**Series: #Life Together**

VBC

Pastor John Johnson

Hebrews 3:12-15

January 19-20, 2013

**“The Power of Encouragement”**

In his “A Million First Dates”, an article in the most recent Atlantic, Dan Slater tells the story of a young man named Jason from Portland

-who has moved from one relationship to another—having discovered the world of *online dating*

*-and while it has served to help people meet and even marry*

-research is telling us that more often than not—meeting people online is creating a culture of non-commitment

-that the Jason’s of this world keep chasing after the *elusive rabbit*—now that they have discovered *this larger mating pool*

-and so—people have become more disposable—relationships end the moment they are not working

*-for there is always someone else online*

-which is part of the reason I chose this sermon series #Life Together

-because we live in an age that doesn’t know how to live together

-we are a culture increasingly conditioned by patterns of transience, flightiness, isolation, and independence

-there is a growing unwillingness to commit—or once committed, stay committed—be it in a relationship or in a church

-what we need to recover is a culture of mutual love, interdependence, faithfulness, vows, and dedication

*-but this does not come accidentally nor automatically*

-true community, spiritual community, committed community comes by intention

-requires a necessary diligence—a willingness to work at it

-a resolute dedication to carry out certain relational demands—even if it sacrifices a certain amount of self will

-so we are looking at these “one another’s”, these mutuality commands

-love another, receive one another—and here in our text, a third and critical “one another”—*read Hebrews 3:12-14*

-we know next to nothing about this church—nor the author

-but we do know this community was coming perilously close to going over the spiritual cliff

-it was a congregation that was discouraged, weary, tired of the spiritual struggle—it shows up in numerous chapters

-attendance was down—they were losing confidence

-some were talking of leaving the church, leaving the faith, going back to old structures, old ways they had been delivered from

-they were about to go online to look for another way

-about to commit the sins of Israel in the wilderness—who after their deliverance became enamored with their past

-which is why he introduces these words with a quote from Psalm 95—*read verses 7-11*

-the Psalmist wrote these words to warn worshippers in the same way the writer of Hebrews does

-that there is this potential in God’s people to go off the rails

-that after receiving numerous blessings—and feeding on God’s Word and drinking from the same spiritual Rock

-and standing on the edge of God’s future—having received His great promises

-they might cave in to unbelief and forfeit their rest

-if we are not careful—*the quitters of those generations may become pale shadows of this generation!*

SO-HOW CAN WE PREVENT THIS PROPENSITY TO CAVE IN?

-and turn away from our faith?

Two things—

1. *A PERSONAL VIGILANCE*—*read 3:12*

-BE CAREFUL!—open your eyes—watch the heart

-we live from the heart—what is in our hearts matters more than anything else

-it is life’s “executive center”—Willard

-the writer underscores Proverbs 4:23*—“Watch over your heart with all diligence, for from it flow the springs of life”*

-it demands a constant attentiveness, awareness

-a daily involvement with the soul, watching lest it begin to stray, go in a bad direction of unfaithfulness and cave

-it is knowing what to pay attention to

*-a growing element of pride*

*-a root of bitterness that is beginning to poison*

*-a possession that is beginning to possess me*

*-an expectation God never promised*

*-a dull and aching spiritual dryness—an insensitivity*

*-a doubt that is on the verge of going bad—that is beginning to block courage and devotion, erode confidence*

*-that if I don’t watch—it will curdle like spoiled milk moving into skepticism, cynicism, and ultimately to rebellion*

point—each generation has its own pilgrimage—but the same tendencies of the heart—the same need of vigilance

-we are all vulnerable to the same possibility of becoming seduced and hardened

1. Holland—not that long ago was a nation where 98% were attentive to faith

-but today—it has become the most atheistic nation in Western Europe

-where less than 10 per cent go to any church

-gradually—they stopped paying attention to the heart

1. our own nation

-Douthat’s book, Bad Religion: How America Became a Nation of Heretics should be required reading of all of us

-it’s here he traces our own apostasy—our own departure from the living God, our own inevitable decline

-just as Dickerson does in The Great Evangelical Recession

-as Douthat puts it—“*We are witnessing the slow motion collapse of traditional Christianity and the rise of pseudo—Christianities in its place*”

