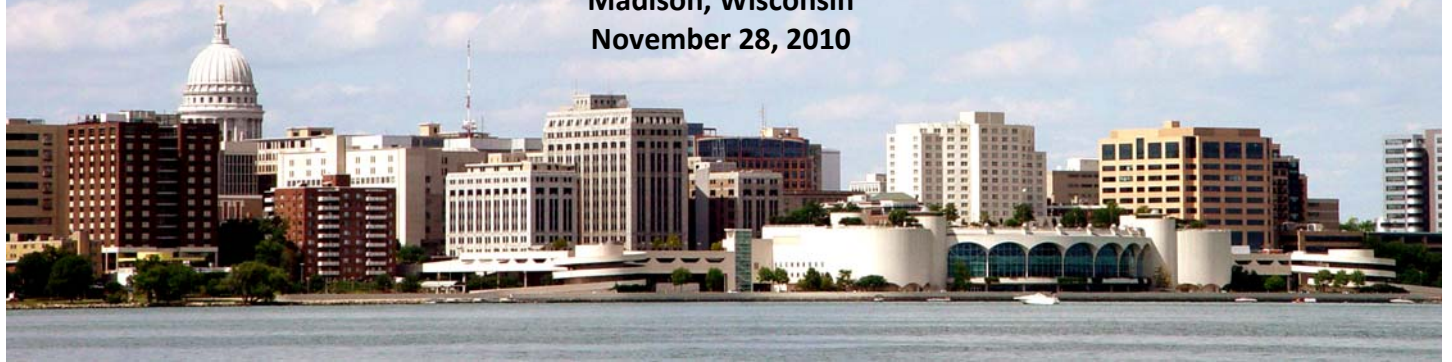


“Barnabas: Son of Encouragement”

Acts 9:23-31

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Introduction:

Probably all of us here this morning can appreciate the value of a good name. We know that our parents gave us the names that we wear for a reason. Many of us were named for someone—we were given the name of a respected friend of the family, or maybe we were given the name of a parent or a grandparent, or maybe we were given a name from the Bible. Many people these days also have nicknames, and so perhaps someone with the name “Alfred” is sometimes referred to as “Al.” Sometimes “William” is changed to “Bill.” I will not embarrass any of our members, but some of you have nicknames that have absolutely nothing to do with your given name. When I go to the hospital for a visit, sometimes I have a hard time finding some of you! Again, I will not embarrass any of our own members, but down in Janesville we had a member named “Marie,” and when I would go to see her in the hospital, she was in there under the name “Alice.” I have no idea what connection “Marie” has to “Alice.” Sometimes a nickname is only remotely connected to someone’s given name. In high school, for example, some of my friends called me “Dos Equis,” a Spanish phrase meaning, “Two X’s,” because of the two X’s in my name. Of course, “Dos Equis” is also the name of a Mexican beer. I have never had it, and yet it does have a nice ring to it! Names, therefore, are important, but they can also be changed for many reasons.

In the Scriptures, we know that names were sometimes passed down from generation to generation, and yet (like today) we also know that people in Bible times were often given nicknames, names that reflected perhaps a certain aspect of their character, and sometimes names were changed at a crucial time in people’s lives. We see this with the changing of Abram to Abraham, “Exalted Father,” to “Father of a Multitude” (when God made the promise that Abram’s descendants would become like the sand on the seashore). In the New Testament, we remember Simon whose name was changed to Peter, meaning “Rock” (when Peter made the good confession that Jesus was, in fact, the Son of God). Often, therefore, names have meaning.

This morning I would like for us to study a man by the name of Joseph. However, most of us probably do not know this man as Joseph, but instead, most of us know him by his nickname, a nickname that was given to him by the apostles. I am referring, of course, to Barnabas. The first time we learn about Barnabas is near the end of Acts 4. As the church is growing, some of the early Christians start selling their property to help take care of their new brothers and sisters in need, and the Bible says in Acts 4:36-37, ***“Now Joseph, a Levite of Cyprian***

birth, who was also called Barnabas by the apostles (which translated means Son of Encouragement), and who owned a tract of land, sold it and brought the money and laid it at the apostles' feet." And so we find here that Joseph was given a nickname by the apostles, and the nickname was "Son of Encouragement." From what I understand, the word that is translated here as "encouragement" goes back to a word meaning, "to call to one's side." The word refers to the idea of a close friend, someone you would call on to stand with you during a difficult time, an encouraging person, someone to comfort you and stand with you side-by-side, shoulder-to-shoulder. Barnabas, therefore, was an encouragement to the early church. He was a comfort to them. He was like a close friend who was standing there with them side-by-side, shoulder-to-shoulder. The nickname must have stuck pretty well, it must have been accurate, because as far as I can tell, he is referred to as Joseph in the Scriptures only once, but he is referred to as Barnabas (the Son of Encouragement) at least 33 times in the New Testament.

