
Gratitude: The Way to Build and Encourage

A sermon by Canon Wallace Marsh
Proper 28—Year A

Therefore encourage one another and build up each other, as indeed you are doing. 1 Thessalonians 5:11

St. Paul says that we are to encourage one another and build each other up. When I read those words, I thought about a lecture I attended a few weeks ago here at the Cathedral. Canon Cathy Zappa and the youth team invited a group of speaker to talk about parenting. One of those speakers in that series was Dr. Mark Crawford.

As I sat in staff meeting, I led myself to believe the lecture was intended for parents of teenagers, then I got an email from the Cathedral Preschool letting me know the event was taking place. I figured if the Preschool thought it was important, then I needed to attend.

In his lecture, Dr. Crawford referenced the work of Dr. Carol Dweck, a psychologist from Stanford. Carol Dweck is the author of *Mindset: The New Psychology of Success*. In that book, Dweck says there are two types of mindsets: 1. Fixed and 2. Growth.

What we want to be doing is promoting “growth mindsets,” but the problem is that it is very easy to fall back into a “fixed mindset.”

Here is how Carol Dweck and her research team came to these conclusions: They took two groups of students (some A students and some C students) and placed them into two different rooms. Both sets of students received math problems that got increasingly difficult if they were answered correctly.

Here is what happened to the A students: Upon completing the problems successfully, the A students were told that they were “perfect,” “great students,” and “going to succeed at everything they did.” They were praised on their accomplishments. But, when the problems got difficult, guess what happened? They didn’t answer them. They didn’t answer them because they didn’t want to be wrong. The team started trying to figure out why, and they discovered it was because if they gave the wrong answer, they wouldn’t be “perfect” or “the best students.” In short, their fixed mindset kept them from growing.

Here is what happened to the C students: Upon completing the problems successfully, the C students were praised for the process they used to solve the problems. And, when they answered problems incorrectly (like me, they were C students), they were commended for the steps they answered correctly and encouraged to apply that knowledge to the next problem. In short, they were praised for the process and began to adopt a growth mindset.

What ended up happening was the students who had a growth mindset outperformed those with a fixed mindset. Carol Dweck and her research team have taken this data and demonstrated its success in some of the poorest and lowest scoring school systems in the nation.

We create growth mindsets when we follow Paul’s words, when we “encourage one another and build each other up.”

I believe we can take Carol Dweck's paradigm (fixed and growth mindsets) and use it as a lens to interpret today's scripture readings.

Matthew's parable about the talents (Matthew 25:14-30) is in some ways a parable about a growth mindset. We have a man going on a journey who entrusts talents to three of his servants. Two of those servants increase / "grow" that talent, while the third servant chooses to bury his talent in the ground. One could argue the first two servants have a growth mindset, while the third servant operates out of a fixed mindset...he believes the Master is one who judges...he has a fixed mindset when it comes to God.

Matthew's gospel is a gospel about spiritual growth, and we know this because of the way the gospel begins and ends. After Jesus calls the disciples, Matthew's gospel launches into a very important section (chapters 5-7), The Sermon on the Mount. Many theologians believe this section is one of the most important parts of the gospel. The sermon begins with the Beatitudes, and then there is a discourse on the importance of prayer and how those who follow Christ should go about living their lives. It is about spiritual growth. In the very last words of the sermon, Jesus says, "those who hear and obey my words will be like those who build their house upon a rock."

Matthew's gospel ends differently than the other gospels. The ending of Matthew's gospel is referred to as "The Great Commission." Jesus says: "Go and make disciples of all nations baptizing them in the name of the Father, Son, and the Holy Spirit, and teaching them everything that I have commanded you. And know that I will be with you always, even to the end of the ages" (Matthew 28:16-20). Jesus tells them that whether they fail or succeed, he will always be with them, encouraging them along the way. Matthew's gospel is about a growth mindset.

You could also apply Carol Dweck's paradigm to Paul's life. Paul's personal story is really one about a fixed and growth mindset. Remember, Paul was a zealous Jew, and in Philippians 3 he goes to great length to describe how perfect and blameless he was before the law (a fixed mindset).

Yet, what happens to Paul on the Damascus Road changes his life. Paul goes from a fixed to a growth mindset. To that end, I have always had some difficulty with Luke's portrayal of Paul's conversion in Acts. I feel like it portrays a zealous persecutor who later becomes a zealous Christian. I prefer Paul's own words regarding his conversion. In Galatians, Paul talks about having this encounter on the Damascus Road and then going to Arabia for three years. He needed some time to move from a fixed mindset to a growth mindset. Then, after those three years in Arabia, Paul decides to meet with Cephas (Peter) and the other disciples for further discussion and instruction (Galatians 1:18-24). Paul needed their encouragement and help in order to be sent out to do the work he had been given to do.

When Paul writes about encouraging one another and building each other up, he is speaking from the heart. Paul knows firsthand what it was like to be knocked down and have to adopt an entirely new mindset. Paul needed the encouragement and to be built up by others...it was all a part of adopting a growth mindset.

So, how do we encourage one another and build up each other? How do we put that into practice in our daily lives? I can tell you what doesn't work—building and encouraging others doesn't involve offering unsolicited advice. That will set you back a few steps!

How do you go about building and encouraging others? I think we have to look at the first words of this letter. In the opening sentences, Paul says "we always give thanks to God for all of you" (1 Thessalonians 1:2). Paul gives thanks for all they are doing...for their work of faith...labor of love...and steadfast hope. We encourage and build up each other through gratitude!

On this Thanksgiving week, we should certainly be able to remember that gratitude is how we build and encourage one another. As we leave this Holy Eucharist (Great Thanksgiving), let us leave this space and speak gratitude to our families, friends, spouses, and our colleagues at work. Give thanks for who they are and what they have done in your life.

Practice gratitude because it is there that we encourage one another and build each other up. Amen.