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**The Power of Encouragement**  
**Acts 4:32-37; 13:1-3; 15:36-41**  
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If you ask people, after Jesus, who were the key leaders in the early church, two of the most common answers are Peter and Paul. Yet, there was another important and admirable leader whose name was Joseph. Without him, we might never have heard of Paul. We meet Joseph in this passage from 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. With **great power** the apostles gave their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and **great grace** was upon them all. 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. They laid it at the apostles’ feet, and it was distributed to each as any had need. **There was a Levite, a native of Cyprus, Joseph, to whom the apostles gave the name Barnabas (which means “son of encouragement”).** He sold a field that belonged to him, then brought the money, and laid it at the apostles’ feet.”

**Joseph**, better known as **Barnabas** is one of the greatest encouragers in the Bible. We all need people in our lives who give us encouragement. Sadly, some of us may have an easier time identifying a key discourager, rather than an encourager in our life. In the first frame of a *Peanuts* comic strip, Linus has written a comic strip that he hands tentatively to his sister Lucy saying, “*Lucy, would you read this and tell me if you think it is funny?*” In the next frame a little bit of a grin comes across Lucy’s face. She looks at her brother Linus and says, “*Well, Linus, who wrote this?*” Linus sticks out his chest and says with a big grin, “*Lucy, I wrote that.*” Lucy wads it up and throws it away saying, “*Well, then I don’t think it’s very funny.*” In the final frame Linus picks up his crumpled comic strip, throws his trusty blanket over his shoulder, looks at Lucy and says, “*Big sisters are the crabgrass in the lawn of life.*”

There are times when we have encouraged others, and there are times when like Lucy, we’ve been the crabgrass in the lawn of someone else’s life. There have been moments in our lives when someone’s encouragement lifted us, and times when we have been discouraged by someone’s words or deeds. To be dis-couraged is to lose our courage or to lose heart. People who en-courage us add to our courage and help us to believe in ourselves and in God. Encouragers are messengers of hope and possibility.

Who is one of the greatest encouragers in your life? I hope there are at least a couple of names that come to your mind of people who have encouraged you and lifted your spirit. It could be a mother or father, a sister or brother, a grandparent, a friend or a teacher, a pastor, a mentor, or a coach who has encouraged you along the way. If we have a healthy personality, then our desire will be, as much as possible to be a source of encouragement and not discouragement. The difference between an encourager and a discourager is that an encourager lights up a room by coming in, a discourager lights up a room by leaving. How would you rather be known? It’s like somebody said, “*Nobody’s worthless; everybody can be a bad example for someone.*”

Hopefully none of us wants to be a source of discouragement because encouragement is vital for life and relationships. Encouragement is like the warmth of the sun on a spring day – it refreshes us and gives us hope.

Encouragement is like a cold drink to a parched thirst – it renews us and gives us strength.

Encouragement helps us overcome when we feel overwhelmed.

Encouragement helps us soar rather than sink.

Encouragement helps us be a victor rather than a victim.

You scream, I scream, we all scream...for encouragement.

If encouragement brings such hope, strength and growth to our lives, how much are we giving? How much are we receiving? Have you ever felt like you were receiving too much encouragement? I didn't think so.

We've heard today from the Book of Acts about someone who was so encouraging to others that the disciples gave him the name, "*Son of Encouragement*." Like some other very important characters in the Bible, Barnabas is given a new name. Barnabas' name change is different than the others who were given a new name because unlike Abraham, Sarah, Jacob, Peter, & Paul – Barnabas doesn't appear to have any significant flaws or faults. His name change is more an acknowledgement of the transforming power of his presence in the lives of other people. Encouraging others is such a part of his DNA that he is called a son of encouragement. If people in your family, or friends, or folks at church were to give you a nickname, what might it be?

What is the legacy our words and behavior are leaving in the lives of others?

Another comic, *Cornered*, portrays two women standing in a cemetery looking at a gravestone that says only RIP. One woman is saying to the other, "*He just made the world a better place. By leaving.*" My mentor in seminary liked to tell the story of the brand new pastor in his first week in his first church having to do his first funeral. He had never done one before and didn't know the man who died, so when it came time for the words of appreciation he said, "*Now I'm going to let those of you who knew Joe share a little about his life and faith.*" And he sat down. And there was silence for one, three almost five minutes. Finally a little old man stood up in the back row, cleared his throat and said, "*Well, his brother was worse.*" We don't want that to be the legacy we leave behind.

The legacy of Barnabas was encouragement. Learning from his life and example, I want to share with you **six characteristics of an encouraging person**. There are at least six habits, behaviors, and attitudes through which we can be a source of encouragement.

