

Encouragement

Acts 4, 9, 11 & 15: selected verses

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Encourage is the Greek word *parakaleo*, and it appears over one hundred times in the New Testament.

We often think of encouragement as giving compliments to make others feel good about themselves but the biblical sense of encouragement is giving someone support or confidence...and perhaps most importantly, that we're helping to develop something in them.

What we all know is that the clearest way to make a difference in a person's life is by being encouraging.

I

If we are looking for a model of encouragement, let's remember that it was Jesus who modeled first and foremost what it meant to encourage. We see this in the story of the woman caught in adultery, and then the story of Jesus recruiting the shady tax collector, Levi, into his ministry, and when encountering Zacchaeus, who had stolen and cheated. If you remember those stories, Jesus did not scorn, criticize or punish. Rather he encouraged.

But it is another biblical figure that grabs my attention. And he is a person who only appears after Pentecost. His name was Joseph but perhaps you will recognize the nickname he was given by new Christians, *Barnabas*.

Here is how the story of Joseph, aka Barnabas, evolves:

God's Spirit had swept through Jerusalem at Pentecost. Jesus' disciples and new converts began experiencing God's transforming power and they were mesmerized at what God was doing in their lives and in their midst.

One of those early Christian converts was a Jewish man named Joseph. And get this....he sold a field he owned and then took the money and gave it to the apostles. And it was these apostles who then gave this new Jesus-follower, Joseph, the nickname, Barnabas. Why? Because, *Barnabas* literally means, *son of encouragement*.

II

I'll bet there are special people in your life who stand out as people who have encouraged you. Folks who stand out as the ones who gave you confidence, who supported you, people who saw possibilities in you that perhaps you could not see in yourself —maybe a mother, father, friend, teacher or colleague.

Do you know those people?

When the disciples met Joseph, his encouragement was so contagious that they gave him a nickname, Barnabas, the son of encouragement. It's hard to imagine a higher compliment, right?

Someone says the difference between an encourager and a discourager is that a room lights up when an encourager walks in and the room grows dim with a discourager walks in.

There was a pastor, brand new, just out of seminary who had never planned or officiated at a funeral. She was in a small rural church and in her first week a parishioner died. Now, the new minister did not know the deceased, nor did she know he had a despicable reputation. When she officiated at the funeral and got to the homily, she said, "I did not know Brother Smith, so I am going to give you an opportunity to share just a little about his faith and his life."

And then there was silence. For a minute, then two, then three awkward minutes of silence. Finally, one of the parishioners, looking for a way to be encouraging, took the high ground, stood and said, "He was not as bad as his brother," and sat down.

That's not how we want to be remembered! What you and I know is that the footprints you and I leave behind are often tied to our ability and our willingness to be encouraging.

How important is encouragement?

Do you know about the home field advantage in sports? The home field advantage is when the team plays at home and is surrounded by screaming fans who encourage them. But does it make any difference, really, a statistical difference, to play at home? Or is the home field advantage a myth? What do you think?

Here is the evidence: Playing at home is a statistically proven advantage. In major league baseball, the home team wins fifty-three percent of the time; in the NFL, the home team wins fifty-five percent of the time; in college football, the home team wins fifty-nine percent of the time.

What is the difference? At home you play before fans who encourage you.

Indeed, a lot of psychological studies have shown that encouragement leads to better performance in school and in work, when compared to receiving criticism or simply being left alone.

But I was interested in a study on golf. A study by the University of Exeter, in Great Britain, showed the extent to which a sympathetic ear or regular words of encouragement can improve sports performance.

The study, published in the *Journal of Applied Sport Psychology*, focused on three male golfers, two amateurs and one professional, who competed at regional, national and international levels.

For half of the study the golfers were each given regular one-on-one support by Dr. Paul Freeman of the University of Exeter. Mind you, Dr. Freeman is not a golf instructor.

Freeman offered a range of support including listening to the golfers as they talked through their problems, and offering encouragement and reassurance before competitions.

In ten golf matches, all three golfers performed better when they were receiving support from Dr. Freeman, compared to when they did not. And the players improved by an average of almost two shots per round, which is significant at high-level golf.

Freeman said: "It is significant that the support I offered, as a relative stranger, had such a marked influence on their results."

It's the power of encouragement.

III

The story of Barnabas is instructive, particularly if we identify the particular ingredients that Barnabas exhibited. Those were acceptance and offering a second chance.

First, acceptance. Encouragers are people who accept us where we are and then help us get to where we need to be.

The story of Barnabas is closely tied to that of the Apostle Paul. You remember that Paul was a zealous persecutor of Christians in the early days of the church. But Paul was on his way to

Damascus when he had a dramatic vision in which Jesus appeared and asked him why he was doing what he was doing. That encounter became the pivotal point of Paul's life and within days this former persecutor of Christians was telling the good news about Jesus. Not long after, Paul went to Jerusalem, wanting to meet with the Christian leaders.

Well, we might imagine how the Jerusalem Christian leaders felt about this former terrorist! They were skeptical and afraid. How could they trust him? How could this arch enemy now be one of them?

In steps Barnabas, the encourager, who had the knack of accepting people where they were and helping them get to where they needed to be. He personally took Paul to the leaders and then spoke on Paul's behalf. He told them what had happened to Paul on the Damascus road and how Paul had preached in the name of Jesus afterwards.

And what affect did Barnabas have on the skeptical Christian leaders? They had a change of heart and agreed to listen to Paul. When they did they were assured of Paul's authenticity. And from that point on, the importance of Paul's work in the early church cannot be overstated.

But it took Barnabas, the encourager, who accepted Paul where he was (which I am sure was a very flawed place) and helped him get to where he needed to be.

Encouragers have that knack. They have the spiritual sensitivity to be less judging, less critical, and more accepting. In that way, they often take a chance on people because they see potential rather than their flaws. The world needs more people like that.

IV

Lastly, encouragers are givers of second chances. Barnabas modeled this in the painful story where he and Paul got tangled up over the fate of a young minister named John Mark.

Now John Mark was a younger cousin of Barnabas and he had been active in the ministry of the new church. As Paul and Barnabas made a plan for a new missionary journey, Barnabas wanted to take John Mark as a part of the team. But Paul objected. Why? Because on an earlier mission journey, John Mark had left the mission early.

Why? We don't know. But when Barnabas wants to include him in this new mission, Paul says absolutely not; this guy had failed them once before and in Paul's mind he was untrustworthy. This disagreement between Paul and Barnabas was so intense that these two men who had longed traveled together, parted ways. Barnabas took John Mark in one direction; Paul took Silas and headed off in another.

Which is to say Barnabas was willing to give the young John Mark a second chance and include him on the team. Was it a good decision?

Well, consider this: John Mark and his work is mentioned throughout the New Testament, and later, Paul would come around and also give him accolades. And, many believe, including a number of biblical scholars, that the writer of the gospel of Mark is none other than.... John Mark. Which he wrote after being given a second chance.

Barnabas, the encourager, was willing to give John Mark a second chance. And in my mind, this is the gospel at its core. May we be sons and daughters of encouragement.