

“Packing Your Parachute,”

16 October 2005

Bible Passage: **I Thessalonians 5:14** (*The Message*)

“Gently encourage the stragglers, and reach out for the exhausted, pulling them to their feet. Be patient with each person, attentive to individual needs.”

Sermon nugget: Someone else packs your parachute. Who can we count on to be sure that we land on our feet? Who provides what we need to make it through life?

You’ve probably heard the story about the man who jumped out of an airplane with a parachute on his back. As he was falling, he realized that his chute was broken. He didn’t know anything about parachutes, but as the earth was rapidly approaching, he quickly realized that his options were quite limited. So he took off the parachute and tried to fix it himself on the way down.

The wind was ripping past his face, and he was dropping like a rock. At about 5000 feet, another man went shooting up past him. In desperation, the man with the parachute looked up and yelled, “Hey, do you know anything about parachutes?” The guy flying up looked down and yelled, “No. Do you know anything about gas stoves?”

Well, do you know anything about parachutes? Clearly, it’s important that someone does, but I have to admit that I haven’t had any personal experience with parachutes, and I doubt seriously that I ever will—at least not intentionally. However, in preparing for today, I did a little research on parachutes. In fact, Mike saw me reading an article on the Internet entitled “Buying a Parachute,” and inquired about whether or not I had some plans that he wasn’t aware of.

One of the things I learned is that, in most cases, like in the armed services, one does not pack one’s own parachute. It’s always packed by someone called a parachute rigger, and packing parachutes is their specialty. Apparently, there’s a certain art to packing it right, and the reality is that the jumper’s life depends on the parachute rigger having acquired that art.

The first I read of this was in a book I’ve mentioned several times before, *Big Russ and Me* by Tim Russert. His father “Big Russ” served in World War II, and that was his job—being a parachute rigger. Russert writes that the parachutes were inspected after every mission and repacked whenever it was necessary. There was always the chance they could be damaged on board by being exposed to fuel or hydraulic oil. Because they were made of silk, they were also susceptible to mold or fungus damage. Russert’s dad was responsible for inspecting and repacking the chutes, and for fitting the harness to the crewmember. If the flyer’s plane was hit,

survival depended on people like Big Russ. Russert said, “Your life was in their hands.”

There’s a story that one of you sent me a while back that shows how vital the one who packs the parachute is. It’s about a man named Charles Plumb, a U S Navy pilot in Vietnam. After 75 successful combat missions, his plane was destroyed by a surface-to-air missile. Plumb ejected, and his chute did what it was supposed to do—it opened and carried him safely to the ground. However, he parachuted into enemy hands, and spent 6 years in a Vietnamese prison. He survived the ordeal and now tells his story and shares the lessons he learned as a result of his experience.

Charles Plumb shared something that happened when he and his wife were sitting in a restaurant. A man at another table came up to him and said, “You’re Plumb! You flew jet fighters in Vietnam from the aircraft carrier Kitty Hawk. You were shot down!”

“How in the world did you know that?” Plumb asked. The man replied, “I packed your parachute.” Plumb gasped with both surprise and gratitude. Then the man shook Plumb’s hand and said, “I guess it worked!” To that, Plumb responded, “It sure did. If your chute hadn’t worked, I wouldn’t be here today.”

Plumb said that he didn’t sleep very well that night, thinking about that man. He kept wondering what he might have looked like in a navy uniform, and wondering how many times he might have seen him and not even said “Good Morning” or “How are you?” Plumb thought of the many hours the man had spent at a long wooden table in the bowels of the ship, carefully weaving the shrouds and folding the silks of each chutes, holding in his hands each time the fate of someone he didn’t know.

Thinking about all that now causes Charles Plumb to ask his audiences, “Who’s packing your parachute?” By that, he simply means that we all have someone or several someones who provide what we need to make it in life. I might re-phrase his question a bit to be more like, “Who do we count on to help us land on our feet?” Who is it that offers us encouragement, support? Who do we trust with our entire being?”

Plumb says that his parents, his big sister, his two little brothers and a coach named Smith started packing his parachute when he was growing up. He also tells about some of those who packed his parachute during the time he was a POW. One of those was another POW named Bob Schumacher.

