

March 30, 2008

The B (Barnabas) Factor

Acts 15:36-41, Acts 4:36, Hebrews 10:24-25

I want to talk about one of the most valuable commodities in this world today. . . one that is valuable because it is far more rare than we would imagine, valuable because it can build up lives in a world that knows how to break them down far too easily, and valuable because there is a space in each of our hearts that longs for it.

That word is *ENCOURAGEMENT*. Let's talk for a moment about what encouragement is. A good place to start is with the word itself. Encouragement in scripture comes from the root word that is used to refer to the Holy Spirit as our Helper, the one called alongside to help, to strengthen, or to help us to stand.

Woven into the fabric of the Acts of the Apostles and Paul's epistles is the quiet life of a man who was a life-changer. He was mentioned at least fifteen times in the New Testament yet many of us have never heard of him. This was a man who so epitomized the meaning of the word encouragement, that the disciples changed his name from Joseph to Barnabas. (Slide 1) The term Barnabas was derived from two words: "bar" meant the "son of" and "nabas" referred to a way of speaking that encouraged or built another person up. So the name Barnabas literally means the Son of Encouragement -- the one who refreshes. To call someone the "son of something" in Jewish culture was a way of describing their character -- as if they were the offspring of a particular behavior. For instance, the disciples of Jesus, James and John, were from the Zebedee family but their nickname was "Sons of Thunder" -- presumably because of their personality. To be known as Barnabas was a supreme compliment. It was a nickname that stuck with this man, Joseph, throughout most of his life.

So, then, journey with me to Acts, chapter 4. The young, persecuted church was backed to the wall and financially strapped. The physical needs of many of the believers were desperate but Barnabas came through -- he sold a field that he owned and gave the proceeds to the church to distribute to those who had needs.

The next time Barnabas appears, he's at it again! In chapter 11, the church is exploding with growth. It is quickly getting too big for the leaders to handle. So what does Barnabas do? He goes searching for Saul of Tarsus, who was still an outcast to many in the church because of his former life of persecuting Christians. But Barnabas had never been afraid to stick his neck out for a new Christian, so the

"Son of Encouragement" took Saul who became the apostle Paul by the hand and brought him to Antioch and introduced him to the entire church as brand-new leadership material.

But, the final reference to Barnabas in Acts is the most telling of all. Let me read it with you. This is from Acts 15:36-41: (Slide 2)

<sup>36</sup> *Some time later Paul said to Barnabas, "Let us go back and visit the brothers in all the towns where we preached the word of the Lord and see how they are doing."* <sup>37</sup> *Barnabas wanted to take John, also called Mark, with them,* <sup>38</sup> *but Paul did not think it wise to take him, because he had deserted them in Pamphylia and had not continued with them in the work.* <sup>39</sup> *They had such a sharp disagreement that they parted company. Barnabas took Mark and sailed for Cyprus,* <sup>40</sup> *but Paul chose Silas and left, commended by the brothers to the grace of the Lord.* <sup>41</sup> *He went through Syria strengthening the churches."*

Let me set this scripture in context. The second big missionary journey is about to begin. As Paul and Barnabas begin to discuss the details of the trip -- the inevitable topic arose -- John Mark, the young man who had not measured up on the first missionary journey. Apparently, Mark began the journey with them but turned back. Can't you just imagine that discussion-- I really hope Mark didn't overhear that one! "No way", said Paul. "He bailed once. . . who's to say he isn't going to do it again?" "Yes", insisted Barnabas. "He can and will succeed if we give him that second chance. He's grown up a lot since then. He just needs a little encouragement." Paul would not withdraw his negative vote. Barnabas stood his ground, believing in the young man's potential, in spite of what had happened before.

Two strong wills that clashed sharply, and the author of this passage of Scripture, Luke, is very honest in allowing us to see the humanity of two men he admired so much. Just a little aside -- I'm glad Barnabas won, not just because I like to see someone get that second chance but because of what John Mark eventually did. You see --without Barnabas' encouragement, we might only have had three gospels, for tradition has it that the John Mark of Acts was also the author of the gospel of Mark.

