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Have you ever found yourself tied up in knots about something? On Friday, I observed a group of 5<sup>th</sup>-8<sup>th</sup> grade students who were literally tied up in knots as I helped Staci at the beginning of the summer camp she's leading in Lebanon. It was the first field trip of the summer, and she was one adult short of having a full staff, so I offered to go along on the first field trip. As the students arrived, they needed something to do until it was time to get on the bus, and the memories of all my past years as a camp director came flooding into my brain. "Get into groups of five or six friends," I told the kids, "and grab the hand of someone on the other side of the circle. Then grab another person's hand in the circle." As they stood there in tangled groups, I explained that object of this game called "Knots" was to get untangled without letting go of each other's hands.

Members of three groups quickly began talking with one another about the best ways of getting untangled, but one group just stood there looking

at each other. Three groups quickly arrived at a solution and untangled, but in the fourth group that just stood there, I observed members letting go of hands so they could quickly get untangled without having to work for a solution.

"It's too hard," they explained, losing heart before they even tried to work together. I invited their group to join with another group and try again, and this time they began talking with one another, working toward a solution to get untangled from their human knot. Afterwards when I asked what happened in the games, one member of the group explained, "It was easy to get discouraged the first time 'cause it seemed too hard, but we worked together the second time and kept trying until we got it."

How many times does a similar thing happen to you—losing heart before even getting started? We often find ourselves getting discouraged: the news of an illness in our family, the continuing unstable economy that seems to drain our bank accounts, an

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argument with a friend that strains the relationship, the expectation to get more work done that we have time to do...you can probably add to the list.

When Paul wrote a letter to the church in Corinth, he too knew what it was like to get discouraged and to lose heart. He wrote, “We are afflicted in every way... perplexed... persecuted... struck down...”<sup>1</sup> Being part of the church in his day was not a popular thing, for some people saw the movement as a radical cult that stirred up trouble. Paul was often arrested and thrown into prison for doing nothing more than telling others about Jesus and the transformation that had happened in his own life. But that transformation also meant that Paul challenged the ways things were—he advocated for those who were taken advantage of, and he confronted the corrupt political powers. Those in charge did not always appreciate what he had to say.

But even in the midst of all the troubles he encountered, he still wrote a letter of hope to the

church in the city of Corinth. Twice he wrote that “we do not lose heart,” which is how many Bibles translate this phrase that was written in Greek. Some Bibles translate the phrase to mean “we do not get discouraged” or “we do not faint,” or “not depressed,” or as the children last week demonstrated in the game of knots, the phrase can also be translated as “we never give up.”

It’s so tempting just to give up, isn’t it? It’s much easier to give up on that diet rather than monitor the intake of food. It’s much easier to get discouraged when we see the overwhelming needs around us and decide there is nothing we can do. It’s much easier to give up our friendships than work through an argument that pushed us apart. It’s much easier to give up our involvement in a struggling organization than to try and improve it.

Paul’s letter recognized the difficult times of life, but it also offered hope. “We are afflicted...but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair;

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persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed.”

“Even though outer nature is wasting away, our inner nature is being renewed day by day” (NRSV) or as the *New Living Translation* says, “Though our bodies are dying, our spirits are being renewed every day.”

We all know that eventually death embraces all of us, but rather than focusing on the fact that someday we will die, we instead focus on each day of life we have now. Even on those days when we feel as though all hope has died, somehow God’s Spirit offers us another option.

In the midst of all the persecution that the writer of this letter faced, it’s amazing that he could offer such a vision of hope. Most of us would rather complain when something doesn’t go our way. Sometimes we often would rather give up than hear words of hope. But it’s those simple words of hope that can nudge us to keep trying, to realize that despair is not the only choice.

Sometimes all it takes is a simple message that can grow into hundreds of encouraging statements, such as three words written on a post-it note on the display window of a vacant storefront on Brattle Street in Cambridge. The message asked, “Who inspires you?”

The message was posted by a few students taking a community organizing class. The class has students “pair off, share stories of what they care about, find a common interest, strategize what to do about it and go out on the street and recruit people to take action.” The teacher explained that “It’s sort of like throwing them in the ocean and giving them a chance to learn what it feels to swim.”<sup>2</sup>

What began with one note on a storefront window has turned into hundreds of brightly colored responses honoring parents and teachers, famous and not-so-famous people, friends...the display illustrates the huge impact that ordinary people can have on one another’s lives.

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In a sense, this display is similar to what the apostle Paul was striving to do in his letter to the Corinthians. Both his letter and the post-it note display encouraged people to not lose heart, to trust that in the difficult times of life, there are those who will cheer us on and help us through the difficult times. If post-it notes and store front windows had been around in the Apostle Paul's day, I imagine he might have created a similar display of hope.

What's wonderful is that we don't have to travel to Cambridge today or to the city of Corinth 2000

years ago to find words that encourage us to not lose heart, for there is hope sitting all around you here in this place.

But let's go one step further. Take the post-it note from the inside of your bulletin and write down a response to the question, "Who inspires you?"

After church hang it in the window near the front door. In coming weeks let's see how large of a display we can make on that window. And once you discern who inspires you, see if you can figure out how to inspire others around you.

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<sup>1</sup> 2 Corinthians 4:8-9.

<sup>2</sup> Doug Gavel, "Field Exercise Inspires Colorful Window Display in Harvard Square," March 30, 2012, <http://www.hks.harvard.edu/news-events/news/articles/ganz-post-it-note-project>