

This morning we are continuing through the book of Acts, the story of the early church. Remember that the resurrected Jesus has told the disciples that they will be his witnesses in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and to the ends of the earth, telling everyone that they forgiveness of sins and eternal life and the very presence of God inside of us is offered to all who would put their faith in Him. They have been given the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost, and the church in Jerusalem grew like crazy. After experiencing severe persecution, the church has been scattered around the region. But instead of destroying the movement, the disciples have brought the gospel of Jesus all over the known world. We're going to pick up the story in Acts 11:19, paying special attention to the ministry of a man named Barnabas:

*Acts 11:19-26 - Now those who had been scattered by the persecution in connection with Stephen traveled as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus and Antioch, telling the message only to Jews. ²⁰ Some of them, however, men from Cyprus and Cyrene, went to Antioch and began to speak to Greeks also, telling them the good news about the Lord Jesus. ²¹ The Lord's hand was with them, and a great number of people believed and turned to the Lord. ²² News of this reached the ears of the church at Jerusalem, and they **sent Barnabas to Antioch.** ²³ When he arrived and saw the evidence of the grace of God, he was glad and encouraged them all to remain true to the Lord with all their hearts. ²⁴ He was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and faith, and a great number of people were brought to the Lord. ²⁵ Then Barnabas went to Tarsus to look for Saul, ²⁶ and when he found him, he brought him to Antioch. So for a whole year Barnabas and Saul met with the church and taught great numbers of people. The disciples were called Christians first at Antioch.*

Most of the first apostles still remain in Jerusalem, where the center of Christian faith resides, but outside of Jerusalem, Antioch becomes a key center for early Christianity (map). We see in this passage how it has become a multicultural, multinational fellowship, and we learn that this is the first place that the disciples are called Christians, or “little Christs.” In response to the growth, the church at Jerusalem sends one of its key leaders, Barnabas, to see what is going on in Antioch. If you're unfamiliar with Barnabas, we first learned about Barnabas in Acts 4:36-37:

*Acts 4:36-37 - Joseph, a Levite from Cyprus, whom the apostles called **Barnabas** (which means Son of Encouragement), ³⁷ sold a field he owned and brought the money and put it at the apostles' feet.*

This passage is from back when the church first starts forming, and many of the church's members are voluntarily selling their possessions so that the proceeds can be used to care for those in need. Joseph, from Cyprus, is one of those. As we see, Barnabas is not his real name, but is a nickname that means "Son of Encouragement" given to him by the apostles because of his gift of encouragement.

The next time Barnabas the Encourager shows up is at a pivotal moment in church history, right after Saul was stopped by Jesus on the road to Damascus and transformed from a persecutor of the church to a follower of Christ:

*Acts 9:26-28 - When he came to Jerusalem, he tried to join the disciples, but they were all afraid of him, not believing that he really was a disciple. ²⁷ But **Barnabas** took him and brought him to the apostles. He told them 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. ²⁸ So Saul stayed with them and moved about freely in Jerusalem, speaking boldly in the name of the Lord.*

And now, as the church becomes one multiethnic, multinational community of Jews and Gentiles, Barnabas, the Son of Encourager, is the one sent to check out what is going on. And we hear:

*Acts 11:23-26 - When he arrived and saw the evidence of the grace of God, he was glad and encouraged them all to remain true to the Lord with all their hearts. ²⁴ He was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and faith, and a great number of people were brought to the Lord. ²⁵ Then **Barnabas** went to Tarsus to look for Saul, ²⁶ and when he found him, he brought him to Antioch. So for a whole year **Barnabas** and Saul met with the church and taught great numbers of people. The disciples were called Christians first at Antioch.*

Barnabas, this Son of Encouragement comes, sees the evidence of the grace of God, and encourages the believers to remain true to the Lord with all their hearts. And then he goes down to Tarsus to find Saul, also known as Paul, and brings him back to Antioch to teach the church. What do we learn from Barnabas about this vital ministry of encouragement?

1) An encourager points out the evidence of God's grace in your life

The word "encouragement" is the Greek word *parakaleo*, from *para* – come alongside, and *kaleo* – to call. It includes calling on someone for help, or speaking

with persistence – entreat, beseech, plead; or speaking authoritatively – exhort, urge, encourage; or speak to relieve sorrow or distress – comfort, cheer up, console, encourage.

In other words, encouragement is more than just saying “you got this” when someone is anxious about an upcoming challenge. Parakeleo has the sense of a person who comes alongside another person or group of people and helps them to become the person God has called them to be. The first thing Barnabas the encourager does is that he recognizes the evidence of God’s grace, or God’s presence and activity in their life. He see that God is at work. And that is great encouragement to the church at Antioch.

