

Barnabas and the Spiritual Gift of Encouragement

Acts 4:32-37; 9:26-27; 11:19-26

Dedicated to Susie Wiberg

Following on from our Lenten theme “The Greening of our Faith”, my sermons in Eastertide will be about “The Church Alive in the Spirit”. My researcher wife, Sue, told me that scientists have lists they use to determine whether or not a thing is alive. The top six signs of life are: respiration, growth, change, reproduction, metabolism, and response to the environment. These are the marks of a church alive in the Spirit too.

Paul made lists of spiritual gifts given to us that give life to the church. Things like preaching, teaching, healing, generosity, leadership, compassionate action, speaking in tongues, and helping.

Paul’s lists were not meant to be exhaustive; there are many more ways that the Spirit gifts us. I think, for example, friendship is a holy gift of God.

I

Today I want to focus on one of spiritual gifts Paul doesn’t list, the gift of encouragement and on the person who exemplified it in the early church, Barnabas. His very name means “Son of encouragement”, and no one was ever

named more aptly. Susie Wiberg has been a Barnabus to us and to Statesville: *Daughter of encouragement*. What would be the singular female form of Barnabas? How about *Barbie?!*

We first hear of Barnabas in Acts 4. He was born on Cyprus, an island in the Mediterranean. His original name was Joseph, and he was a Levite—which meant his father was a Levite and his father before him, all the way back to the beginning of Hebrew worship. Levites had leadership responsibility for Hebrew worship, and so carried spiritual authority.

When this Joseph the Levite of Cyprus became a Christian, the disciples gave him a new name, Barnabas, and we will see why!

Acts 4 introduces Barnabas by telling us that he

...sold a field which belonged to him and brought the money and laid it at the apostles' feet.

What an encouragement that must have been for that fledgling church. We've heard today how that early church community in Jerusalem shared all things in common and that everyone was given help according to their need. But only the gift of Barnabas was mentioned by name. It must have made a great impact on the church and been a great encouragement, not only in dollars but also in morale. Was that gift why he was given his new name? Perhaps, but there were

more reasons than that. Encouragement was not a one-time thing for Barnabus, it's *who he was*.

II

We know the story of Paul's conversion almost by heart: "Breathing threats and murder", he was on his way to Damascus to persecute Christians there. But the risen Christ appeared to him in a blinding light, saying, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?" Blinded by that light, Paul was led by the hand into Damascus, where one of the Christians he was on his way to persecute, Ananias, laid hands on him, and healed him. Before it was all over, Saul, the persecutor of Christ's followers had become Paul, an apostle of Christ. He never stopped being amazed at the grace of it all.

After a time alone in Arabia, Paul began preaching with boldness and power. Then he traveled to Jerusalem to present himself to the apostles as a follower of Jesus.

For the apostles, it was too much to swallow. We can imagine their responses: fear, suspicion, incredulity. The text says that they were afraid of him, and did not believe he was now a genuine disciple of Jesus. You can understand.

I remember with shame my skeptical response when Charles Colson, in prison for crimes he committed as Nixon's dirty tricks lawyer, was converted to

Christ. I was dubious. Perhaps my own political persuasions were part of my skepticism. But then I watched the amazing fruits of his conversion as he began a nationwide ministry to those in prison. I was wrong.

The apostles were not eager to believe that Saul, once a feared persecutor of Christians, was now a believer. But here came Barnabas. The text says that he *took* him and *brought* him to the apostles and declared to them,

...how on the road [Saul] had seen the Lord, who had spoken to him, and how at Damascus he had preached boldly in Jesus' name.

Here was not a *passive* advocacy! Barnabas *went* and *got* Paul, and *brought* him to the apostles and advocated passionately for him.

It worked. Think about it. Without Barnabas' intercession on Paul's behalf, Paul's mission to the Gentiles might never have gotten off the ground. Paul was the first great theologian of the church, bridging the gap between Jewish and Hellenistic culture. What if there had been no Barnabas!

What if there had been no Barnabas in your own life, someone who believed in you and advocated for you and encouraged you? Everyone needs a champion and advocate, from childhood on!

We might call this spiritual gift "the ministry of introduction". We commend someone to another who can help them. We link people up. Someone

has described true evangelism as “one beggar telling another beggar where to find bread.” The ministry of introduction is a way we help people find just the sort of bread they need.

III

Now we get to Acts 11. The leaders of the church in Jerusalem had heard reports of the great success of the new church in Antioch. Spiritually speaking, Antioch was “rocking”, and large numbers were turning to Christ. The church leaders heard of this success with concern; after all, most of those being converted were *Gentiles*, not *Jews*, and their methods of outreach and their style of worship seemed a bit unorthodox. Their reservations were religious, social and racial. People are people, even in church!

