

Be A Barnabas
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Acts 4:32-37

"Now the whole group of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one claimed private ownership of any possessions, but everything they owned was held in common. ³³ With great power the apostles gave their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all. ³⁴ There was not a needy person among them, for as many as owned lands or houses sold them and brought the proceeds of what was sold. ³⁵ They laid it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to each as any had need. ³⁶ There was a Levite, a native of Cyprus, Joseph, to whom the apostles gave the name Barnabas (which means "son of encouragement"). ³⁷ He sold a field that belonged to him, then brought the money, and laid it at the apostles' feet."

Sermon, "Be A Barnabas"

It's been a quiet week at Meridian Street! After the craziness, noise, excitement, and fun of Vacation Bible School week, this week was quiet. I'll be honest with you; it's much better having the kids running around the church from Children's Day In or VBS. It brings life and energy into this place. During VBS week, it was inspiring to see our kids learn about the Bible, God, and have some fun. Our VBS Crew Leaders, our adult servants, were wonderful. I noticed how they were so encouraging to the kids throughout the week saying, "Try something new," or "Come play the game with the group" while dancing and having fun. As our kids danced and sang, they were encouraged to try new songs and dance moves from our music leaders Lucas and Sean. If you were here last Sunday, you might have noticed how we had four girls in front of the others leading them in the dance moves and singing during worship. Encouragement is so important. Encouragement is contagious.

I've been reflecting on this idea of encouragement a lot this week. Who has encouraged me to become the person that God is continuing to create in me? Who am I encouraging to follow God more closely in their lives? Those are simple, but heavy questions to ask. Everyone needs to be encouraged or inspired or lifted up to become the person that God is calling them to be. Saint Catherine of Siena, the 14th C. mystic, wrote, "Be who God meant you to be and you will set the world on fire." I love that quote. You will set the world on fire with passion, love, and hope. We can't get there by ourselves though; we need to encourage each other.

This idea of encouragement reminded me of the story of a man named Joseph. This is not Mary's Joseph in the Gospels, but a Levite, a native of Cyprus, whose name was changed by the apostles to Barnabas, which means "son of encouragement." We find him introduced in Acts 4, which we heard read this morning, in a section describing the very early foundations of the church. One that was built on believers who were united in heart and soul, so much so, they sold land and houses to take care of others.

This included Barnabas, who we are told, sold his field and laid the proceeds at the apostles' feet. That would get the apostles' attention, just like any good donation to a church or non-profit would, but I think what Luke is trying to convey here is this spirit of encouragement that Barnabas

gave with. He believed so much in this Gospel of Jesus Christ that he gave what he had. He was sold, not to a church alone, but to a movement. We know that Barnabas was a faithful and devout Jew from the Israelite tribe of Levi. This tribe had been assigned to different roles during the history of Israel, some were priests, musicians, teachers, judges, but all had the duty to maintain the holy things of God. I suppose we could add the role of encourager to this list; encouragement being one of the holy things of God.

We know that Barnabas was an encouraging person not by just the name change and his generous spirit, but by his willingness to lift others up in leadership as well. Later in Acts Chapter 9, we find Saul, who would later become Paul, who had a life changing experience and began preaching. He went to the apostles in Damascus, but everyone was afraid of Saul who persecuted believers, not really believing he was a disciple of Jesus. Who is the change agent in this story? It was Barnabas who took him and brought him to the apostles. I find the language here fascinating that Barnabas "took him". Sometimes encouragement can be that nudge people need to become a disciple, to start a new ministry, or to simply do what God has called them to do and we don't leave them alone in that business. We walk with them. We encourage them. That's what Barnabas did.

He told the apostles how Saul on his journey had seen the Lord and that the Lord had spoken to him, and how in Damascus he had preached fearlessly in the name of Jesus. Barnabas not only "took him", but walked with him to the apostles and vouched for his experience. We can be like Barnabas. We are to be generous disciples, who help "take people" to their calling, their vocation. On Friday this week, I had the chance to speak on a panel with the college students who are apart of Project Transformation this summer. They are college age Christians who are serving at Cumberland and North United Methodist Churches in a reading program for kids. I had the chance to speak with them and hopefully encourage them to follow God's leading in their lives. I quoted Frederick Buchner who defined vocation as "the place where your deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet." I hope that I encouraged them, that I helped, even just a little, to "take them" to their calling.

