will make them strong, He will guide them through... "At the end of a storm is a golden sky and the sweet silver song of a lark." The proverbial "light at the end of the tunnel", and the sweet sound of calm after the storm.

Paul's words to the Thessalonians about working hard, doing our fair share and never tiring of doing what is right are words for the advice givers... Words for me when I encourage my kids or my friends with "Keep your chin up..." "Hold that head up high..." I can't be lazy and stop there, I must finish my work. I must do my fair share in spreading the good news about the sacrifice of Jesus Christ and the greatness of our God. That is what I am tasked with doing, that is what we are all tasked with doing.

It's like learning about the American Revolution and thinking that Paul Revere's ride proclaiming the enemy was on their way means that nobody ever has to warn anybody about enemies coming ever again - Paul Revere did that already!

Slipping into the history of our Christian story is so very easy to do and then we get lazy, or at least a bit complacent, and we don't always do our fair share. The lessons we learn when studying our Christian history are great lessons! But just like studying our American history, these lessons are to be taught with each generation. Lessons for us, as a community of people, to learn from so that we can stop doing things that are harmful and continue doing that which is good, that which works for the betterment of all people. Just because the stories were told once and the lessons were voiced once doesn't mean that everybody heard, or that nobody has forgotten...

Paul told us that we need to keep away from those who are idle and disruptive, that we should not be idle. Paul instructed that people should follow the example given by himself and those who were with him... They didn't sit idly by after teaching the lesson one time... They worked tirelessly to bring the good news of our salvation to others. They offered the same lessons over and over again. They taught of God's love for ALL people and brought good values and good community wherever they went.

Thank you Paul! So glad you did all that so now it's done! That's not how it works. It's not all done... WE must follow the example he gave and not sit idly by, but continue to work hard to tell the stories and share the good news!

Paul's words to the Thessalonians are part of the lesson we as advice givers need to hear. What we heard in the Gospel of Mark today is more a lesson for the advice receivers...

God wants us to be strong in Him, be confident in Him, learn and then know who we are in Him... isn't that what the stories, the lessons, the word of God brings us to be? Confident and strong in Him? Isn't it in obeying the word of God we become who He wants us to be? Who he created us to be? If we are strong, and confident, and know who we are in Him, well then, there is no darkness that can consume us, no storm that we cannot withstand... there is nothing that can knock us down -

When we have strength and confidence in who we are in God, we are firmly planted: our roots, the foundation upon which we live is solid... Mark says: "The rain poured down, the rivers flooded over, and the wind blew hard against that house. But it did not fall, because it was built on rock" - the foundation was strong. He says that if we hear the words of God and obey them, if we truly learn the lessons being taught, we are like the wise man who built his house on a rock, our foundation will be strong and will hold up to any storm.

But what if we are not strong and confident? What if we have not learned to hold our heads up and have faith in who we are in Christ? Mark tells us that if that's the case, then we don't stand a chance. It's as if NOT hearing

and obeying His word is like building our house upon the sand. When the first good storm comes along, our foundation is not nearly strong enough to keep us upright - we will not be able to stand in the face of adversity. We will not be able to walk through the storm and find that light at the end of the tunnel. We will fall.

If we hear His words and obey them, if we continue to teach and continue to learn, we will always have the strength of God to help us through any storm, any darkness, that we might face. Nobody is saying that it will always be easy. Nobody is saying that there won't be times of doubt, times when you get tired of plowing through the storms you face. We simply need to remember that we are not going through any of this on our own. We are children of God our Father who loves us dearly. Ryan Stevenson said it well when he wrote: "In the eye of the storm, You remain in control, And in the middle of the war you guard my soul... Your love surrounds me, in the eye of the storm."

What these lyrics tell us, what Paul is telling us in his letters to the Thessolonians, what Mark shared with us in the Gospel, is that when we find ourselves in darkness, when life is less like being on vacation and more like waking up in the middle of a hurricane, we need to hold our heads up high and: Walk on through the wind, Walk on through the rain and even though our dreams, our ideals of what our lives should be, are tossed around and blown about, we need to walk on. Walk on with hope in our hearts and we will never walk alone. We will NEVER walk alone. AMEN