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Something We Could Use a Lot More of in Our Church

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TEXT: Acts 4:32-37 (ESV)

Now the full number of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one said that any of the things that belonged to him was his own, but they had everything in common. And with great power the apostles were giving their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all. There was not a needy person among them, for as many as were owners of lands or houses sold them and brought the proceeds of what was sold and laid it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to each as any had need. Thus Joseph, who was also called by the apostles Barnabas (which means son of encouragement), a Levite, a native of Cyprus, sold a field that belonged to him and brought the money and laid it at the apostles' feet.

The chorus of an old American folk song goes like this: "Home, home on the range, where the deer and the antelope play, where seldom is heard a discouraging word, and the skies are not cloudy all day." It sounds wonderful, doesn't it? A place where seldom is heard a discouraging word. For we know, the world in which we live often is not like that. It can be filled with discouragement brought about by failure, fearful or overwhelming circumstances, or difficult and critical people. And so, we oftentimes find ourselves in need of encouragement from something or someone that will lift us up and breathe new life into us so that we can keep going. This happens to everyone, by the way, including people of faith. None of us are exempt from sometimes feeling discouraged, and this is not really anything new to our time. It's been like that since the fall of Adam and Eve. In scriptures, we read about discouraged people of faith in both

the Old and the New Testament, frequently in need of encouragement along life's way. And as you read the biographies of God's people throughout church history, you find that they too experienced times of great challenge. So today, we are still seeing that discouragement happening in other people's lives as well as our own. It's just part of living in a sinful and broken world. I have found that when I experience discouragement and need a shoulder to lean on and an encouraging word, I can find it by turning to my best friend, Jesus, who I've learned through experience, is always with me.

I hope you have that same relationship. Jesus is not unsympathetic to what we go through as human beings, for he experienced trials and discouraging times like we do. He is there to speak encouraging words of love and guidance to me. I've discovered that as I turn to him in the Bible, he breathes new life into me. As I gather with other believers in worship and come to the Lord's Supper, he quietly assures me. As I pray, he gives me a sense of his presence. And as I sit quietly in solitude and think about him and all he's done for me, I thank God for this encouragement in my life. God has provided other avenues of encouragement for believers as well, according to his word. Fellow believers, have you noticed how many "one anothers" you can find in the New Testament? Love one another, forgive one another, be kind to one another. In the book of Hebrews, we're told to consider how to stir up one another to love and good works and encourage one another. Each one of us in the Church of Jesus Christ is meant to be encouragers to one another. What a difference you and I can make in other people's lives, especially the lives we touch as friends and fellow believers.

With just a few words or a gesture, we can bring a person down or pick him up. We can stop someone dead in their tracks, or we can get them moving again. Today, I thought it would be good for us to sharpen our encouraging skills a bit by looking at a man God used well to encourage other believers. We read about him in the Book of Acts. His name was Joseph. He was a Jewish man, a Levite from the island of Cyprus who happened to be in Jerusalem on Pentecost when the Holy Spirit came. He heard of the mighty works of God in his own language. And as Peter preached the good news of Christ, the Redeemer and Savior for sinners dying on a cross and rising again, Joseph repented and believed, was baptized, and filled with the Holy Spirit. We're told the disciples gave him a nickname later on, Barnabas, which means the son of encouragement, for they had observed him to be an excellent encourager to others in the midst of the life of the early church in Jerusalem. They saw something in him which

brought refreshment and encouragement to others around him. He was good at lifting people up and giving them courage, confidence, and hope. So I'd like to look at five different scenarios from the Book of Acts in which Barnabas played the role of encourager.

First, in our reading for today, we see Barnabas in Jerusalem at a church which was growing by the thousands in a very short time. These Christians were living communally, sharing everything they had with one another to keep that Christian community going and growing. It was pretty much living hand to mouth. Barnabas sold some land that he owned and generously gave the proceeds of the sale to the church to help his fellow believers keep the church running.

