

ENCOURAGER
Acts 11:22-26

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I saw them tearing a building down,
A gang of men in a dusty town.
With a “yo heave ho” and a lusty yell,
They swung a beam and the side wall fell.

I asked the foreman if these men were as skilled
As the men he’d hire, if he were to build.
He laughed and said, “Oh, no indeed,
Common labor is all I need.”

For those men can wreck in a day or two
What builders have taken years to do.
I asked myself as I went my way
Which kind of role am I to play?

Am I the builder who builds with care,
Measuring life by the rule and square?
Or am I the wrecker who walks the town,
Content with the role of tearing down?

When one of our girls was just a preschooler she told me, “Daddy, talk to me like you do Jake.”
Now Jake is my dearly departed dog. I didn’t know what she meant until I thought about it just a bit.
When I talked to Jake, I used a high voice, a praising voice, a pleasing voice. I petted him and told him what a good boy he was.
My preschool daughter was saying to me that she preferred the way I talked to the dog over the way I talked to her.
With the dog, I used tones of encouragement. And with her, I must have been using tones of discouragement.

How do you talk to those in your family? Those around you? Those in the work place? Those in the classroom?

You know, you and I can be remembered for a lot of attributes. But I can think of no greater attribute than to be remembered as someone who is an encourager.

That brings us to a character, Barnabas, whose very name means “the son of encouragement.”
What a wonderful name. While “encouragement” is not our name, it can be part of who we are.

During the Second Boer War, 1899-1902, a man was convicted of a very unusual crime. He was found guilty of being a discourager. While the South African town of Ladysmith was under attack, this traitor would move up and down the line of soldiers who were defending the city, and he would do everything he could to dampen their spirits. He would point out the enemy's strengths, the difficulty of defending the city, and assert the eventual capture of the city. He didn't use a gun in his attack – it wasn't necessary. His weapon was the power of discouragement.

Paul wrote to the Colossians, "I am sending Tychicus to encourage you." To both Timothy and Titus on another occasion, Paul commanded, "Encourage your churches." In Acts, the church in Jerusalem sent a letter to the Christians in Antioch, and it says they were encouraged. Later we read, "Silas said much to encourage the brothers." Four times in 1 Thessalonians alone we are admonished to "encourage one another." And in Hebrews, we're told to "encourage one another daily."

The ministry of encouragement is central to a healthy church. In the New Testament, "encouragement" is mentioned as a duty of believers too many times to count. We live in a world that discourages us on every hand. But the church should be the one place where we can come and find encouragement.

The old cowboy sings about being home on the range where the deer and the antelope play, where seldom is heard a discouraging word. Now, I don't know what kind of utopian fantasy world he was living in, because more often than not our world can be a very discouraging place. Every day, you and I are bombarded with negativity and discouragement. We live in a discouraged world, looking for an encouraging word.

Let's see how Barnabas served as an encourager.

Our first text this morning is in Acts 4:36-37.

And Joseph, a Levite of Cyprian birth, who was also called Barnabas by the apostles (which translated means, Son of Encouragement), and who owned a tract of land, sold it and brought the money and laid it at the apostles' feet.

I. Barnabas was an encourager by giving.

The first time we come across Barnabas, he is being an encourager by giving to others. The Christian church at this point in the story is still very young. There has been the outpouring of the Spirit of God on the Day of Pentecost, and the church has grown from 120 to 3,000 believers. And even thousands more have been added. And Barnabas, having a piece of land, sold it and gave the money to the church to help meet those needs.

We need people like Barnabas in our churches who are willing to make those kinds of sacrifices so that needs might be met, so that people might be encouraged. I'm afraid that in the minds of many Christians the idea of stewardship and giving to the cause of Christ is worse than any four-letter-word.

For some folks, it's really hard to give. They are like the little boy in elementary school who bought a really nice Valentine's present for his girlfriend – his very first girlfriend. The present was beautifully and neatly wrapped. Attached to the gift was a note which read, "With all my love and most of my allowance."

Why do you give? Why do you encourage the church by giving? Is it out of a sense of duty? Or guilt? Or pressure? Or is it the selfish hope of getting something back from God?

Our attitude is everything when it comes to giving. The question we have to ask ourselves is, "Do I really believe that Christ is the answer, and the only answer, to the moral and spiritual collapse of our world? Do I really believe that Christ can and will transform human lives? Do I see the church as a vital part of my life and the life of my family?" If yes, I believe in Christ, and yes, I believe in His bride, which He commissions to do his work, then I ought to and I will give my tithe to support the church.

Barnabas gave because he loved God, because he loved God's people. It is certainly possible to give without loving, but it is impossible to love without giving. Barnabas knew that God could use that piece of land, and he gave it that he might minister to and encourage others.

