

Sunday May 16th, 2021

Series: People We All Need in Our Lives
Acts 4:32-37
Sermon: "We All Need a Barnabus"

Bennett Cerf tells a story of the time of Nero the emperor, when Roman citizens crowded into the Coliseum to see hundreds of Christians tossed to the lions. It came to be that there was one particular Christian who had given the authorities nothing but trouble. Nero heard about it, and ordered that eleven of his most ferocious lions be set aside, and left unfed for an entire week, to assure they would be ravenous when they turned on this particular Christian.

On the big day, eighty thousand people crowded into the arena to watch the spectacle. The troublesome Christian stood alone in the middle of the arena, calm and unafraid. The crowd waited with baited breath for the show, but something amazing happened. The first lion was released, and driven by intense hunger rushed toward the Christian, pausing just before he leapt for the kill, and the Christian bent down and whispered in the lion's ear.

Immediately, the lion put his tail between his legs and slinked away. Six more lions were released with the exact same result. The crowd hollered in protest, demanding its money back. An angry Nero summoned the Christian and angrily asked, "If you tell me what you said to those lions to make them act that way, I will grant you a full pardon." "It's simple, Nero," explained the Christian with a grin. "I just whispered in their ears: 'Remember, you'll be expected to say a few words after dinner!'" (Treasury of Humour, p. 383)

Ask any number of people what frightens them in this world, and the majority of respondents are likely to say, speaking in public. I cannot tell you how many times someone has said to me after a service, "I don't know how you do it. I could never preach a sermon." Well, thirty plus years ago, I would have said, "I can't do it." I didn't even like putting my hand up in class. It's not because I was shy, because I wasn't that shy, it's just that I didn't want to sound foolish.

And in those first few attempts at public speaking, I said some foolish things. Now I am fully aware I still do from time to time, but I have learned to apologize and learn from my mistakes. So, the question you might have is this; how did I get from "I can't do it" to preaching 50 or so sermons or messages a year. The simple answer is, Barnabus. Well, not actually the original Barnabus from scripture, but several people who became my Barnabuses over the years.

The Barnabus we meet in scripture was actually named Joseph at birth, but because of his generosity and support of the early church, the disciples renamed him Barnabus, or "Son of Encouragement". I was blessed with a lot of sons and daughters of encouragement over the years, and still am.

Fun fact. It was actually my own mother that originally suggested I consider pursuing pastoral work. It was an encouragement to look in a direction I had not yet considered. In my case, I also had a pastor, when I was a teenager, who took my initial leanings to pastoral work seriously, and encouraged me to try things; even preaching. I had professors and supervisors when I was in seminary who guided, and on occasion corrected some serious flaws in my attitude and approach to ministry and in the pulpit.

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Whatever skill I possess that First Baptist enjoys, is really a legacy of Brownsburg and Avoca/Rivington Baptist churches, who loved me, and encouraged me, as I fumbled through my first few years of pastoring. Without my Barnabuses, whether they be women or men, I would not be in this pulpit, even when I sensed a strong call to ministry. I suspect that for everyone listening to this recording, whatever success we enjoy, in whatever endeavor we are in, is owed at least in some measure to a Barnabus, or maybe several.

If you want a long healthy life; then you need a Barnabus. Michael Marmot produced a study entitled, *The Status Syndrome: How Social Standing Effects Our Health and Longevity*. What Marmot discovered was that Academy Award winning actors and actresses lived an astonishing four years longer than their co-stars, or those who were just nominated. Winning the Oscar, it seems, statistically lowers your risk of dying from heart disease, but also from other causes.

Go back to the book of Acts, and just see how critical Barnabus was to the ministry and mission of the early church. When the early church was frightened, and suspicious of the recently converted Paul, it was Barnabus who vouched for him. Remember it was Barnabus who was sent to Antioch to check out the church there, and he brought back an encouraging report.

It was Barnabus, who subsequently sought out Paul, and got him into missionary work, beginning in Antioch. Barnabus was a positive, encouraging, man. He saw the best in everyone he encountered. He was like Aaron was to Moses, holding up tired arms. But Barnabus was not a flatterer. When push came to shove, he stood on his principles, even disagreeing with Paul, and thus needing to end his traveling with Paul.