Next, we read about Barnabas right after Paul's conversion on the road to Damascus. Paul had been a persecutor of the Christian faith before he had his encounter with the Risen Jesus. And we find that Jesus had big plans for Paul. But at first, everyone was afraid and suspicious of him. After his baptism into the family of God, people kept their distance from him, just waiting to see what he was really up to. They were suspicious, but not Barnabas. He went to Paul, sat down, listened to his story. He believed Paul saw the plans God had for him. He saw the potential that no one else saw. And so he took Paul with him before the leaders of the church and told Paul's conversion story to them and about his bold preaching in Damascus that followed. And so they received Paul into the fellowship and backed his ministry.

Third, then we learn from the 11th chapter of Acts that there was this great spiritual awakening in the city of Antioch, and many of these converts to the faith were not of Jewish background. Instead, they were Gentiles. Jewish Christians were not expecting this kind of thing at all. They thought it was rather strange. The leaders of the church sent Barnabas to check all this out. And when he saw the grace of God at work in these people's lives, he was glad and he exhorted them to remain faithful to Jesus with steadfast purpose. In other words, he encouraged them to keep following Jesus.

And then Barnabas made a 150-mile walk to Tarsus to visit Paul. Barnabas encouraged Paul to come to Antioch and do ministry there with those Gentiles. He was needed. God could use him. So the two of them went back to Antioch and they did ministry together. And it's recorded that large numbers of people came to faith in Christ through the efforts of these two men.

A fourth scenario: Later on, Barnabas and Paul were sent out on a missionary journey together. God used them to lead many people to faith in Christ and to set up new churches all across Asia Minor. Paul was the main speaker; Barnabas took the back seat. He was the supporter. On the way back home, they stopped at each one of those churches that they'd started and strengthened and encouraged them to continue in their faith, even through hard times.

Finally, we read of Barnabas in the Book of Acts Chapter 15. Paul and Barnabas are back in Antioch, planning on doing a second mission trip to check on the new churches. The two are having a heated argument. You see, on the first missionary trip, they had brought a young man along with them named John Mark, who left them in the middle of the mission trip and went back home to Jerusalem. They were disappointed. Now, Barnabas wanted to take John Mark on the second trip and give him a second chance. And Paul said, "No way. I don't trust him to follow through." Barnabas stood up to Paul and stressed the potential he saw in John Mark. There was a sharp disagreement which ended with them separating from each other. Again, we see the encourager standing by the failure saying, "I believe in him, and I think God has plans for him." Barnabas lived up to his name. And in each one of these stories, God used him to be an instrument of encouragement, and many lives were blessed by that. Without Barnabas, Paul may not have gotten into the church and its ministry to Gentiles. Think about that. If Paul were to sit down with us today and list the top ten people who influenced him in his relationship with Christ, I'm sure Barnabas would be at the top of the list. He spoke up for Paul before the church leaders, got him into fellowship with them, went with him, ministered with him, and the rest is history.

As we see the letters of Paul in our Bible and learn about the enormous impact he made for the gospel in his time, and continues to make even today as people read those letters and learn about the gospel. What a blessing and strengthener Barnabas was with his giving actions and words of encouragement to the churches in Jerusalem, Antioch, and the mission churches established by Paul and him. It's also interesting to note in Paul's second letter to Timothy from a Roman Prison that Paul wanted Tim to send John Mark to him, for he had been of great help to Paul in ministry. Wow. It's a good thing someone believed in, mentored, and encouraged John Mark, isn't it? Some scholars have even suggested that Mark ended up working with the apostle Peter and wrote down what Peter preached, and that's what the gospel of Mark is.

There are some principles to be taken from this man used to encourage others. First, the value of giving actions on behalf of other believers. Barnabas encouraged and built up confidence and faith in fellow believers with his generous giving and his actions for them to keep them going in faith and service to the cause of Jesus Christ. He was committed to helping others keep going. Sometimes encouragement does involve taking action, like giving of yourself for the sake of someone else or for a ministry you're involved in. Generously giving of your finances, time, energy, and love not only helps others, but it also inspires and encourages other believers in their ministry for Jesus Christ. Over the years, Julie and I have been financially and prayerfully supporting a mission in Haiti. The letters we receive from them usually talk not only about what this support will be used for, but it also tells us of how our support encourages them to keep going to reach fellow Haitians for Christ.