**First, Encouragers give freely of their resources.** Barnabas sold a field he owned and gave the money to the apostles so they could distribute the money **to those in need**. Encouragers recognize what they have really doesn't belong to them but to God. Barnabas gave freely. One of the ways we can encourage others is by giving to them in a tangible way, and it doesn't have to be as expensive as selling or giving property as Barnabas did, although, I'm sure that would be deeply appreciated. Writing a note of thanks, giving an hour or two of our time to listen and visit, sharing some scallops,

baking a pecan pie or some chocolate chip cookies or making a meal, fixing something that is broken, watching someone's children, giving a gift – these are just a few ways we can give of ourselves to encourage someone else. Doing something tangible is one of the many encouraging things we can do. We all know how we spend our money and our time are perhaps the two greatest indicators of what is important to us. Barnabas shared his resources freely and invested his life and time in others. No wonder everyone was always glad to see him coming.

Charles Ryrie in his book, *Balancing the Christian Life*, says, *“How we use our possessions demonstrates the reality of our love for God. In some ways, it proves our love more consciously than depth of knowledge, length of prayers, or prominence of service. Those things can be faked. But the use of our possessions shows us up for what we actually are.”* Barnabas demonstrates that one way to encourage others is by **giving freely of our resources.**

**Secondly, encouragers accept us where we are.** In Acts 9, Saul has a life changing encounter with Christ, and goes from being a persecutor of the gospel to a promoter. In Acts 9:26-30, Saul comes to Jerusalem to try and join the disciples but they are all afraid of him and suspicious of Saul's motives. He had a nasty reputation, and was ravaging the church, and approved the murder of Stephen who was the first martyr. Now Saul's life has been changed but no one believes him or trusts him. Acts 9:27 says, **“But Barnabas took him and brought him to the apostles.”** Barnabas takes Saul in and advocates for him before the apostles. Can you remember an incident when someone took a risk on your behalf and spoke up for you? How did that make you feel? Barnabas spoke of Saul's experience of being confronted by Jesus and being changed. Barnabas risked his own reputation to help Saul be accepted in the community of Christ followers.

**Encouragers accept us where we are, and help us get where we need to be.** They don't dwell on our past or our reputation. How important can it be to accept people where they are, disregarding their past? We might not have almost **half the New Testament** if Barnabas hadn't been willing to encourage Saul and speak up on his behalf. Encouragers accept us where we are and help us get where we need to be.

**The third characteristic of encouragers is they get excited about the progress of others.** In Acts 11:19-26, we learn that some of the believers who were scattered because of the persecution that took place over Stephen, went to the city of Antioch and spoke to some Greeks *“and a great number became believers and turned to the Lord.”* Who was going to follow-up with all these new believers, teaching them and helping them to grow? Anyone want to take a wild guess who was sent by the church in Jerusalem to encourage these new believers? **Barnabas.**

Barnabas witnessed to them about the grace of God and encouraged them to remain true to the Lord. He rejoiced with them. He got excited about their growth, their potential and their progress as individuals and as a faith community. Encouragers get excited about the progress of others and their excitement is contagious. Acts 11:24 provides us with additional insight into why Barnabas was such an effective encourager. It says, *“He was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and of faith.”* That is a powerful combination and a great way to be known.

**Encouragers give freely of their resources. Encouragers accept us where we are and help us get where we need to be. Encouragers get excited about the progress of others.**

**Fourth, an Encourager has a humble heart.** Jim Collins' book, *Good to Great*, is “*about how you take a good organization and turn it into one that produces sustained great results.*” Several key characteristics are identified to move an organization from good to great and the first is called Level 5 leadership. Level 5 leaders are described as “modest and willful, humble and fearless. It’s not that Level 5 leaders have no ego or self-interest. Indeed they are incredibly ambitious – *but their ambition is first and foremost for the institution, not themselves.*”<sup>1</sup> Barnabas was a Level 5 leader. He realizes he needs help with all the new believers in Antioch so he went to Tarsus to get Saul to help him with the teaching and discipling of all these converts. For the first thirteen chapters in the Book of Acts, Barnabas’ name always appears first on the marquee when he is mentioned with Saul. It’s always Barnabas and Saul. However, after a dramatic encounter in which Saul rebukes a man who is trying to turn people away from the faith; from then on it’s more frequently Paul and Barnabas. Barnabas is a modest, humble encourager and he doesn’t care who gets the credit or top billing.

Encouragers freely give of their resources.

They accept you where you are and help you get where you need to be.

Encouragers get excited about the progress of others and have a humble heart.

**The fifth characteristic of an encourager is they keep building unity.** Encouragers recognize how we need each other, that everyone is important, and in Christ we are all truly one. In Acts 13:1-3, Barnabas and Saul are part of a multi-cultural group that is worshiping, praying and fasting together. Present are Barnabas, a Jew from Cyprus, Simeon of Niger, who was undoubtedly black, Lucius of Cyrene, who likely was black, and Manaen, a friend and member of the court of ruler Herod Antipas (the one who had John the Baptist killed), who becomes a leader of the church in Antioch. Finally, there is Saul, a Pharisee from Tarsus. This group of diverse believers reflects the truth that Jesus wants a church that doesn’t limit itself or make distinctions based on boundaries, nationalities or distinctions that the world does. Encouragers work to build unity wherever they are, people who are discouragers almost inevitably can also be found sowing seeds of discord and division.