This morning, then, I would like for us to look at one of the most crucial examples of Barnabas acting as an encouraging person. The account is found in Acts 9:23-31 (p. 1717). You may remember that a man by the name of Saul had been persecuting the church. Later, in fact, he will tell us in his own words that he was a **"violent aggressor"** (1 Timothy 1:13); that is, he enjoyed persecuting the church, he thought he was offering service to God by dragging Christians to jail, by taking part in putting them to death. And yet as he was on one of those missions to round up Christians to bring them bound to Jerusalem, we know that Saul saw the light. He was told to continue on to the city of Damascus where he would be told what to do. After three days, Saul was told to be baptized, he did so immediately, and then right away, Saul started preaching the good news about Jesus, that Jesus was, in fact, the Son of God. And that is where we come to Acts 9:23-31. Saul is in Damascus, he is preaching the faith which just a few days earlier he had been trying to destroy, and this is what the Bible says starting in Acts 9:23...

²³ When many days had elapsed, the Jews plotted together to do away with him, ²⁴ but their plot became known to Saul. They were also watching the gates day and night so that they might put him to death; ²⁵ but his disciples took him by night and let him down through an opening in the wall, lowering him in a large basket. ²⁶ When he came to Jerusalem, he was trying to associate with the disciples; but they were all afraid of him, not believing that he was a disciple. ²⁷ But Barnabas took hold of him and brought him to the apostles and described to them how he had seen the Lord on the road, and that He had talked to him, and how at Damascus he had spoken out boldly in the name of Jesus. ²⁸ And he was with them, moving about freely in Jerusalem, speaking out boldly in the name of the Lord. ²⁹ And he was talking and arguing with the Hellenistic Jews; but they were attempting to put him to death. ³⁰ But when the brethren learned of it, they brought him down to Caesarea and sent him away to Tarsus. ³¹ So the church throughout all Judea and Galilee and Samaria enjoyed peace, being built up; and going on in the fear of the Lord and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit, it continued to increase.

As we look at this passage of scripture this morning, I would like for us to consider, first of all, the fact that Saul needed the fellowship of the church. Secondly, I would like for us to look at how Barnabas made it happen, and then I would like for us to close by looking at the positive result of what Barnabas did on this occasion.

I. **First of all, though, let us please consider the fact that SAUL NEEDED THE FELLOWSHIP OF THE CHURCH.**

In verse 26, the Bible says that, *“When he came to Jerusalem, he was trying to associate with the disciples.”* When it says that Saul *“was trying to associate,”* it means that he tried over and over again—it was a constant process, and yet the more he tried, the more they turned him down. Apparently they were scared, not believing that Saul had really changed. Nevertheless, Saul was looking for that close fellowship. In fact, the word we translate here as *“associate”* goes back to a word referring to “glue.” It is a word that is sometimes used to refer to the marriage relationship, the close bond between a husband and wife. And so we find here that Saul wanted to “glue” himself to the church in Jerusalem. He wanted to be bonded to the church. He did not just want a place to worship on Sunday, he did not just want a few people to hang out with from time to time, but he wanted a close relationship with the Jerusalem congregation.

And yet as we learn from the text, the disciples were afraid, not believing that Saul was really a disciple. Of course, it was earlier in this same chapter (in verse 1) that Saul was, *“...still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord.”* So maybe we can understand why they might have been nervous. Perhaps they were scared that this was all part of a plot, a plot where Saul would pretend to convert, and then he would come in and use that inside information to cause some real damage. But in spite of their rejection, Saul kept trying. He knew how important it was to get plugged in to the church, and so he continued to try to glue himself to the disciples.

So, there is a lesson here, first of all, for those who are new Christians and for those who are new to the congregation: It is very important for you push hard for a way to connect, for a way to get involved. It is important to jump in. Do not take “no” for an answer, but keep on pushing for a way to get involved. Of all people, Saul was in a perfect position to say, “Well, that’s it, I’m out of here! Nobody shook my hand on Sunday, this is a cold congregation, the preacher stepped on my toes, nobody cares about me, nobody called me, this church isn’t meeting my needs. I am gone!” And yet we find that Saul kept on trying to associate himself with the church. Saul did not give up. He did not leave it to the church, he was not a quitter, but he kept on putting himself in a position to connect.

