

Their Story, Our Story: The Power of Encouragement (Barnabas)

Acts 4:32-37; 11:19-26

As we look at some of the characters of the Bible who are lesser-known but important participants in God's great Story of redemption, after looking at 4 characters in the Old Testament, we now turn to the New Testament, for the next three Sundays.

This morning, we look into the inspiring life of a man whose impact reverberates through the very first years of the early church—Barnabas. Often overshadowed by the apostles Peter and Paul, Barnabas played a crucial role in the early church, embodying the spirit of encouragement and harmony.

We witness Barnabas living out his faith in a few places in the book of Acts, the first instance which you just heard. We'll read the others as we go along. It helps to know that Barnabas was the apostle Paul's main companion on his early missionary journeys. And we'll see why shortly.

Acts 11:19-26

19 Now those who were scattered because of the persecution that took place over Stephen travelled as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus, and Antioch, and they spoke the word to no one except Jews. ²⁰But among them were some men of Cyprus and Cyrene who, on coming to Antioch, spoke to the Hellenists also, proclaiming the Lord Jesus. ²¹The hand of the Lord was with them, and a great number became believers and turned to the Lord. ²²News of this came to the

ears of the church in Jerusalem (which was like the headquarters of the early church), and they sent Barnabas to Antioch. ²³When he came and saw the grace of God, he rejoiced, and he exhorted them all to remain faithful to the Lord with steadfast devotion; ²⁴for he was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and of faith. And a great many people were brought to the Lord. ²⁵Then Barnabas went to Tarsus to look for Saul (or, Paul; he hasn't had his name changed yet to Paul, who would become the main apostle of the early church), ²⁶and when he had found him, he brought him to Antioch. So it was that for an entire year they associated with the church and taught a great many people, and it was in Antioch that the disciples were first called 'Christians'. ('Christian' means "little Christ")

This is the word of the Lord.

Did you receive a nickname growing up? Or as an adult? A good one, that is! A helpful one. It would be fun to share our stories of the nicknames we were given and how they helped us form an identity.

Names have power—to bless, and to help someone discover and affirm their identity. They can also cause harm if a bad name is given, but there is power in being named, or renamed, or nicknamed, as others see something in a person and bless them with a name that affirms who they are.

For those of you who have followed major league baseball over the years, you'll remember Orel Hershiser, a hall of fame pitcher for the LA Dodgers from the mid-80's until 2000. His manager, Tommy Lasorda, gave him the nickname "bulldog" because he was tough, and had a bulldog-ish scowl as he stared down

hitters from the pitcher's mound. Tommy Lasorda also called him bulldog because he said that hitters will show greater respect for a pitcher named bulldog.

We see this in the Bible all the time. Perhaps the best example is Jesus renaming Simon to Peter, which means "rock." Jesus saw something in him that was strong, upon which he could build the early church movement. That helped Peter—*launched* him, actually—into a new understanding of himself as a disciple, and a leader in the early church.

And this is exactly what the early believers did with this man named Joseph. They gave him the name Barnabas, which means 'son of encouragement.' What a great nickname! Think about what kind of person he must have been, what he said and did, that caused people to get together and say to one another, "We need to give this guy this nickname."

With Barnabas as our inspiration this morning I'd like to talk about the power of encouragement. People need encouragement these days! *We* need encouragement these days. So let's look at how we can become people of encouragement, by asking: what made Barnabas such an encouraging person, and presence? The accounts from the book of Acts give us some insight into why he was given the nickname 'son of encouragement.'

I'll focus on two aspects of his vision—his way of seeing—that helped him become an encourager.

First, and perhaps most importantly, he saw the good and affirmed it. Acts 11 tells us, “He saw the grace of God, and rejoiced.” Barnabas’ ability to bring encouragement to the people he was with started with his ability to see the grace of God. To see the good and affirm it.

This doesn’t mean he was idealistic or Pollyanna about things. We can be sure that Barnabas didn’t have his head in the sand about what was going on in the world in those days. Especially what was going on right around him. After all, the early church was under heavy persecution, and Christians were not only being arrested and thrown in jail, they were being put to death in gruesome ways. Barnabas, like all the others, was certainly aware of this. But this didn’t hinder him from seeing the grace of God at work; of finding the good and affirming it.

Here is a lovely piece from 2020, during the worst of the pandemic, and everything else that was going on that year. A young woman spoke with an older man she met while on a walk, and sits on a bench near him (but not too close; remember social distancing?), and she writes about their conversation afterward: “Sometimes I just want it all to stop. Talk of COVID, protests, looting, brutality. I lose my way. I become convinced that this “new normal” is real life. Then I meet

an 87-year-old who talks of living through polio, the depression, diphtheria, the Korean war, Vietnam protests and yet is still enchanted with life.