**The sixth and final characteristic of an encourager is they give others a second chance.** One of the surprising and almost stunning passages in Acts is in Acts 15:36-41, where we discover that Barnabas and his protégé, Paul – after all the trial and triumphs they have shared together, after all their mutual ministry and service and accomplishment – have a disagreement that was so serious that it caused them to part company. Barnabas and Paul decided to go back and visit all the churches in which they had preached and taught. Barnabas, ever the encouraging leader, wants to take John called Mark with them. Paul says, “*No way, he quit on us during the first missionary journey. He doesn’t have what it takes.*” We don’t know why Mark had left the first time, but he did. Ironically, Paul, the one who had benefited so deeply from the acceptance and encouragement of Barnabas, is unwilling to extend similar acceptance, encouragement and a second chance to Mark. It’s always sad when Christians who are only saved by God’s grace, welcome grace for themselves,

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<sup>1</sup> Jim Collins, *Good to Great* (Harper Business: New York, NY, 2001) pages, 15, 21, 22.

but then can be so unforgiving, harsh or judgmental of others. The disagreement became so sharp that Paul took Silas and headed to Syria while Barnabas took Mark to Cyprus. Barnabas was willing to part with Paul, his companion in ministry, for the sake of an inexperienced young man **because encouragers give others a second chance**. Encouragers accept us where we are and help us get where we need to be. Encouragers realize one failure doesn't mean someone is a failure.

Because Barnabas was willing to pour his life into John Mark, eventually the old encourager was able to reconcile and reunite Paul and Mark. In fact, in 2 Timothy 4:11, Paul writes, *"Get Mark and bring him with you, for he is useful in my ministry."* Without Barnabas, Christianity as we know it would not exist. Neither Paul nor John Mark would have reached the heights of influence and impact without the encouragement, bridge building, acceptance, and unwavering support of Barnabas, one of the greatest men in the history of the Christian faith.

When was the last time you went out on a limb for someone, and like Barnabas forgave the errors of their past or the hurt they caused, and became a source of encouragement to them instead?

Encouragers give freely of their resources.

Encouragers accept us where we are.

Encouragers get excited about the progress of others.

Encouragers have a humble heart.

Encouragers keep building unity.

Encouragers give others a second chance.

Who can you encourage this week?

Painter Benjamin West was one of the most important American painters of the eighteenth century. Born near Philadelphia in 1738, there is a sign that marks the house where he was born, which is found on the campus of Swarthmore College. We saw it this past Tuesday. Benjamin West traveled to London in 1763, and stayed there for the rest of his life. He became a leading figure in London's art world and a founding member of the Royal Academy, serving as its second president. West told how he loved to paint as a youngster. When his mother left, he would pull out the oils and try to paint. One day he pulled out all the paints and made quite a mess. He hoped to get it all cleaned up before his mother came back, but he didn't. West said what she did next completely surprised him. She picked up the painting and said, *"My what a beautiful painting of your sister."* She gave him a little kiss on the cheek and walked away. With that kiss, West says, he became a painter.

Every day, with God's help, you and I are trying to paint the picture of Christ in our lives through what we say and do. But we all make messes. The last thing any of us need is someone coming along saying, *"What a mess you made! What were you thinking? I don't understand how you could do this."* What we need, what so many people need, **is a word and a kiss of encouragement**.

God knows our lives, this church and the world need more people like Benjamin West's mom and Barnabas. May their tribe increase.

**Blessing** Romans 15:5-6, *“May the God of steadfastness and encouragement grant you to live in harmony with one another, in accordance with Christ Jesus, so that together you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.”*

### **Questions for Discussion or Reflection**

1. Who is one of the greatest encouragers in your life?
2. When we meet Barnabas in Acts 4:32-37, what is admirable about him?
3. Share or recall a time when someone’s generosity encouraged, inspired or blessed you.
4. In Acts 9:26-30, Saul comes to Jerusalem to try and join the disciples but they are all afraid of him and suspicious of Saul’s motives. Barnabas takes Saul in and advocates for him before the apostles. Can you remember an incident when someone took a risk on your behalf and spoke up for you? How did that make you feel?
5. In Acts 11:22-26, what character traits of Barnabas are identified? What kind of reputation and legacy do you think Barnabas was creating through who he was and what he was doing?
6. What sort of legacy or reputation do you wish to leave behind? How do you want to be remembered?
7. In Acts 13:1-3, Barnabas is part of a multi-cultural group that is worshiping, fasting and praying together seeking the Lord’s direction. What value does he gain from being a part of that group and what can we learn from his experience?
8. In Acts 15:36-41, we learn that two believers as great as Barnabas and Paul who had served together and accomplished a great deal together, had a disagreement that caused them to part company. What happened as a result of their parting? Is there anything for us to learn from how they handled their disagreement?
9. Who can you encourage this week?