

**April 17, 2005**  
**Ruth 2:1-13, Acts 4:32-37**  
**Dr. Lewis Galloway**

**“Encourage One Another”**

The poet Kathleen Norris moved from her home in New York City to a home that had been built by her grandmother in a small town near the North Dakota/South Dakota border. In the Dakotas, this New Yorker found “a terrifying but beautiful landscape in which we are at the mercy of the unexpected, and even angels proceed at their own risk.” (p. 12, *Dakota: A Spiritual Geography*).

In her book, *Dakota: A Spiritual Geography*, Norris writes about discovering the holy in unforgiving weather and on the vast high plains. She also discovered the holy in Hope Presbyterian Church, a tiny but spiritually alive congregation. Hope Church is a congregation involved in the daily lives and struggles of people: farm auctions, Bible School, funeral meals, worship, local problems, and even worldwide concerns. The pastor commented, “The thing that makes Hope so vibrant is that the congregation is alive to the world.” (p. 164, *Dakota*).

The book of Acts describes a church that is “alive to the world.” Following the miracle of Pentecost, the day in which the Holy Spirit formed the church and empowered the church for ministry, the community of believers continued to gather to worship and to share life together. Luke tells us that the believers were “of one heart and mind.” Worship became the central act of the church. They gathered to hear the apostles tell of Jesus’ life and resurrection. They offered prayers, sang songs and broke bread together. A church that is alive to the world is a church that worships together. John Calvin said that the true church exists wherever the word is rightly preached and the sacraments are rightly administered.

Too often we think of worship as a performance by the pastors and choirs. The Danish theologian Soren Kierkegaard challenged us to think of worship as a theater with stage, actors and audience. If worship were a drama played in a theater, where would we place the various participants—the pastors, the choir, the congregation and even God? If we think of worship as theater, most of us would be inclined to place the pastors and choir on stage and the congregation in the audience. We might think of God as a kind of unseen director behind all things or the theater lights that illuminate the whole theater.

Kierkegaard would have us reverse our usual thinking about worship. Worship is not a performance by the pastors and choir, but an offering of the whole congregation to God. All of us, pastor, congregation and choir, are in the chancel offering our gifts of praise and thanks to God. The Lord God is the audience who receives our gift. Worship becomes more alive when we see worship as our common act and offering. When we enter the sanctuary, our prayers should be, “Lord, may our offering be pleasing to you today. Guide those who lead our worship to speak, pray, sing and

proclaim your word.” I once heard someone say, that the best thing to say to the preacher at the door following worship is not the dead, “Sweet message, Pastor,” but the lively, “How did we do today?” A church is that is alive to the world is a church that is engaged in lively, faithful worship.

The Book of Acts tells us that vital worship is the breeding ground for our daily life together. The Christian life flows from this central experience of worship. Acts tells us that the early Christians shared whatever they had with whoever was in need. They saw their resources as God’s gifts to be used to help others. Through the Holy Spirit, they experienced a tremendous outpouring of God’s grace. They gave without begrudging the gift. What they did, they did joyfully and thankfully. We too find joy in giving and fulfillment in helping others. Care Corps members walk beside those in need; the Presbyterian Women give generously to local and global mission projects; the Deacons take home communion to our shut-ins; the Second at Work Team (SAW) builds ramps for those with handicaps who otherwise could not leave their homes. Friends stand with the grieving, the sick and the troubled to encourage them. A vital church is a place where youth feel accepted and safe, where adults find friendship, nurture and challenge, where children find love and attention, and strangers are welcome. How wonderful it is to see a little girl run through the door to greet adults outside her family as caring friends.

A Benedictine nun once said that there are two ways of looking at heaven: in one view, heaven is full of people you love; in the other view, heaven is where you love everybody who is there (p. 115, *Dakota*). A vital church is where we learn to love everybody who is there and together create a little bit of heaven on earth.

In a vital church, there are always those people who have a special calling to encourage one another. Acts lifts up one man named Joseph, a Levite and native of the island of Cyprus, who sold a field and brought the proceeds of the sale to the disciples’ feet. Acts doesn’t tell us why they singled out this particular Joseph to be given the name Barnabas, which means son of encouragement. I don’t know if it was the speed of his response, the humble way he gave, or the joy written all over his faith that made his giving so distinctive. There was something in the way he did it that led the apostles to call him, Barnabas, son of encouragement.

