

May 21 Comfort one Another

2 Corinthians 1:3-7

Dog lovers nearly always talk about their dog's capacity to offer comfort when they are sad. If the apostle Paul had had a dog, he'd have needed a lot of caring. We know he had been through a very trying experience before writing to the Corinthians. What's more, those same Christians, people he had won to Christ, had been seriously at odds with him for a time. As he started this letter he used the word "comfort" nine times in just five verses!

My quote for today: "When an eighty-five pound mammal licks your tears away, then tries to sit on you lap, it's hard to feel sad." Kristan Higgins (author)

Here is just one of the many stories I received. This one is from Judy Stevenfeldt. We brought Hans' mother Astrid over from Sweden to live with us when she was 87. While living in Prescott, AZ we had a wonderful Keeshond dog named Gabby, whom Astrid picked out from a shelter there. Gabby was Astrid's constant companion, even when Astrid was dying at age 94. Gabby stayed with her whether Astrid was eating or sleeping or sitting outside on our porch. She was just a totally faithful support and companion to her old human friend.

It is somehow appropriate that we are talking about comfort on music Sunday. I don't know about you but one of the ways I find comfort and peace for my soul is through music. When I am upset or tense, listening to music calms me down. When I am sad, music lifts my spirit. When I am troubled, music can give me a sense of peace. It is almost as good as having a dog put their head in your lap or snuggle beside you. There is a program now that uses music to reach and comfort dementia patients.

But we need to see that when Paul talks about comfort he means more than that warm feeling we get when a dog snuggles with us. Paul says God comforts us. What did that mean for Paul? Scholar William Barclay, who was one of the best-known authorities of the Bible in the past generation, said this, "Comfort in the New Testament always means far more than soothing sympathy. Comfort in the Bible is true to its root meaning, for its root is the Latin *fortis* which means brave. Christian comfort is the

comfort which brings courage and enables a person to cope with all that life can throw at us.”

Think about what it means to see comfort as a form of courage. When we feel safe and protected, yes, we are comforted, but we are also given the courage to try and do things. Often what keeps us from risking, from trying something new is fear. When the fear is taken care of we find courage to move forward. When the Bible talks about comfort it often means this kind of support. When God says through prophets, “Comfort, comfort my people” God was saying, I am with you, take heart, be brave and don’t fear the “what ifs” of life. God is not promising to take away all of the problems, but to be with us in the midst of them. It is the awareness that we are not alone. Knowing and relying upon the presence of God, especially at difficult moments, brings great comfort.

One of the things a dog can give to us is this kind of comfort. Of course it depends upon the size of the dog! Jenny use to walk alone some times in the evening and never had a worry when she had our big black dog with her. His presence comforted her because she knew that with him she was safe. Now, we walk together at night though I am not sure I am much of a deterrent!!

Or, I think of Jesus’ last night on earth. He goes to the garden to pray. He is in agony of spirit. But finally he prays, not my will but yours be done. He found comfort for his troubled heart and knew that, whatever tomorrow might bring, God was with him and he was being faithful to God.

We need to understand that this courageous comfort is something we can offer to all. Through our willingness to stand beside them, people at difficult times in their life find the courage and peace to deal with it in strength. I don’t know how many people’s hands I have held as they deal with potentially life ending health news. Having that hand to hold gives them this kind of comfort. They are able to face the future, whatever it might be, with peace because they are reminded that they are not alone, God is with them. Think about how you can, just like a dog, be there for another, a comforting presence that gives them strength to handle a tricky time in life.

I also like the idea of comfort coming to us as skills to cope. Think about something you were afraid to do. It made you ill at ease. How did you get over it? You got over it often by doing the thing, usually with someone being there beside you. The more you did it the more you felt that you could handle this situation. But you would never have begun if there wasn't that person there beside you to teach you and encourage you.

Growing up I was quite shy. There are still vestiges of this in my personality to this day that I continually work on. One of the things that terrified me most was talking in public. I know, that is a pretty serious problem if you think God has called you to be a pastor. Well, I remember telling my dad that I was thinking about going into the ministry but didn't think I could ever preach. Was there some other way to serve as a minister? My father, who was a pastor, had also struggled with being shy and speaking in public. What he said is, "Yes, there are many ways to serve, but you will never know if your calling is to serving a church and preaching unless you preach." He soon thereafter gave me my first opportunity to preach. I still have that sermon. It was over twice the content of a sermon I give today and yet I preached it in under 15 minutes. I recall climbing into the pulpit. It was a semi-circular affair. I grasped both sides, locked my knees and filled with fear took a deep breath and began. I am not sure I really breathed again until it was over. But, I did it. Partly I was able to accomplish the task because I knew my dad was sitting right behind me. I preached for him several times over the next few years. Afterwards he would critique my work. He always started with the positives and then gave me one or two suggestions for improvement. In learning the skills, I became comfortable in speaking. I came to understand that this is what God wanted me to do. I would never have entered the pastoral ministry without a mentor. Where can we be a mentor to others, helping them, and encouraging them? Where can we give them skill to cope as a form of comfort? This is part of our task.

Strikingly, Paul did not describe "comfort" purely in terms of what he received. Instead, he wrote, "We offer the same comfort that we ourselves received from God." Let me share with you a story of one of our dogs from Caroline Reiger:

Anna came to us this way. Paul and I were at the local AKC dog show, waiting on the showing of the standard poodles. I asked the woman sitting next to us if she knew of anyone looking for a home for an older dog. She said to wait, she would be right back. In a short time she returned with a gentleman with a dog who said, "This is Anna. Take her for a walk and see how that goes." We walked and when we returned the gentleman said, "She is yours." We took Anna home; there she ran non-stop in circles 'round the garden for a long time and ended up in Paul's arms. It seemed she might be happy to be with us. With the poodle in our lives Paul's spirits lifted somewhat. Illness took him 6 months later with Anna by his side. During that time Anna earned her certification as a Therapy Dog. We belong to Olympic Gentle Paws, a local club under the umbrella of Therapy Dogs International. Our certified dogs are authorized to visit retirement homes, assisted living, rehab, and memory care facilities, schools, libraries (Tail Waggin' Tutors), the hospital, the cancer center and wherever Therapy Dogs are needed. Their mission is to provide support and comfort. The organization says that Therapy Dogs are born, not made because in addition to obedience requirements they must have outstanding temperaments. Anna loves to go to work. When she's wearing her official bandana and special dog tag she is raring to go on a visit. In her work she has an uncanny sense to head for someone who seems most in need of special attention. Anna is my latest 'special dog' on loan to me from somewhere.

How can you pass on comfort you have received? How can we seem to be like a dog, one who people turn to for comfort and reassurance when they are hurting? That is part of what it means to follow the way of Christ