But even more than that – certainly the person who had the biggest influence on the world for Christianity, according to Acts, is Saul, who becomes knows as Paul. And when you look at Acts 9 and Acts 11, you find that the biggest believer in Saul, or Paul, was Barnabas. He is the one who brought him to the disciples and vouched for him, telling them about the activity of God in his life. He is the one in Acts 11 who, when faced with a young and diverse church that needed instruction, goes to Tarsus to find Saul to bring him back to be their discipler. A true encourager can identify and point out the evidence of God’s grace in your life.

Think back to someone who pointed out the evidence of God’s grace, God’s activity, in your life. I can think back to 1997 (slide), when Musicon came to South United Methodist Church in Manchester, where I was the summer youth director. I was 21, and beginning to feel a stirring towards youth ministry, but was not yet sure what that meant. I remember us gathering outside, and Jon, the leader, calling me to him and saying that he could see God’s gifting in my life and wanted to have a time of prayer for me. That was a powerful moment in my life, having someone notice and point out the evidence of God’s grace in my life.

Most of us suffer from imposter syndrome. We don’t believe that we belong, or that we have what it takes to be successful at what we are doing or what we want to do. There are few things more encouraging than having someone see the evidence of God’s work in our life. Someone who sees God working, and expresses that belief in who God has created us to be. An encourager who comes alongside us, and call out of us what God is doing. Life is hard, and we need someone who believes in what God is doing in our lives, someone who is willing to come alongside us and encourage us. How can you be that encourager in someone’s life?

2) An encourager calls us to be faithful to God

*Acts 11:23-26 - When he arrived and saw the evidence of the grace of God, he was glad and encouraged them all to remain true to the Lord with all their hearts. ²⁴ He was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and faith, and a great number of people were brought to the Lord. ²⁵ Then **Barnabas** went to Tarsus to look for Saul, ²⁶ and when he found him, he brought him to Antioch. So for a whole year **Barnabas** and Saul met with the church and taught great numbers of people. The disciples were called Christians first at Antioch.*

An encourager not only sees the evidence of God's work in our lives, but calls us to be faithful to God. They don't just say "you're perfect just the way you are" but "I see God at work, and I want to see you become all that God has created you to be." As I mentioned, this takes many forms:

Comforting and consoling the discouraged.

2 Corinthians 1:3-4 - Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, ⁴ who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves have received from God.

Beseeking those who need to be strengthened and inspired and reminding them of God's truth and promises. (beseek is to ask urgently, imploring, entreating)

*1 Thessalonians 5:9-11 - For God did not appoint us to suffer wrath but to receive salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ. ¹⁰ He died for us so that, whether we are awake or asleep, we may live together with him. ¹¹ Therefore **encourage** one another and build each other up, just as in fact you are doing.*

Exhorting and speaking the truth in love to those who need to be confronted

The encourager is not afraid to speak the truth in love.

*Ephesians 4:11-15 - It was he who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers, ¹² to prepare God's people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up ¹³ until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the **fullness of Christ**. ¹⁴ Then we will no longer be infants, tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by*

every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of men in their deceitful scheming. ¹⁵ Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will in all things grow up into him who is the Head, that is, Christ.

Speaking the truth in love is how we grow up and mature. **Think of the continuum.** Some speak the truth, but with no love. Others are all about speaking words of love, but may prefer flattery or hiding the truth rather than speaking hard truth. But the encourager learns to speak the truth in love. To not shy away from saying what needs to be said, but doing it from a place of loving concern, not out of a desire to put someone in their place.

Hebrews 3:12-13 - *See to it, brothers, that none of you has a sinful, unbelieving heart that turns away from the living God. ¹³ But encourage one another daily, as long as it is called Today, so that none of you may be hardened by sin's deceitfulness.*

Life is hard! We need encouragers.

If you're going to be encourager:

1) You need to know a person

If you're going to come alongside someone and call out of them the person that God has created to be, then you need to actually spend time with them. Get to know them enough to be able to see God's activity in their life and know what they need in order to encourage them towards faithfulness to God. Do this in person. Be in a group. Be in relationship.

2) You need to know God's Word

You can't speak the truth in love, and you can't point someone to faithfulness to God, if you don't know God's Word.

3) You need to be filled with the Holy Spirit

Acts 11:23-26 - *When he arrived and saw the evidence of the grace of God, he was glad and encouraged them all to remain true to the Lord with all their hearts. ²⁴ He was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and faith, and a great number of people were brought to the Lord. ²⁵ Then Barnabas went to Tarsus to look for Saul, ²⁶ and when he found him, he brought him to Antioch. So for a whole year Barnabas*

and Saul met with the church and taught great numbers of people. The disciples were called Christians first at Antioch.

In John 14:26, Jesus was preparing his disciples for his leaving, and he told them this:

John 14:26 - *But the Counselor, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you all things and will remind you of everything I have said to you.*

The Holy Spirit is the paraclete. He is the one who comes alongside us and encourages us towards faithfulness to God. He points out Jesus to us and works on us to make us into the person God has created us to be. If we're going to be true encouragers, it helps to know the encourager and to follow Him.

Who can you encourage today?