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Newport News, Virginia
April 19, 2009

Barnabas—Son of Encouragement
Acts 4:32-37

Sometimes, people come into our lives at just the right time and their presence makes all the difference in the world. Sometimes, these points in our lives are when we need a friend. Sometimes, it is the need for guidance or reassurance. Always, it is a point when we need or could use some help and encouragement.

The early church had one such person enter its life that made all the difference in the world. The setting was Jerusalem, but the person was from Cyprus. His name was Joseph—a Levite from Cyprus who was in Jerusalem. The followers of Jesus' Way numbered 5,000 at the time. Joseph from Cyprus' personality was so impressive from the beginning that he is given a nickname—Barnabas—at the point of his introduction. The word Barnabas means “son of encouragement.”

An encourager has unique characteristics. He or she possesses the ability to inject hope at a time of despair. An encourager is one who is able to see a future when others can only see a past. An encourager has the ability to put fresh heart into another...to lift them up rather than pull them down. Such a person helps another see possibilities rather than just the problems.

When you read through the history book of the New Testament—the book of Acts—you discover that this Joseph had a knack for showing up at crisis moments when everything was so uncertain and becoming a catalyst for a brand new good.

The first time this Joseph is mentioned is in Acts 4:32-37. The young church in Jerusalem was in trouble. Economically, things had been bad enough for all Jews since Rome's occupation of Judah. But, for this splinter group, they were being deprived for their deviation from the Jewish faith. At this critical point in the life of the early Christian Church, Joseph of Cyprus sold a field he

owned and laid the money at the disposal of the church. His actions set off a chain reaction. Luke says, “there was never a needy person among them.”

In this act, Joseph was given the nickname Barnabas. He had hope in the midst of despair. He was willing to take a chance on these people. The name Joseph was no longer big enough for him. He had become the Encourager...a gambler on the highest and best...a midwife for the future of the early Christian Church.

In the ninth chapter of Acts (Acts 9:26-28), Barnabas has moved from helping a needy church to helping a needy individual. This time his subject is Saul of Tarsus, a rather risky prospect at that time. Saul of Tarsus was a fiery, Jewish fanatic who was present at the stoning of Stephen. He had started out for Damascus to persecute the Christians there when he became blinded by a light and emotionally disoriented by the experience of the light and voices. Paul (as he became known after this experience) completely changed sides after his encounter with Jesus.

Going from a fanatical opponent of the early Christian movement to one of its greatest proponents was an extreme change on several fronts. In some ways, it would be like two teams getting to the NFL Superbowl after a long, hard season. Then when halftime comes, the quarterback on one team changes sides. Who could trust his motive and his loyalty?

The church did not accept Paul at first. He was like a baby with no one to nurture him into maturity. At this crucial point in Paul’s pilgrimage, who should step in but Barnabas--the Son of Encouragement? Barnabas was the one who took the former persecutor of Christians under wing and introduced him to the elders in Jerusalem.

The third time we see this “Breather of Hope” is in the eleventh chapter of Acts—Acts 11:22-26. The expanding was at a crucial point. Up until then, followers were only Jews who had come to believe in Jesus as the true leader of God’s Kingdom. However, in the church at Antioch, racial and social boundaries were being crossed. It became a racially integrated church. Some of the believers at Antioch began sharing the gospel of Jesus with Gentiles. Luke records: “and a

great many became believers and turned to the Lord.” Into that new dynamic the Jerusalem church sent none other than our Barnabas. Acts 11:23 says that when he arrived and saw the divine grace at work, he rejoiced and encouraged them all to hold fast to the Lord with resolute hearts, for he was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and of faith. And large numbers were won over to the Lord.”

Barnabas then requested that his friend, Paul, come join him in his work with the Greco-Jewish-Christian congregation in Antioch. Paul, himself, knew firsthand what radical personal changes were like. What better person to help Barnabas than one who had experienced a cultural-faith shift.

The ability to see the good potential in persons never left Barnabas. In the last Barnabas scene, Acts 15:36-40, we see him determined to take John Mark on a second missionary trip. You may recall that on the first missionary trip of Barnabas and Paul, John Mark left Paul and Barnabas in Pamphylia to return home for some unexplained reason—homesickness, the lack of physical and emotional stamina, personality conflicts...we don’t know. In the 15th chapter of Acts, Paul and Barnabas plan for a second missionary trip. Barnabas is intent on taking John Mark on this trip—determined to give him another opportunity of service in God’s work. Paul would not hear of it. He refused to be a part of a trip and work that involved John Mark.

I find it interesting that the one who had been such a risky prospect—the Apostle Paul—and had experienced the grace of a new future was unwilling to extend that same grace to this young “ministerial student.” So Barnabas, once again, breathed encouragement and a future into an individual and the Church. Paul and Barnabas parted ways—Timothy going with Paul and John Mark going with Barnabas.

When you give encouragement, you say as Barnabas did, “I sense in you more things than you have ever dreamed.” When you push someone down, you are saying, “I have no confidence in you; you are not worth my time.” Such words depress and break any hope that exists. For good or for ill, we all have this influence.

This is why Barnabas is so appealing to me. He saw a *future* rather than a *past*. He did not get side-tracked with what *was*, but focused on what *could be*.

This way of living and relating was not original with Barnabas. Obviously, he had learned it from the living presence of Jesus. Jesus, also, was a “Son of Encouragement.” He saw more in people like Simon Peter, Matthew, and Zachaeus than anyone else. He was forever taking chances on risky prospects.

This quality is one of the unique characteristics in the Christian faith—looking deep until you see the real gifts in people and championing their true potential.

There is a risk that you may be taken advantage of. Everyone, including Barnabas and Jesus, has had this happen to them. But, isn't it better to take a chance and lose some of the time, than to never take a chance and lose all of the time. This is what Hilton Presbyterian Church needs to be to the community in which we live. This is what we need to be to each other—people who have experienced hope, encouragement, and acceptance, and are eager to extend it to others.

Prayer

So much about life we don't understand, Lord. Help us call forth the best in those before us, and those in our keeping. And, help us respond with courage and creative energy when the best is called forth from us. This we pray in the name of Jesus, who always brings out the best in us. Amen

Acts 4:32-37

³²Now 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. ³³With great power the apostles gave their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all. ³⁴There 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. ³⁵They laid it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to each as any had need. ³⁶There was a Levite, a native of Cyprus, Joseph, to whom the apostles gave the name Barnabas (which means "son of encouragement"). ³⁷He sold a field that belonged to him, then brought the money, and laid it at the apostles' feet.