But then secondly, there is also a lesson here for the rest of us, a lesson for those of us who have been a part of the church for a long time, and that is: We must be responsive to those who are new who are looking for a closer connection. Maybe we can think of this in terms of bringing a little baby home from the hospital. Imagine bringing a newborn home from the hospital and saying, “Well, this is the living room, your bedroom is upstairs, here’s the TV remote. We are going to bed, but if you get hungry, the kitchen is over here. Just make yourself at home.” Can you imagine saying that to a newborn? Would that child ever grow to maturity? If we would never say that to a newborn, then let us think very carefully about what we are saying to those who are new to the congregation, “Well, here’s your cubbyhole, here is a church directory, if you need anything, just let us know, and we’ll see you next Sunday!” Perhaps there is more that we can do to welcome those who are new. As those who have been Christians for many years, maybe we can put ourselves out there, we can practice hospitality as we should, and we can make sure that those who are new have an invitation to join us for lunch every Sunday.

But the fellowship of the church is so incredibly important! Often, those who are new to the Christian faith (like Saul) are in the process of being rejected by their old friends and family. Sometimes it is a struggle at work as the new Christian realizes that he or she should no longer participate in the office gossip, and so they suddenly find themselves on the outside as they step away from those conversations. Sometimes the conflict comes with our own earthly families or even our close friends. As Peter said in 1 Peter 4, when we become

Christians, the time has already passed for us to participate in those *“drinking parties,”* and when we suddenly stop those things, our old friends are *“surprised”* that we no longer *“run with them”* and ridicule us for our new stand on some of those things. When those old friends turn against us, that is when we really need to glue ourselves to our new Christian family.

Some time ago, I read about a young man who had come from a pretty wild background. He had obeyed the gospel, he was friendly and outgoing, and several weeks after he was baptized, one of the members of the congregation called him one Friday night and said, “Hey, I was just wondering how you are doing these days.” And the young Christian responded and said, “Well, I am just sitting here all by myself realizing that I can’t have any women and can’t go out with my old drinking buddies. I was just sitting here thinking about the joy of Christian living!” It is so important, then, for us to spend time with each other!

As we read in our Scripture reading this morning, the writer of Hebrews told us that we are to *“...consider how to stimulate one another to love and good deeds, not forsaking our own assembling together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another; and all the more as you see the day drawing near”* (Hebrews 10:24-25). In other words, it is not just about us, it is not just about what we are getting out of the church, but all of us are personally responsible for reaching out and encouraging others. First of all, then, Saul saw the value of fellowship, and he made a point of trying to associate himself with the disciples in Jerusalem.

II. But as we look back at the passage in Acts 9, we see not only that Saul saw the need for fellowship, but we also see that BARNABAS SET AN AMAZING EXAMPLE OF ENCOURAGEMENT.

In verse 27, the Bible says, *“But Barnabas took hold of [Saul] and brought him to the apostles and described to them how he had seen the Lord on the road, and that He had talked to him, and how at Damascus he had spoken out boldly in the name of Jesus.”* We find that the disciples are obviously afraid of Saul, and yet in spite of their fear, we find that Barnabas did something. As I see it, at least, Barnabas apparently took it upon himself to meet with Saul privately, to get the story straight from Saul, and then he took Saul directly to the apostles and laid it out. The Bible tells us (in verse 27) that Barnabas *“took hold”* of Saul. This word, by the way, is translated twice in the New Testament as “seized.” In Luke 23:26, the Bible tells us that the Roman soldiers *“seized”* Simon of Cyrene and pressed him into service to carry the Lord’s cross, and in Acts 16:19, the Bible tells us that the owners of the demon-possessed girl *“seized”* Paul and Silas and brought them before the local magistrate to be thrown into prison. The same word is used. Barnabas saw that Saul was being rejected by the church, and so he seized him (he took hold of him) and brought him to the apostles, and he explained the situation. Sometimes we may not realize this, but Barnabas was truly putting not only his reputation but also his life on the line here.

Barnabas was a generous man with a good reputation, and Barnabas was risking it all as he explained that Saul was someone to be trusted. This was a matter of life and death. If Saul had been faking his conversion, if Saul had been trying to infiltrate the church, if this had been a trap, this might have been the end of the apostles, this might have been the end of the Jerusalem congregation, hundreds if not thousands of innocent people might have been murdered for their faith in Jesus, and Barnabas would have gone down in history as the one who let Saul in, as the one who allowed it all to happen. But as it is, Barnabas took the risk and in the face of suspicion Barnabas stood with Saul, and Barnabas explained how Saul had become a Christian. At this point, Barnabas had no idea that Saul would go on to write 13 books of the New Testament. At this point, Barnabas had no idea that Saul would travel thousands of miles on several very important missionary journeys. At this point, Barnabas had no idea that Saul would preach the gospel all the way from Jerusalem to Rome. And yet Barnabas knew that Saul needed encouragement. He knew that Saul needed a helping hand. He knew that

Saul needed someone to come and stand by his side, and so that is exactly what Barnabas did. Barnabas looked past those sins that had been forgiven, and he introduced Saul to the apostles.