II. He encouraged by believing in others.

There is another passage where the Son of Encouragement uses his gift. In Acts 9:26-28, we read these words, "And when he had come to Jerusalem, he was trying to associate with the disciples; and they were all afraid of him, not believing that he was a disciple. But Barnabas took hold of him and brought him to the apostles and described to them how he had seen the Lord on the road, and that He had talked to him, and how at Damascus he had spoken out boldly in the name of Jesus. And he was with them moving about freely in Jerusalem, speaking out boldly in the name of the Lord."

Paul had been a persecutor of the Christians. He had a fierce reputation, and everyone thought he had made up the story of his conversion. Remember, he was on the road to Damascus to capture Christians when he saw the resurrected Jesus. They thought him insincere in his turning to the Lord. Perhaps he was just an undercover persecutor of the people of God.

Was Paul a fake? In reality, he'd had a true conversion. He'd risked himself for the gospel of Jesus. The Jews themselves had plotted to kill him because he had turned to be a follower of Jesus. At Damascus, the Jews had surrounded the city and watched all the gates carefully, so as not to let him escape. And at night, disciples placed him in a large basket and lowered him over the city wall.

When he finally came to Jerusalem, he wanted to find those who had known Jesus so well. He was trying to befriend the disciples, those who had walked with Jesus for three years. But they were all terribly afraid of him. Gave him the cold shoulder. They knew how he had treated the followers of Jesus, and they tried to stay away from him. They turned their backs, shunning him.

Who would ever reach out? Who would ever risk having a relationship with this awful man by the name of Paul? It's Barnabas, the encourager. He believed Paul and brought him to the other disciples. Look at verse 27. "Barnabas brought him to the apostles and described to them how Paul had seen the Lord on the road, and that he had spoken boldly in the name of Jesus."

In that moment of fear, prejudice and rejection, Barnabas stepped in and told of Paul's conversion experience. He told how Paul had changed, how Paul now proclaimed Christ boldly. What Barnabas was saying was "I believe in Paul," and he encouraged the others to believe in Paul as well.

When you believe in people, even when others are prejudiced and afraid, when others see no hope and no way, you're practicing the ministry of encouragement.

In his book *Fully Human, Fully Alive*, John Powell tells the true story that occurred in the life of a friend. The friend was vacationing in the Bahamas. While there, he noticed a large restless crowd on the end of a pier. Curious as to what was going on, he went and joined the crowd. When he got there, he discovered that there was a young man making last minute preparations for a solo journey around the world in a homemade boat. Without exception, everyone on the pier was negative. They were telling the ambitious sailor all the things that could possibly go wrong. "The sun will broil you." "You won't have enough food." "Your boat won't be able to withstand the waves in a storm." And, of course those all-too-familiar words, "You'll never make it."

When Powell's friend heard all these discouraging warnings, he felt an irresistible desire to offer some words of hope and encouragement. As the little craft began drifting away from the pier towards the horizon, he went to the end of the pier ahead of the crowd and started shouting with confidence, "Bon voyage. You're really something. We're with you. We're proud of you."

If you had been there on the end of that pier, as the sun was setting on that homemade boat that was pulling out, which group would you have been a part of?

The world is full of discouragers, those individuals who go through life with a dark cloud over their heads and who like nothing more than raining on everybody else's parade. But as the people of God, as the people of hope, it is imperative that we be different, that we offer encouragement, that we be like Barnabas and believe in others.

III. He encouraged by serving others.

Acts 11:21-26

And the hand of the Lord was with them, and a large number who believed turned to the Lord. And the news about them reached the ears of the church at Jerusalem, and they sent Barnabas off to Antioch. Then when he had come and witnessed the grace of God, he rejoiced and began to encourage them all with resolute heart to remain true to the Lord; for he was a good man, and full of the Holy Spirit and of faith. And considerable numbers were brought to the Lord. And he left for Tarsus to look for Saul. And when he had found him, he brought him to Antioch. And it came about that for an entire year they met with the church, and taught considerable numbers; and the disciples were first called Christians in Antioch.

When the Christian community was scattered during the persecution by Paul, some of the believers settled in Antioch, 300 miles north of Jerusalem. As the gospel began to spread throughout this large city of a half million, Acts 11:21 says, “And a large number who believed turned to the Lord.” When news of this spiritual awakening reached Jerusalem, the church there decided to send a one-man-committee to investigate. They couldn’t believe a revival of this nature could break out in a place like Antioch. Up until now, converts to Christianity had come largely from Jewish backgrounds, but Antioch was a city of Greek culture and influence. So the church sent Barnabas to check it out.

Why Barnabas? Because Barnabas was a good man, it tells us. A man who was willing to take risks to help people. A man who was willing to get involved in human lives, even those lives that were vastly different from his own. Barnabas had the heart of a servant.

I want you to notice one of the ways Barnabas served them (verse 23): “He began to encourage them all with resolute heart to remain true to the Lord.” Barnabas was an encourager.