Many in Jerusalem were suspicious of the new work in Antioch, maybe even a tiny bit envious. Sometimes we fall prey to a perversion of spirit that causes us to grow sad at another’s success and take pleasure in another’s failure or misfortune. The German language has a word for it: *Schadenfreude*, the joy at another’s misfortune. It’s the terrible inversion of Paul’s injunction: “Rejoice with those who rejoice and weep with those who weep.”

At times I get snared in that net. Sometimes we get snared in that net as we criticize and look down on a church that seems to be doing better than we are and grow sad and resentful of their success, or when we rejoice when they struggle.

But the leaders in Jerusalem came to a good decision. They decided to send Barnabas to Antioch to check things out, to observe the worship there, de-brief the miracles, evaluate the conversions. Quality control! Or perhaps, mostly *control*.

They actually could not have sent a better person than Barnabus. He arrived at Antioch, and this is how the text reports it:

When he came and saw the grace of God, he was glad!

Here again, Barnabus the encourager, the right one to send on this fact-finding mission because he had a generous heart, led by the generous Spirit of God. He saw the grace of God at work and was *glad*. He was, as the text says, “a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and faith.”

A New York Times writer, Julia Fraga, offers us a cure for *Schadenfreude*. It is *Freundenfreude*, joy in another’s good fortune. Let’s make it a spiritual practice! Practice joy, be generous, become an encourager.

After witnessing the work of God in Antioch, Barnabas did an intriguing thing, a Barnabas thing. He did not go directly back to Jerusalem to report. Instead he traveled to Tarsus, where he found Paul and took him to Antioch! He sensed that the gifts of the Spirit that Paul possessed would match up with the needs of the new believers. Barnabas here practicing his ministry of introduction again.

With this introduction, Barnabus becomes a sponsor of Paul's vocation. This is a vital part of the ministry of our church and all churches, sponsoring each other in our special callings and gifts. It's part of the Mission Statement written into our church Covenant—a pledge to help in “the development of each person's gifts.”

V

One more vignette from the life of Barnabus. Let's call it “*Knowing when to take a back seat and having the grace to do it.*”

Up to this point in the story, Barnabus has had the pre-eminent role. Earlier in Acts, whenever the two are mentioned, it is always “Barnabus and Paul”, Barnabus getting top billing. In Lystra, for example, when Barnabus and Paul arrive in town and the townspeople think they are Greek gods, it is Barnabus

that they call Zeus, the Big Cheese, mythologically speaking, and Paul whom they name as the lesser god Hermes. (Acts 14: 8-18)

But as their missionary journeys progress, we begin to see Paul taking on preeminence, Paul getting top billing. Now it's "Paul and Barnabas, Paul and Barnabas." Isn't that the way we often remember it and say it? Paul's prodigious gifts as the cross-cultural interpreter of the faith to the Hellenistic world began to overshadow Barnabus, and Barnabus had the grace to take the back seat. "Paul, you take the lead now."

VI

In his book of little essays called "A Touch of Wonder", Arthur Gordan tells of going to help his aging mother move out of her home—a home that had sheltered generations of her family since before the Civil War.

He worked his way up to the attic, saw it crammed with boxes and trunks, and began to fantasize about the treasures he might find—Confederate stamps, valuable art, rare books.

What he found became an even greater treasure: a trunk full of letters. As he carefully opened the envelopes and read, he was overwhelmed by what was expressed on the brittle pages. One letter read:

You don't know how much your visit meant to each of us! When you left I felt as if the sun had stopped shining.

Another:

The courage with which you are facing your difficulties is an inspiration to all of us.

And one more:

Have I told you lately what a wonderful person you are? Never forget how much your friends and family love and admire you.

Gordon was deeply moved by how openly the encouragement, affection and love were expressed. Too rarely are such life-giving words expressed today.

Can you remember the people in your life who have been like a Barnabas to you? A teacher, a coach, a parent, a mentor, a friend? Who has come to your mind? Thank God for them, and if they are still alive, take a moment write a note, call them, find a way to thank them.

Anybody want to join the Barnabas Fan Club today? The church alive in the Spirit is a community of, what's the plural of Barnabas? "Barnabae"?!

That's what Jesus was like in his life, the encourager, the one who gave us *courage* (doesn't encouragement give us courage?). He was the advocate of all

who needed an advocate. And in his last words to his disciples, he told them that he was sending another, one like himself, a *Paraclete*, literally one “called alongside” us, to stand by us and encourage us and give us strength.

That’s what the Spirit does for the church that is alive in the spirit. Want to join?