There are many things in life that cause us to experience discouragement. Sometimes it's a crisis, sometimes it's simply tiredness or sickness, or sometimes it's the cutting words or actions of another person. To encourage is to do the direct

opposite -- It puts back what has been taken or that which has leaked out of us. The Barnabas factor is really the gift of encouragement. What is critical here is *not* understanding what encouragement *is* as much as what it *does*. I think that we can all affirm that it is valuable especially in the lives of children, but I'm not sure we often know just how vital it really is for adults as well. Let me suggest three things that this Barnabas factor does.

(Slide 3) **First, when we encourage people we build them up – People with the Barnabas factor affirm other people.** There is a crucial difference between appreciation and affirmation. We appreciate what a person does. We affirm who a person is. As important as appreciation is, affirmation is far more crucial because it goes far deeper. It is directed at the person. To be appreciated, we get the distinct impression that we have to earn it, but affirmation is a gift that comes whether we earn it, whether we succeed or fail. We have the sense that we are valuable to someone not for what we can do, but simply for who we are. I don't care how secure or mature or successful a person may appear to be, there's a longing inside every single one of us that longs for a little encouragement.

Some years ago, there was a young boy in Kenya who was blessed to not only receive some financial support from a British schoolteacher, but encouragement as well. When John Ngugi was young, he exchanged letters with a schoolteacher from Great Britain. This teacher was part of an organization that sought to provide financial relief through the sponsorship of children.

John's letters to the teacher reflected a pretty low opinion of himself. He described himself with phrases like, "I'm not smart, I'm not handsome, and I don't have many friends." He did include one positive phrase though. He said, "But I am the fastest runner in my class." The teacher was keen enough to key in on that one phrase and wrote back, "I'm proud of you. If you're a good runner, be the best runner you can be."

He took her counsel to heart and in 1988 it paid off. As a member of Kenya's Olympic team, John Ngugi won the five thousand-meter run in Seoul, Korea. On his return trip to Kenya, he was routed through England and made his way to that caring teacher's house and gave her his gold medal. He told her, "I never would have run if you hadn't believed in me as a child." Wow.

There is an important caveat here. While each of us grows with encouragement, it is important not to be dependent on it. Some of us crave the approval of others so

much, it can be crippling. That kind of dependency can make slaves out of us – especially if our self-esteem is dependent on affirmation. If we *always* need encouragement, constant praise, pats on the back from everyone, then we make the grave error of allowing the world to define who we are. Eleanor Roosevelt once said: “No one can make you feel inferior without your consent.” I believe that so much I quote it to most of the teenagers and many of the adults I know.

(Slide 4) **People with the Barnabas factor focus on the positive in other people.** "Most of the high spots in our lives come about through encouragement. I don't care how great, how famous, how successful a man may be, he hungers for applause. The Duke of Wellington said these words near the end of his life. When asked what one thing he would change if he could live his life again, he replied, “I would give more praise.”

For some of us, our first inclination is often to criticize, not encourage. It is often far easier to notice what is wrong with the situation than what is right. Don't get me wrong, it is important to trouble-shoot problems, but when our first inclination is to pounce on the negative, it can be quite destructive in relationships. In my office, I have a large expanse of wall that is a beautiful shade of yellow. I will often point out that beautiful yellow wall to people and then show them a small black stain on that wall. It's amazing how some people first notice and lock in on that tiny black mark on the wall instead of the entire yellow wall around it. We zero in on the negative, while ignoring the positives all around it.

Joyce Landorf Heatherly wrote a little book entitled Balcony People almost twenty years ago and it is still in print perhaps because her concepts are so simple yet so profound. She describes the difference between *basement people* – the kind of people who tend to evaluate and criticize first – and *balcony people* – the people in our lives who always seem to be able to offer a word or gesture of encouragement first. Balcony people are those who have a large dose of the B factor and they know how to use it well.

I need to make one comment – encouragement has to be real. Too many times, we offer hollow praise – and people see right through it. Real encouragement comes from a place of honest and genuine awareness. (Slide 5) Someone said, "*Flatter me, and I may not believe you. Criticize me, and I may not like you. Ignore me, and I may not forgive you. Encourage me, and I will not forget you.*"

(Slide 6) **And, finally, people with the Barnabas factor see the potential in people that others might miss.** I think one of the reasons they called Joseph

Barnabas was because he looked at people in the same way God does. People who cultivate the Barnabas factor have an open mind to consider what God may be doing in another person. They somehow see the grace of God at work in the lives of others and they take the time to encourage it. They understand that some people just need time to grow in maturity.