I heard the story of a minister who was depressed and defeated. He was ready to give up in a moment of discouragement. Actually, I have found among my colleagues that depression is quite often a visitor to a pastor’s study. One morning this pastor sat dejectedly by the window. He looked outside and noticed a starling perched on the sill. The bird seemed to look steadily at him and chirp what sounded like “Give it up! Give it up! Give it up!” in the rhythmic, starling language. The pastor thought about his seeming failure in the work God had given him. Was the bird, himself, sending the pastor a message?

As the pastor contemplated this question, a friend entered the room. When he told the friend what had happened, the friend went to the window to listen. The starling again chirped the phrase that sounded like “Give it up! Give it up!” The pastor’s friend laughed, then turned to him and said with a smile, “Why, that starling is saying ‘Keep it up! Keep it up!’ not ‘give it up.’”

That’s the way Barnabas was. He encouraged them with a resolute heart to remain true to the work of the Lord.

People need to be encouraged. Several years ago, in Ft. Lauderdale, Florida, a man planned his own funeral and he also attended it – alive and well. He arrived at the church sitting in the back of a hearse. He sat up front among the flowers while people said nice things about him. He heard his own eulogy. He said it served no purpose for people to say all those good things about you after you were dead and couldn’t hear them.

I guess he has a point. So often we wait until it’s too late to express our appreciation, our gratitude, and our love. People are dead and gone. There is no other chance, no other opportunity to share our hearts.

How often should funeral words be spoken long before someone dies? Barnabas was speaking those kinds of words. He began to encourage them.

IV. He encouraged by forgiving.

Acts 15:36-41

And after some days, Paul said to Barnabas, "Let us return and visit the brethren in every city in which we proclaimed the word of the Lord, and see how they are." And Barnabas was desirous of taking John, called Mark, along with them also. But Paul kept insisting that they should not take him along who had deserted them in Pamphylia and had not gone with them to the work. And there arose such a sharp disagreement that they separated from one another, and Barnabas took Mark with him and sailed away to Cyprus.

You remember the first missionary journey. Paul and Barnabas had been accompanied by Barnabas's young relative, John Mark. Things went well until they arrived at Pamphylia, and, for reasons unknown, John Mark left the team. I think he was homesick. As they prepared for their second journey, to follow up on the churches that had been planted, Barnabas wanted to once again take John Mark. But Paul wouldn't hear of it. He thought, "Man, John Mark's too weak.. He gave up before. He's immature. I can't trust him again. In the heat of the battle, that kind of guy will desert you."

Ultimately, Barnabas decided that he was going to forgive and believe in John Mark and go one way, and Paul and Silas went another. The difference between Barnabas and Paul was that Barnabas had forgiven John Mark while Paul, obviously, hadn't done so.

One of the pressing needs in our churches and in our world today is forgiveness. If you're going to be an encouraging Christian, you're going to have to be a forgiving Christian. When you forgive others, you are reflecting the spirit of Christ who, while hanging on the cross, said "Father, forgive them for they know not what they do."

When you forgive people, you give them a clean slate, a fresh opportunity. You give them the opportunity to forget their past and believe in the future.

There is an old Andy Capp and Flo cartoon strip. Flo is pacing the floor restlessly. She seems upset when she says, "Three whole days without speaking. This is ridiculous." She approaches Andy and says, "I'm sorry I acted like I did. You were right. All forgiven?" Andy says, "All right, all forgiven." Then he starts to walk out the door, but Flo catches him as he passes and gives him a big hug and a kiss, toward which he acts a little cool. Then Andy steps out the door to meet one of his old buddies who says, "I heard that Andy. It takes a good woman to apologize when she's wrong." And Andy privately admits, "Yea, and it take an even better one to apologize when she's not wrong."

A lot of time we create unnecessary conflict and tension through our constant obsession with who's right and who's wrong. Playing courtroom never reflects the spirit of forgiveness that is to characterize our lives. Sometimes it's better to seek reconciliation even when we think the other party has wronged us. It's the very kind of forgiveness that God gives to us through Christ. Because even though we're in the wrong against God, we're the ones who sinned, we're the ones who have fallen short, God has acted and chosen to extend forgiveness through His Son, Jesus Christ.

Jesus said, “Forgive and you shall be forgiven.” And Paul said in Ephesians 4:32 – the very Paul who rejected John Mark – “And be kind to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving one another, just as God in Christ also has forgiven you.” We might be tempted to think Paul is a bit of a hypocrite here. Not at all. You see, in his last letter, II Timothy 4:11, he tells Timothy to go and get John Mark “and bring him with you, for he is useful to me for ministry.”

Paul had worked through his resentment, bitterness, and hard feelings. And like a true encourager, a true man of God, he forgave John Mark.

How can you encourage the discouraged? By being there when you’re needed. By giving to others. By believing in others. By serving others. By forgiving others. That’s how we are to live our lives to the glory of God and to the good of each other.

Encouragement. Barnabas, the son of encouragement. What a wonderful thing to have said about Barnabas or about you or about me.

Flatter me, and I may not believe you.
Criticize me, and I may not like you.
Ignore me, and I may not forgive you.
Encourage me, and I will never forget you.