

Play about someone lonely finding faith – loneliness epidemic
Encourage One Another
Hebrews 10:24-25

²⁴ And let us consider how to provoke one another to love and good deeds, ²⁵ not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day approaching.
Holy Wisdom, Holy Word.

1. **Why did the pastor encourage his entire congregation to go to an acupuncturist?**
2. So, that they would become more holy.

A couple of weeks ago I was in Tucson for the monthly Macedonia meeting of my fellow pastors in the Presbytery, and we were led in a presentation and discussion on the future of the church. We were told to imagine a few scenarios 10 years down the road including, but not limited to: all income for churches coming from ways that do not include passing offering plates; the largest congregation in the presbytery neither owns nor rents a building and half of congregations in the presbytery do not have property; and my favorite -- church becomes cool again, and parents and grandparents are helpless to keep their kids from going to church.¹

These are all bold ideas, goals, and dreams, and I think an argument can be made for all of them to happen. For example, several congregations I know do not pass offering plates anymore. They have an offering box in the back of the sanctuary, and they offer online giving like we do.

Churches these days are always mulling over their real estate needs. Some are selling property they are not using or don't plan to use to cut costs and raise money. Churches are also thinking of ways their property can be used to help the community and show people in their cities and towns the good things that they do.

And then there's the idea of churches becoming cool again. I'm not sure the wider culture ever thought Christianity was cool but there were times where it is more popular in the United States. I rely on the belief that with God anything is possible, and through prayer, anything is possible. My prayer is that churches become cool, and that children flood into them!

I put these ideas out there as things to ponder for us as we look 10 years down the road. What do you see at Faith 10 years from now?
Take a minute to think about that. What can we be 10 years from now? PAUSE My prayer is that Faith is as vibrant and active as it is today, and I pray that it is even more active and vibrant, full of energy and faithfulness to the Lord.

¹ Presentation by Rev. Dr. Brad Munroe on futurist Jane McGonigal book

I'm speaking much about the church, the communal aspect of Christianity this morning because today is our annual congregational meeting.

Our annual meeting and the concept of community is why I chose today's scripture passage in Hebrews. In it contain many great lessons for us and it is a guide for the congregations of more than 2000 years ago, and today.

Back then the small groups of Christians gathered in homes to share stories of Jesus and the apostles. They would share a meal and would commemorate the night before Jesus died when he shared bread and wine with his friends. They gathered to encourage one another toward love and to do good things for each other and in their daily lives. They encouraged each other to stick with the faith, to remain steadfast in the belief in Jesus as the Messiah and the Son of God. They needed that encouragement because times were tough for these early Christians. They faced persecution and shunning by the people of their communities because they didn't participate in the pagan rites and emperor worship of the Roman empire.

Even though we do not face the challenges these early Jesus followers faced, we still must encourage each other toward love and doing good deeds for each other and the world at large.

At the annual meeting after worship today, you will be able to look at the annual report, and also hear from elders in the church, about where we have been in the past year as a congregation. A lot has happened in the past year in the life of this church. We helped a lot of people in and out of the congregation. We brought worship and music to more and more folks as more people attended worship. You were all extremely generous with your time, talent, and treasure. We need that again this year as we reach out more in the community and take care of the folks here in our congregation.

How do we do that? Our scripture lesson this morning instructs us a lot. Let us pray and think about ways to rouse one another to Christian love and good deeds. To continue to meet each Sunday to worship together, and at times during the month for committee meetings to plan the expressions of Christian love this congregation will carry out this year. To encourage each other before worship when we greet each other, and at coffee hour after worship. To encourage each other to pray, to encourage one another to stay involved or get involved in the community of Faith Presbyterian to carry our banner of love and caring out into the community at large.

What is Faith going to do this year? Guess what? That's up to you. I can do a lot, but I can't do everything. I need your help. The church needs your help. As the late Mother Teresa said, "I can do things you cannot, you can do things I cannot; together we can do great things." I love our church and I'm proud of our congregation. I want to stand before you next year at this time and reiterate that, and I want to say I love our church even more than I did a year ago and I am even prouder of our congregation than I was a year ago.

We are already doing great things in the community and to show our caring for others. The Mission and Stewardship Committee met last week and mapped out much of the year ahead. Next month will be the start of the Dixieland Devotionals, a series of three Dixieland music concerts held here at Faith that raise money for a couple of local charitable organizations. The committee is going to recommend to session that some of that money go to the Good Neighbor Alliance, which is a local shelter for people experiencing homelessness. It takes a lot of people to help put those concerts on and organize them. As the time grows closer, I'm sure we will be calling on you to help put these benefit concerts on.

We will need your creativity. We will need your ideas. Johnnie Travis' idea of the loose change jug, along with some generous contributions, led to the raising of \$500 that will go to the purchase of 3 goats and 7 flocks of chickens by Heifer International for impoverished people who need sustainable sources of food. Jan Gray's idea for the Jack calendar is another example of the creativity we have in this congregation to spread the love of Christ out into the world.

What will worship look like this year? What kind of music will we hear? What wonderful musicians will be here? It takes all of us to do these things. It takes all of us to make this congregation go.

As Christians, we need community. Community has been part of the church of Christ from the beginning. Even before it was a "church." The early, small clusters of Christians in the Middle East, Europe, and Africa needed each other for support, encouragement, and spiritual growth.

We still need each other in 2024 for support, encouragement, and spiritual growth.

Pray for each other. Pray for our congregation. Encourage one another.

Let's keep doing good things for each other and in the community. Let's keep encouraging one another to love. To work for the betterment and relief of suffering in the community and around the world. That is what Jesus called us to do. Let us keep meeting together in worship on Sundays, and on other days of the week to do the work of the Lord, and to also read the Word of God and discuss it. Let us keep encouraging one another.

What is Faith going to be like in 10 years? I think the actions we take today, and this year, will have a bearing on where we are a decade from now.

²⁴ And let us consider how to provoke one another to love and good deeds, ²⁵ not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day approaching."
May it be so. Amen.