He described what it was like to be imprisoned by the Vietnamese, pacing back and forth in his 8x8 cell, his mind racing, feeling totally alone. At one point, he heard what he thought was a cricket chirping, and at first, he ignored it. But the more he listened, the more he began to recognize a rhythm to the chirping. Upon investigation, he discovered that it wasn’t a cricket at all, but a piece of wire coming

out of a hole at the base of the cell wall and scratching on the concrete floor.

He kept watching the wall, and determined that it was probably attached to an American on the other end, and he wanted desperately to communicate with another American. And yet, he was afraid to, fearing that he would connect to some macho fighter pilot who wouldn't understand the condition that he was in, nor that he had cried when they had tortured him for information.

Finally, he got up the nerve to tug back. He tugged three times, and it tugged back three times. Four times...four tugs in return. After some time passed, the wire came back, and this time there was a crude note attached to it, written with blobs on ash on toilet tissue. The first communication read, "How are you doing, buddy?"

That was his first encounter with Bob Schumacher, a fighter pilot who became one of the parachute packers for Charles Plumb. Schumacher had already been there for two years by the time the two connected, and through his encouragement, Plumb was able to survive the experience as a POW.

We all need someone like that, someone who provides what we need when we need it. And we all have opportunities to be that kind of person. That's what our Bible passage for today is telling us. It reads like this: "**Gently encourage the stragglers, and reach out for the exhausted, pulling them to their feet. Be patient with each person, attentive to individual needs.**"

Now the writer Paul is addressing the Thessalonians, and he's trying to help them understand how they are to respond to those who struggle with some of the basic issues of life and faith—people who have trouble keeping up and people who are worn down and worn out. The people in the church are urged to be patient, and to care for each person according to his or her needs. We all face those kinds of pressures and problems and more today, and we all need someone who will encourage us and pull us to our feet when we're down. We need those who look out for our best interests, those who help us land on our feet; we need those who pack our parachutes so we can make it through some of the pressure-packed times.

Encouragement cannot be underrated. It can make all the difference to everyone we know. As someone has said, "**Acceptance recognizes persons as they now are. Encouragement celebrates what they may yet become with God's help.**" Victor Hugo wrote, "**Man lives more by affirmation than by bread.**" I'd put that a bit differently; I think I'd say, "**We live more by encouragement for our spirits than by food for our bodies.**" All that is to say that it's important to have those persons in our lives who help us stand on our feet and thrive; they are the ones who pack our parachutes.

I suspect most of us could name one or more persons who encouraged us when we needed it the most, the ones who packed our parachutes. Maybe it was a parent who believed in us and helped us learn and grow, or perhaps it was a teacher

or coach. For me, it was and is a husband who believes in me and urges me to stand up tall. It was a colleague who saw something that I couldn't see and helped it grow and begin to flourish. We all have people like that who've been or are now in our lives, and it wouldn't be a bad idea for us to take a moment to think about those who have packed our parachutes. In fact, you'll find some notepaper on your tables, and I would encourage all of us to write a note of thanks, even if that person is no longer alive, or we've lost touch. Let's express how they have helped us be the persons we are today.

But you know, there's another side to this packing parachute business—and that is that we each have the capacity to pack other people's parachutes, too. That was certainly the theory of the late psychologist Donald Clifton. He referred to it as the dipper and the bucket. (I don't want to mix our metaphors, but....) What he meant by that is that we all have an internal bucket that is depleted or filled depending on how others treat us, and we all have a dipper that we use to empty or fill others' buckets.

Clifton would say that every time we encourage, every time we are friendly to someone who's had a bad day, every time we offer a heart-felt word of appreciation to someone else, we're filling their internal bucket, or in today's jargon—we're packing their parachute. Clifton and his grandson, Tom Rath (a leader of professional development programs at the Gallup Organization) insist that this positive give-and-take of encouragement leads to more solid relationships, higher worker satisfaction, and a happier world.

So, maybe a question each of us could ask ourselves is, "How am I doing at parachute packing?"

Closing:

As we leave here this morning, I hope and pray that we will thank those who provide the encouragement we need when the chips are down, and I hope that we will draw on the capacity each of us has to encourage someone else. Let's be top-notch parachute packers. OK?

Have a good Sunday, and go in peace. Amen.