-it wasn’t that long ago evangelicalism had moved from the margins to mainstream

-the nation grew steadily more churched—think the 50’s

-but then things came apart—

-First—it was mainline protestant churches that began to cave in to core convictions and disintegrate

-Second—Catholicism began its decay

-Third—Evangelicalism—which is having less and less influence on culture

-by the 60’s and 70’s—heretics began to carry the day

-America became less traditionally Christian, less orthodox in our faith

1-we have refashioned a new Jesus who screens out discomfiting parts

2-we have modernized Christianity into a faith where tolerance trumps dogmatism

-Biblical obligations and prohibitions are shoved aside

3-we have recreated God who makes very little demands

-like Israel—that got distracted in their wilderness—impressed with the power of other gods

-Douthat identifies our own—

1. an unhealthy dependence on politics—that has dominated us—causing us to become more enamored with its power, so entangled that much of the church has been robbed of its prophetic voice
2. the sexual revolution—that has intimidated many into believing 2000 years of Christian teaching on marriage and sexuality are out of date

(how did we come to a place where Atlanta Pastor Louie Giglio was asked to withdraw from giving the inaugural benediction because he does not conform to the new definitions of marriage?)

1. consumerism—that like a giant dictates its demands that we buy until the church is so under resourced it can no longer carry out its ministry

point—in every generation—we see the same caving in by the people of God

-what will it take to avoid this? A renewed vigilance

-but the writer of Hebrews surprises us with one more vital thing—-it will take a critical “one another”

1. *AN ENCOURAGING COMMUNITY*—read 3:13

-critical to staying strong in the wilderness—staring down the giants—is this mutual work of parakaleo—a word that literally means to call alongside—a word that is expressed in wide range of ways—that together strengthen the will

a-*to encourage is to affirm one another*

-their gifts, their unique abilities, their contributions to our shared work

*-think about this—on any given week—the church needs—*

-people to unlock the doors, rock crying babies

-drive the shuttle, organize the food closet

-make the coffee, run the slides

-sing in the choir, play in the band

-teach a class, run a meeting, empty the trash

-count the money, type the newsletter, visit the shut ins

-pray for the services, attend to the sanctuary, water the plants, pull the weeds, mow the lawns

-pass out the worship folders

-you know what keeps them going? (the money?)

-here’s what keeps the going—ENCOURAGEMENT

-you are amazing—your faithfulness makes a difference

1. as Sittser puts it—*Encouragement is to the body of Christ what maintenance is to trucks*

-the church’s performance depends upon regular encouragements to one another lest we get ground down

-like a rainbow—parakaleo has other colors—

1. *to encourage is to comfort* when one is hurting—with a word or a touch—2 Corinthians 1
2. *to encourage is to strengthen one another*

-we sent Timothy to encourage and strengthen your faith—I Thessalonians 3:1

-encouragers pour hope into those empty spaces filled with resignation and despair

1. *to encourage is to instill courage*, resolve

-press people to persist in the faith, keep on keeping on

-stay steady in the storms—especially when one is flagging, one is about to give up

-it’s Paul saying—work out your salvation with fear and trembling—stay at it!—Phil 2:12

-it’s God to Jeremiah—“If you can’t compete with the runners, how can you run with the horses?”

-this text reveals that encouragement has another dimension

1. *to encourage is to warn,* alert, expose someone of the dangers, the perils of going off the rails

-uncover the lies of sin that say—“God cannot be trusted—this play is going nowhere—this sacrificial life is a waste”

*-lest one is seduced, becomes harden, and provokes God’s anger*

-it is another non-negotiable, an admonition given to all, emphasizing a mutual responsibility

-“daily” underscores its ongoing necessity—its urgency—do it now!—do it from here on out

In sum—*to encourage is to do the work of Jesus*—verse 14

CONCLUSION

NPR has been doing a series this week—“Losing Our Religion”

-daily interviews with people who have lost their faith—gone back to Egypt

-you wonder—what mutual encouragement could have prevented

Dwight Eisenhower became an American General and a US President because, in large part, he was convinced the world needed him

-but where did that come from?

-it came from a mom who had memorized the NT and believed the world could be fixed if every child understood the necessity of their existence

-that if Eisenhower wasn’t alive, the family couldn’t function well

-and he took this into his community—and then into his city—and into his world—that it mattered he was there

-what if everyone felt that way at Village?