Next, we learn the importance of coming alongside someone and affirming words used in standing by them. That's what Barnabas did for Paul. That's what Barnabas did for the early churches he began. And that's what Barnabas did for John Mark. We learned that he came alongside someone. And that coming alongside someone like Barnabas did makes a difference. Barnabas took the initiative to approach Paul, befriended him when no one else would. Presence is a powerful gift to give someone. Sometimes I think we worry so much about what we're going to say to someone else who's needing encouragement. We forget there's power in simply being present with them. They don't want a sermon. They just need someone to be a friend. M. Scott Peck, a renowned psychiatrist, wrote in one of his books, "Often the most loving thing we can do when a friend is in pain is to share the pain, to be there even when we have nothing to offer except our presence. And even when being there is painful to ourselves."

Finally, we learn from Barnabas the power of encouraging words, words of affirmation, like saying, "I believe God has plans for you. I believe in you. You're important to God and important to me. I care about you." Affirming words can be a great blessing to others in need of encouragement. Affirmations can bring about transformations. How important it is to look and discover the strengths and positive attributes in our friends and then point them out. Encouragement also happens when we stand beside people or let them overhear us talking in the presence of others words of appreciation and admiration for them, like Barnabas did for Paul and John Mark.

I like this statement from Emma Wheeler Wilcox when she wrote, "A pat on the back is only a few vertebrae removed from a kick in the pants, but it's miles ahead in results." A Christian counselor whose books I've enjoyed in the past, Dr. Paul Welter, tells this story about being an encourager to his daughter. He writes, "My daughter came to me one day quite unhappy about herself. She'd had a not-very-good day and felt that it was all her fault. She had a long list of reasons why she was unhappy. 'I can't spell.

Everyone reads better than I do. My hair is ugly. No one will play with me.' I sat down in a rocking chair and pulled her onto my lap. We just rocked for several minutes, and I made the comment that she seemed to have had a bad day. We talked to some degree about the day that she seemed unhappy about at that point. At one point, I asked her if she felt there was anything she did well that day. At first, she said no. Then she thought for a second and said, 'Well, I did do a backflip.' I asked her how it made her feel. She said, 'Good,' then proceeded to tell me that no one else in her class could do that. I mentioned that she was very good in gymnastics, and she agreed and told me how kids tell her that and even ask her to help with various skills. I asked her if she likes to help the other kids. She said yes. I commented that I saw that she was a helpful person. She said she likes to help others and then proceeded to tell the ways in which she helps them. We continued to talk for a while longer, and finally she hopped down from my lap and asked to go play with a friend, did a cartwheel, and went out the room singing."

Encouraging words. Sometimes words of encouragement need to be loving and gentle, words that encourage someone to do the right thing to correct the course. We see Barnabas trying to encourage Paul to do the right thing and show patience and grace to John Mark, don't we? Sometimes we need people to encourage us to do the right thing, don't we? Trusted brothers and sisters in the faith who want to prevent us from making wrong decisions that could bring us down and harm the cause of Christ. There's a saying which goes like this: "A friend is one who never gets in your way unless you're on your way down."

Generous giving actions, being present, encouraging words—oh, how the Church of Jesus Christ needs more Barnabas to fulfill its God-given purpose of leading others to faith in Christ. How we need encouragers who come alongside discouraged fellow believers and communicate to them that they are loved and not alone, and that we know God has a great plan and purpose for their life. Oh, how we need in the church people who are not tearing others down but instead building them up. Let us always be

on the lookout and always praying for opportunities to do good works like that, encouraging others in the faith, in our families, and even in our workplace. Let's pray.

Almighty and loving God, help us to see the hurts and discouragement in others and then come alongside them as an encouraging reminder from you that they are not alone and that they are loved. Amen.