The truth is we need two kinds of handlers in our lives. The first is a Nathan, who comes with the hard fist of truth to knock some sense into us. But we also need a Barnabus who comes with an open hand to gently pat us on the back. Did you know that up until Acts 13:7 Paul was actually Barnabus' assistant? When Luke writes of them, he always mentioned Barnabus first. Eventually Paul takes over, but the new arrangement is brief, because they have a falling out.

Do you know what caused the riff between these two men? There was another young man who started with great vigor in the work and mission of the church. His name was John Mark, Peter's protégé. We don't know what happened, but John Mark left the mission field, and returned home to Jerusalem. Paul no longer had faith in John Mark. He thought him unworthy to return to the mission's work.

John Mark's reasons for returning home held no weight with Paul. But Barnabus, a cousin of John Mark, believed in John Mark. He saw his potential. He wasn't ready to cast off the young man. Barnabus pleaded with the disciples to take him back, but Paul refused. So, Barnabus agreed to separate from Paul, and take John Mark as his traveling companion, and they went to Cyprus to spread the gospel.

In the end, Barnabus proved to be right, or maybe his encouragement brought out the best in John Mark, because as Paul approached his death years later, it was John Mark he sent for to comfort him. There are lots of voices in this world ready to tell us we are not ready, skilled enough, righteous enough, old enough, or whatever.

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Others may wish to cast us aside; but God never, ever, casts us aside, and often to underscore his support and love, he gives us Barnabuses. And there are different kinds, or levels of being a Barnabus, Leonard Sweet suggests. The first, is one too easily dismissed as irrelevant, but it can be life altering. These we might call “Good Samaritan” Barnabuses. Men and women who enter our lives on an admittedly shallow level.

Often, they may be people we do not know, who say something encouraging, or undertake some small mercy to ease our daily grind. Sometimes we think of it as good manners, but these simple gestures carry a great deal of weight. So much so that Leonard Sweet, as part of his spiritual discipline, sets one day aside every week to intentionally be a spontaneous Barnabus to everyone he meets.

Jesus may have been reflecting on this when he mentioned “Giving a cup of cold water in my name”. Another more modern approach we have heard about, is “random acts of kindness”. You hear stories of people going into a Tim Hortons and paying for the next several coffee orders, just out of kindness. It may seem like such a simple gesture, but the recipients admit it really brightened their day.

Then we have our “Big Brother” Barnabuses, and we are not referring to George Orwell’s idea of big brother here. These are men and women who know us by name, but more than that, who are observant enough to see the signs when we are flagging. They can see clearly that life has beaten us up, and that we are tempted to withdraw. These Barnabuses, come and gently bring us back. They are the ones who climb into the foxhole with us.

They are the Robin to our Batman, and the Sam to our Frodo. They are the ones God sends to us when our cup is dry, and by the grace of God tries to help us see God filling the cup to overflowing. Sometimes these Barnabuses are our advocates. People who speak for us, when we have lost our voice, due to trauma or emotional distress. Jonathan was this kind of Barnabus to David.

Then there is perhaps the most dangerous Barnabus of all. The “Prayer Barnabus”. I say dangerous, because prayer can be the most powerful force in the world, and these Barnabuses pray for us. Prayer changes things, changes lives. We have seen it for ourselves. These Barnabuses are the men and women who say they will pray for us, and it is more than a Christian nicety, because they keep their word. They pray for us and things happen.

In the Colossian church, there was a man named Epaphras who was described by Paul as “always wrestling in prayer for you”. At this moment, who is praying for you? Who is calling on God to bless your life and make you an instrument of his Kingdom? A praying Barnabus is one who keeps us from slip sliding away. Life moves and changes in the blink of an eye, so who prays that we hold steady. A praying Barnabus is truly an encourager.

I remember to this day, what an encouragement it was when I was a new pastor to hear my parents and grandparents tell me they loved me, and they were praying daily for me. One of my favourite types of Barnabuses is one I often undertake, because it comes easily to me, and that is a “Humour Barnabus”.