Again, as we apply this lesson to ourselves, hopefully we realize that each of us can be a Barnabas to the other members of the congregation. All of us have the ability to reach out and include someone who may benefit from being included. Some people may be risky, some people may be more difficult to love than others, but all of us can step out in faith and encourage somebody who needs some encouragement.

In English, the word “encouragement” comes from an old French word and literally means that we fill someone with courage, that we make them courageous, that we inspire or fill someone with confidence. We need more of this in the church. Every day, we face situations where the people in this world may take our confidence away, situations where our courage is depleted—perhaps some kind of crisis, maybe we’re just tired, maybe we’re facing an illness, maybe someone lashes out at us with some discouraging words at work or at school. But in the church, we have the privilege of filling each other back up with courage, like a battery that gets recharged. We can write a note. We can make a call. We can send a message. We can post on a wall. We can send a text. We can take someone out for lunch. We can send some flowers. We can rake some leaves. We can shovel some snow. We can listen. We can stand up and object when we hear some gossip. We can send an anonymous gift. We can give a compliment. And above all, we can follow the example of Barnabas, the Son of Encouragement.

III. As we come to the end of our passage this morning, I would like for us to notice something else before we close, and that is: THE CHURCH WAS BLESSED AS A RESULT OF WHAT HAPPENED.

After Saul had been accepted and encouraged, the Bible says in verse 31, ***“So the church throughout all Judea and Galilee and Samaria enjoyed peace, being built up; and going on in the fear of the Lord and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit, it continued to increase.”*** We may think that Saul is the one who was built up and encouraged here, and he was, but what Barnabas did was so much more than that. Once Saul got to know the church, once he was able to speak out boldly in Jerusalem and all over that area, the church got stronger as well. Saul was encouraged, but the church needed to change, they needed to be more accepting of Saul, and once they made the change, things were so much better. According to verse 31, the church enjoyed peace. You know, I hope we’re thankful for the peace that the church here has right now. I remember my grandfather saying, “The time to preach on peace is when you have peace, because if you wait to preach on peace until the church is in conflict, then it usually doesn’t do any good, and sometimes it can even make it worse.” We have peace right now, so let’s be happy about it. Let’s appreciate it. But let’s use our peace to get things done. Let’s use this time of peace to encourage each other.

Verse 31 also tells us that the church was being ***“built up”*** during this time. They were, ***“...going on in the fear of the Lord and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit.”*** A lot of people today look at the fear of God as being a bad thing. But according to King Solomon in Proverbs 1:7, the fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge and wisdom. And so when the Bible says that the early church went on in the ***“fear of the Lord,”*** it means that they respected the Lord and that they stayed close to the Lord’s word. And so at the end of verse 31, we find that the church ***“continued to increase.”*** I don’t know about you, but these are some things I would love to see more of here in Madison.

Conclusion:

This morning, then, as we close, let us think back briefly to the idea of a nickname. Normally, we do not have the privilege of giving ourselves a nickname, but usually our nicknames are given to us by others. Not knowing anything about Mexican beer, I would have never even thought about Dos Equis. So let's think about this in terms of our Christian faith: If our fellow Christians were to give us a nickname based on some aspect of our Christian character, what would that name be? What are we known for in the church? Are we (like Barnabas) known for encouraging others with our words? As we close this morning, I would ask that we just try to imagine a church full of people like Barnabas. Imagine having our courage filled every time we get together! Imagine having someone come to our side whenever we go through any kind of difficult situation. What a wonderful church that would be! That's the kind of church I want to tell my neighbor about! And that is exactly why the early church grew as it did.

To be a part of the Lord's church, the Lord teaches in the Bible that we must accept the sacrifice of His only Son by reenacting the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus in our own lives. We die to sin, we allow ourselves to be briefly buried in water, and we are raised up to live the Christian life. If you have fallen and need the prayers of this church, we hope you will let us know about it—write your concern down and bring it to the front. We can pray about it together. We can stand by your side. If you have any questions, let us know. But if you are ready to obey the gospel right now, you can let us know as we sing this next song. Let's stand and sing...

To comment on this lesson: church@fourlakescoc.org