A vital church, a church that is alive to the world, is filled with sons and daughters of encouragement. This weekend, the Indianapolis Great Banquet is hosting the Men’s Spring Great Banquet here at Second Church. Forty-eight men stay at the church from Thursday evening through Sunday evening for a spiritual retreat. Giving up cell phones and pagers for a weekend and meeting with new people they have not known before can be a very uncomfortable experience. Through the entire weekend, these guests are supported by others who have come to encourage them and share the faith with them. Still other unseen hands prepare the church, cook the food, and offer prayers. These sons and daughters of Barnabas are ministers of encouragement.

In every one of our lives there are countless people who have encouraged us when we were down, guided us when we were perplexed, listened to us when we were troubled, calmed our spirits when we were angry, helped us find open doors when every way seemed blocked. These are sons and daughters of encouragement.

When we were sorting through papers preparing for our move to Indianapolis, I came across a copy of a letter of recommendation that a man had written for me to attend college. As I reread the letter, a flood of memories came back to me. The man had been my employer for an after-school and summer job in high school. He ran a hospital supply company where I worked in the warehouse and drove the delivery truck. I asked him to write a letter for me because I had managed to deliver the right supplies to the right places most of the time and managed not to wreck the truck! When I reread the letter, I remembered why I had kept it all these years. In the letter he talked about my work and then about me as a person. He ended the letter by saying that he hoped that when I finished college, I would come back and work for him. He wrote that he thought of me as his own son.

I was astonished by his faith in me. His words were pure gift! His faith in me encouraged me to realize that I could do well in college and in whatever I chose to do. Someone believed in me and saw gifts in me that I do not think I saw in myself. I doubt if he ever knew just how much that letter meant to me.

A vital church is a church that is alive to the world and filled with sons and daughters of encouragement. Someone may tell you that the time you take to mentor a child is a waste of time, mentor that child anyway. Someone may tell you that taking the time to write a note to someone who is alone is a waste of time, write the note anyway. Someone may tell you that standing up for a cause you believe in is a waste of time, stand up anyway. You never know who is watching you and learning from your example of faith and courage.

In our Old Testament lesson, we heard a portion of the book of Ruth. Ruth and Naomi have been living in Moab and have lost everything. Their husbands are dead and they are starving to death. Naomi has heard that there is food in Israel and she plans to return to her own people and wants to send Ruth back to her Moabite family. Ruth binds herself to Naomi and promises to go wherever she goes. Ruth encourages Naomi. When they return to Israel, Ruth hatches a plan to glean in the fields to provide food for Naomi and her. This time, Naomi encourages and guides Ruth in her plans. When Ruth begins to glean in the fields, Naomi's kinsman Boaz takes notice of Ruth. He knows the story of all she has done to help Naomi. He draws Ruth aside to provide for her, protect her and encourage her. Before you know it, these three have built a whole community of encouragement! These are sons and daughters of Barnabas!

A year ago, Dr. Bill Enright formed a Task Force to study our congregation's participation in Westminster Neighborhood Ministries. Bill formed the Task Force and I had the privilege of working with the members of this group. Over the past

year, they have worked hard. They have worked alongside Presbytery's Commission on Westminster Ministries, which, by the way, includes many other dedicated Second Church members. The Task Force studied the needs of the Westminster neighborhood, the after school and summer program, the condition of the building, the concerns of the city, the food pantry, the participation by other congregations, the staff and volunteers and the role of Second Church in this ministry. In this process, the members of the Task Force became sons and daughters of encouragement. They help us see how God is at work in this ministry to transform the lives of children and their families. By their example of faithful giving of time and talent, they encourage us to deepen our commitment to this ministry in the city of Indianapolis. In May, we will receive their report and recommendations for the future.

In every life there are challenges to be faced; in every congregation there are opportunities in mission and ministry to meet; in every community, there are troubles to overcome and wounds to heal. In worship we meet the Risen Lord who sends us out in the power of the Spirit to be sons and daughters of encouragement. Encourage one another with these words.