He seemed surprised when I said that 2020 must be especially challenging for him. “No,” he said slowly, looking me straight in the eyes. “I learned a long time ago to not see the world through the printed headlines; I see the world through the people that surround me. I see the world with the realization that there is good in the world still. Therefore, I just choose to write my own headlines.

“Husband loves wife today.” “Family drops everything to come to Grandma’s bedside.” He leaned over and patted my hand. **“Old man makes new friend.”**

His words collide with my worries, freeing them from the tether I had been holding tight. They float away. I am left with a renewed spirit. My headline now reads **“Woman overwhelmed by the spirit of kindness and the reminder that our capacity to love is never-ending.”**

Isn’t that beautiful? So, here is something each of us can do this week, or at the end of each day: write your own headlines. Put on your Barnabas glasses each morning and see the grace of God throughout the day. Find the good, and see what headlines emerge for you by the end of the day. Sometimes apart from the bad, and, sometimes in the middle of it. Barnabas saw the grace of God, he found the good, in the midst of upsetting and unsettling times in the first century.

Reminds me of a story—there are a few versions of it, but it goes something like this: a boy wakes up on Christmas morning to find a big pile of horse manure under the Christmas tree. His brother says, “This smells; this is terrible; our Christmas is ruined.” His response: “There must be a pony in here somewhere.”

I’m sure Barnabas smelled the poop, but saw the grace of God anyway.

And notice that after he saw the grace of God, he rejoiced, and then he encouraged the people. He saw the good, rejoiced, and encouraged the people.

What this tells us is that it's important to see, and then to say. We need to tell the stories of what we see! That's a big part of being an encouragement to others. Because if someone tells me what they see, I want to see the good too. It helps me change my vision, and where I focus my attention. And, hearing a good story brings a boost.

We're probably all acquainted with the phrase: "If you see something, say something." That saying originated from our Homeland Security Dept. That saying usually pertains to suspicious activity, or some unattended bag or box. I saw it on a sign on the ferries when I used to commute—a picture of an unattended duffel bag with the words, "If you see something, say something." That's good, and we need awareness to keep our communities safe. But that saying can apply to positive things too! If you see something good, say something. Tell someone. If you see the grace of God, share it!

It's too easy, almost reflexive these days, to *see the bad* and *complain* about it. It's a little challenging, but so much more edifying for everyone, if we look for the good, and share it.

Barnabas saw the good—he saw the grace of God—and rejoiced, and encouraged the people.

Second, his ability to see the grace of God and affirm it led him to become a bridge-builder, and an advocate for the underdog.

It's probably safe to say that we know who the apostle Paul is (was). He was the most influential leader of the early church in its theology and practice and organization and leadership, especially in the second generation after the first disciples. Most of the New Testament letters were written by the apostle Paul (although, fun fact, we know that he didn't write the letter to the Hebrews; we don't know who actually wrote it, but many scholars are convinced that the author of the letter to Hebrews was... Barnabas—that's another topic for another time). So, the apostle Paul's influence in the early church is well-known.

However, he didn't start out that way. We learn in the early chapters of the book of Acts that before he became the apostle Paul, he was a zealous Pharisee named Saul, who led the early efforts of persecuting the first Christians. He violently opposed the Christian movement. Then we read in Acts 9 that Saul has a conversion experience on the road to Damascus that knocks him off his horse, which changes his mind and his whole life, as the risen Christ appears to him and convinces him that he is causing harm and is actually opposing God, when Paul

thought he was defending God and doing good (you know, by throwing people in prison). Paul then disappears for a while as he gets his bearings, and learns more about Christ, who he comes to acknowledge as the promised Messiah, the fulfillment of the Jewish law and prophets. And once Paul is convinced, look out. He starts to talk about it and teach and preach about it to whoever will listen.

However, the early Christians didn't know about Paul's conversion experience; or, they had only heard rumors about it but didn't believe it. All they knew about him was that he was the one persecuting the church. So we can understand their skepticism about the legitimacy of his conversion experience when Saul/Paul re-emerges and wants to join the early church. Here are two verses from Acts 9 that tell us what happened:

Acts 9:26–27

²⁶When he (Paul) had come to Jerusalem, he attempted to join the disciples; and they were all afraid of him, for they did not believe that he was a disciple. ²⁷But Barnabas... took him, brought him to the apostles, and described for them how on the road he had seen the Lord, who had spoken to him, and how in Damascus he had spoken boldly in the name of Jesus.