People who can see raw potential in others have an amazing ability to mentor others in ways that immeasurably change lives. The implication in this story is that while Barnabas was initially the mentor to Paul but was comfortable enough to encourage both Paul and John Mark to grow. Barnabas was at ease enough with himself to encourage others to take over his role as leader to become strong leaders themselves.

I had an experience a bit like this back in 1980. At the time I was finishing my seminary degree in Richmond, Indiana and I was just barely 25 years old. I was serving as an intern in First United Church in Troy, Ohio with a wise mentor named Bob Behrens. Bob was near retirement age and used that time to impart the wisdom he had gathered over 40 years of ministry to me. In many ways, I loved him both as a father and a dear friend. Midway through that year, Bob was diagnosed with emphysema due to chronic bronchitis. He went from being a vibrant loving pastor to almost an invalid. You need to know that this was a church of about 1000 members and I was the only other minister on staff. I went from being the student intern to performing most of the ministerial responsibilities in that place. Bob encouraged me to assume the leadership role until the time came for a new pastor to take his place.

Bob was a Barnabas. He wasn't enamored with prestige or position or title, he merely wanted to serve God. He helped me learn as much as I could, always willing to encourage me, guide me, and direct me. A Barnabas like that is willing to believe in what God can do in a person's life. Bob allowed me to grow up enough that I could take my place in leadership at that church. He believed I was capable and had an amazing ability to help me believe in the gifts God had given me.

George Adams once said: *"There is no such thing as a self-made man. We are made up of thousands of others. Every one who has ever done a kind deed for us, or spoken one word of encouragement to us, has entered into the make-up of our character and of our thoughts, as well as our success."*

I believe that behind most people who have accomplished great things is at least one person who loved them, believed in them, and encouraged them. Let me ask you a couple of questions in light of the Barnabas factor.

(Slide 7)

1. Can you name one person who has believed in you when others wanted to write you off?
2. Who are you believing in or investing in today whom others might want to write off?

So then, let me leave you with the story of a man whose lasting legacy was certainly one of encouragement. This young man was attending seminary hoping to be a minister someday. While he was in school, he liked to visit different churches to see how other ministers preached. While in New England one weekend, he and some friends decided to visit the church of a well known and well-respected preacher. But after the service began, they discovered that the pastor was away on vacation and a supply preacher was filling in. Unfortunately, for this young man, the sermon was a disappointment. He fidgeted through the sermon, mentally checking off every preaching rule the man was bending, breaking, or totally disregarding. He yawned, struggled to stay awake, and counted the minutes until he could leave.

When it ended, the young man turned to his friend beside him to commiserate. But before he could say a single word, he found himself silenced by the tears he saw streaming down her face. “He said exactly what I needed to hear.” The young man thought to himself – ‘that bungle of a sermon was exactly what she needed to hear?!’ He didn’t know what to say.

But as he began to ponder the gulf between their reactions, he realized that the essential difference lay within: she had come open and he had come in judgment. She had come ready to affirm and he had come with a critical attitude. And because of her need and the sincerity of the preacher, the Holy Spirit was able to translate the words – poorly constructed as they might have been – into exactly what she had needed to hear.

It was that moment that this young seminary student began to develop one of the key parts of his personal life philosophy. ***“In life, you always have the choice between being an accuser and being an advocate.”*** And who was that young minister? It was none other than Fred Rogers – or Mr. Rogers to all of us who

watched him welcome us into his make-believe neighborhood every morning on public television. In all of our life relationships, we have the opportunity to be critical or encouraging. To affirm or to tear down. To be an accuser or an advocate. The Barnabas factor can make a huge difference in the lives of those around us. You know, I've just been thinking, I can't imagine a much better nickname than Barnabas, can you?

***Benediction***

“May our Lord Jesus Christ himself and God our Father, who loved us and by his grace gave us eternal encouragement and good hope, encourage your hearts and strengthen you in every good deed and word.” (II Thessalonians 2:16-17)