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This kind of Barnabus comes when we are in a funk, or as they say in AA meetings, caught in “stinkin’ thinkin’.” I truly believe that humour is as great a gift, as sympathetic tears. Life crushes us so hard sometimes, that we forget that Jesus brought us “good news”. What does it mean to give people good news? It means to encourage them, whether we agree with them or not.

Many years ago, at the Baptist Convention in the Atlantic region, there was a conference included in the meetings for the clergy where two theological papers were given concerning the authority of scripture. That’s sure fuel for the fire. One speaker took the position that every word in the Bible had to be taken literally; the other said that one must recognize that the Bible sometimes employs picturesque language, which must not be interpreted as literal. You can imagine the hubbub that ensued.

Minister after minister stood and spoke in support of one paper or the other. The acrimony began to build, and things were turning ugly. It was near as close to a verbal brawl as one can imagine until Rev. MacLeish, who pastored at the time near Canning Nova Scotia, took a turn at the mic and said, “Well, brethren, I’ve listened with a great deal of interest to the two papers, and to the discussions which followed, and I have found it personally uplifting.

Now brethren, I have only one thing to say: I read in the Good Book of a woman clothed in scarlet, seated on seven hills. If you take THAT literally, I would have to say she had some seating capacity!” As you can imagine, laughter broke out in a roar throughout the room, and the chairman seeing an opportunity immediately closed the meeting with prayer. (Let There be Laughter, p. 62)

Ever notice how Jesus, although he never turned anyone away, seemed to deliberately seek out the company of sinners. Could it be that pious people, namely Pharisees and such, are unpleasant to be around? Could it be, that the religious folks thought they knew everything, and dismissed Jesus as having nothing to offer them; but the tax-collectors, prostitutes and other outcasts hungered for Jesus’ encouragement? Can you picture a Pharisee laughing? Can you picture Zacchaeus laughing? You get the point.

Finally, we need to consider the “Endurance Barnabus”, or the people in our lives who emulate Ruth. The people who say, “Whither thou goest, I will go.” Did you know the Greek word for *patience* is more properly translated as “a conquering endurance”? When Naomi’s whole life disintegrated around her (her husband and two sons died suddenly), it was Ruth who refused to abandon her, even willing to travel to a new country.

Who comes and sits with you in your pain? One of the saddest moments of the Passion story of Jesus is when he asks Peter, James, and John, to sit with him as he prayed, and they fell asleep. We all need companions in our suffering.

Someone who bears with you, stays with you and endures with you. Kurt Vonnegut, noted author, says that AA might turn out to be America’s most important contribution to western society. First, it pioneers ways to combat addictions, but secondly, and maybe of greater importance, it provided a networked family of encouragers around the world.

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One wonders what the church would look like today if it had been a more encouraging and a lot less judging.

Imagine that the church could be like AA, a world family of encouragers. Did you know the word encouragement comes from the French word *Coeur*? It means literally to put your heart into someone. Ministers are very prone to what Leonard Sweet calls the Tin Man syndrome. He is referring to the Tin Man in the Wizard of Oz. Over time, with little or no encouragement, the sense of calling and passion for ministry is gone. Life and soul-destroying despair settle in. It is epidemic in churches and it's not just ministers.

We are easily discouraged, and we end up singing the tin man song "I'd be tender-I'd be gentle. And awful sentimental. If I only had a heart." If this is you, you desperately need a Barnabus to put "heart" into you? To restore unto you the joy and hope of life. The prophet Ezekiel speaks for God in this promise to all of us, "I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh." (Ezek. 36:26) A Barnabus helps us recover our soft hearts and isn't that a wonderful thing.

A Barnabus helps us keep things in perspective, which is why I want to leave you with a little prayer a former parishioner passed onto me from the newsletter of First Baptist Church Brantford. I hope it speaks to you as it did to me.

Dear God, I did not sleep well last night, but I did wake up. My muscles are sore, but they work. My wallet is not full, but my belly is. I may not have all I want, but I have all I need. My life is not perfect, but my life is good. Thank you!

A Barnabus, whoever that may be, reminds of this little prayer's truth.