Naturally, the disciples are afraid of Paul. But Barnabas... advocated for him, brought him to the apostles, and vouched for him, saying he's legit. Talk about seeing the grace of God and then saying something! Barnabas saw potential

where others saw a threat, and he encouraged Paul in his ministry and they became a team, for years, in proclaiming the gospel throughout the region and in planting churches.

Think about this: if it were not for Barnabas, we may not have the apostle Paul. Because Barnabas chose to be a bridge-builder, and an advocate for the underdog. He saw the grace of God *in people*, he found the good *in people*, and he invested in them.

There is one more appearance of Barnabas in Acts, and it's another instance of Barnabas being an advocate for the underdog. And it's a story of how his advocacy, his encouragement if you will, led to a conflict with the very man that he first advocated for a few years earlier (namely, Paul):

Acts 15:36-41

³⁶After some days Paul said to Barnabas, "Come, let us return and visit the believers in every city where we proclaimed the word of the Lord and see how they are doing." (They're going to go on an encouragement tour! We see the great influence that Barnabas had on Paul)

³⁷Barnabas wanted to take with them John called Mark. ³⁸But Paul decided not to take with them one who had deserted them in Pamphylia and had not accompanied them in the work (Mark went AWOL on them at one time). ³⁹The disagreement (between Paul and Barnabas) became so sharp that they parted company; Barnabas took Mark with him and sailed away to Cyprus. ⁴⁰But Paul chose Silas and set out.

So, Mark deserts them at one point, and because of that Paul doesn't want anything to do with him. Barnabas says, let's give him a second chance; and Paul, obviously, says no. So they go their separate ways.

Now, it's always good to work through conflicts and disagreements as a basic rule, and do the best we can to resolve them, but sometimes things just don't work out and it's best to part company. That's life. It happens (hopefully not very often!). Instructive for us this morning, though, is Barnabas giving Mark a second chance. Advocating for him, when Paul didn't want to take a chance on having him desert them again. Which is kind of ironic to me, because Paul himself received encouragement from Barnabas and received more than a second chance to prove himself and his sincerity. There is probably more going on here than we're being told, but one would think that Paul would recognize how much grace he had been given, and would then be willing to extend that grace to another. But apparently Paul was still very zealous and earnest, and I'm sure he thought "There's work to do; we can't take any chances." The good news is, Paul mellowed out as he aged (his letters reflect that).

But thank God for Barnabas, who stood by his principles and didn't let himself get bullied by Paul, and stood by his advocacy of Mark. No wonder he got the nickname son of encouragement!

That takes a lot of strength, and courage.

In all of this we see how Barnabas played a crucial role in the early church—of keeping people encouraged and faithful, of exercising his ability to see the good and affirm it. Of believing in people, in giving people second chances, because he sees their potential.

Barnabas' influence was so great, Acts tells us, that people came to faith because of him. It never says of him that he was an evangelist or a convincing apologist or public speaker of some kind, or that he performed great deeds of power and whatnot. He was never in the spotlight. It simply says, "He was a good man, full of the Spirit, and of faith." And that the early believers called him "son of encouragement."

So, once again, like others we have looked at in past weeks, we have an example of someone who didn't make headlines (and probably didn't want to!), but someone who, because of who he was as a human being, had significant influence.

The apostle Paul wrote this, in 1 Thessalonians 5:11 (maybe a little influence from Barnabas here?): "Therefore encourage one another and build one another up..."

Here's a fun story. A pastor colleague shared this with me. It's about a church that took this passage to heart and used it as a theme verse for an entire year. As a result of that, they formed a "Barnabas Committee." Now, no one really likes committee work, and the formation of a new committee at church doesn't usually excite most people. But a Barnabas committee? I'd volunteer for that! And apparently a lot of people did at that church.

This committee's task was to find ways to build encouragement into the life of the congregation. They would leave encouragement sayings around the building on the walls; they would share weekly stories of the good work that folks at the church were doing (like Dayle does in our weekly email); they'd scrutinize the Sunday worship service (including the pastor's sermons!) to make sure that people experienced encouragement. They weren't in denial, they understood that sometimes people needed to hear hard things, even bad news sometimes. It's that they wanted the mark of their church, their culture, their reputation, to be one of encouragement (kind of like being "the blessing people" that I mentioned a few weeks ago...).

The Barnabas committee also planned events like movie nights, game nights, storytelling nights, potluck gathering, and made sure the people ate

together, and laughed together, and prayed together too. To build one another up.

I don't know what became of this, if the committee only lasted a year or two, but what a good idea.

There doesn't need to be a committee for us to be encouragers, though. It begins simply: see the good, affirm it, and share it. Be an advocate and a bridge-builder when you are able.

Be Thou My Vision