For all of us, we have the opportunity to encourage each other. We read in Hebrews 10, "Let us consider each other carefully for the purpose of sparking love and good deeds. Don't stop meeting together with other believers, which some people have gotten into the habit of doing. Instead, encourage each other." In his letters to Timothy and Titus, Paul, who was once Saul, repeatedly wrote to encourage the believers, but also to encourage them to encourage others.

Speaking to the college students this week made me think about those who have encouraged me on my journey of faith and life. There are almost too many to name. I can think of the pastors who listened to me, prayed for me, and encouraged me to become the person God was calling me to be. I can think of many people who did the same, family, friends, and church members. I couldn't do it alone, I still can't do it alone; we need each other's encouragement. Who are those who have been Barnabas like figures in your life? More importantly though, who are you Barnabas to?

In every aspect of life, we can encourage others to become the very best people they can be for God. I have come to realize that a major part of parenting is encouragement. Just imagine if

I constantly told my son, Zechariah, you can't do it. You're not strong enough or good enough. Guess what would happen, he probably wouldn't be able to do it, or it would at least be harder. Instead, I am always telling him he can do it, take your time, and try again. As he gets older, I will be continuing to encourage him to become the person that God is calling him to be. In our relationships at home, at work, or here at church, we should consider how we inspire others to become the people God created them to be. If we are promoting and teaching values that come from our faith; such as love, kindness, generosity, hope; then I think we're creating relationships that may help others experience a small taste of God's goodness.

In order to encourage others, we should think about the language we use and how we encourage and build up or discourage and tear down. I appreciate Paul's words to the Thessalonians, "We are *alive* with Jesus! So speak encouraging words to one another. Build up hope so you'll all be together in this, no one left out, no one left behind. I know you're already doing this; just keep on doing it." The way we speak to each other is important. It's been said time and again in my family, by my wife, Candace, to be more precise, "Words shape worlds." Candace often reminds me, "Words shape worlds." Now before you think that I married a great philosopher and theologian, which I did, this quote actually comes from Rabbi Abraham Heschel and the Jewish tradition. We learn from this tradition that God spoke and the world came to be as we read in Genesis. We, too, being co-creators with God, are creating worlds of our own. Our words create worlds; they can be words of encouragement or words that tear down. Rabbi Heschel's daughter wrote, "Words are themselves sacred, God's tool for creating the universe, and our tools for bringing holiness – or evil – into the world."

The words we choose to use to one another can encourage and build up or discourage and tear down, break apart, or cause division. Are we choosing to build each other up, encouraging each other to become the people God is calling us to be and to do that which God has called us to do? Who are you Barnabas to in our congregation? When Barnabas arrived in Antioch, as we find in Acts 11, we read that he saw what the grace of God had done; he was glad and encouraged them all to remain true to the Lord with all their hearts. That's our job together. When we see the grace of God at work, when we recognize what God is doing, let us celebrate and encourage each other. We can take that another step though. Just as Barnabas didn't leave Paul alone to figure out his calling, we can encourage and walk with others in our congregation, praying for them, talking with them, and encouraging them to become the people God has called them to be.

Remember and be thankful for the people who have been like Barnabas to you, but as you do, remember to be a Barnabas for others. What the world really needs right now are people of encouragement. We have enough critics; we have enough cynical and negative people. Instead, we as people of faith need to be sons and daughters of encouragement. As author Eston Swaby put it, "God made you a miracle to be someone else's miracle. Someone out there is waiting on you to make even a small impact on their life, even an encouraging word." You are called to be a Barnabas for someone else. You have the ability, you have the faith, you have opportunity to become a Barnabas. If you do, I'm certain you will change someone's life and will help "take them" to their calling. You'll become the miracle, the spark that starts the fire, the Barnabas in their life that will ultimately make a difference in their life and in the creation of God's Kingdom.

Let us pray:

Lord, we thank you for the encouragement of others in our lives; from Barnabas, Paul, and even Jesus, to those who have walked with us encouraging us to become the people you have created us to be. Inspire us to become encouragers for others. In the name of Jesus our Lord we pray. Amen.