



Barnabas: Son of Encouragement

TEXT
Acts 15:36–41

July 2, 2017 — Sermon by Rev. Tom Are, Jr.

If we read the Bible from the beginning, we learn about Joseph, the youngest of Jacob's boys. Joseph was the dreamer who got all over his brother's nerves. It was so bad that they sold him into slavery. They had issues in that family.

At the beginning of the story of Jesus, we meet another Joseph. He was engaged to Mary. Joseph was a righteous man — and would be the man that God would choose to raise his son.

In the book of Acts, we meet another Joseph — at least that is the name his mother gave him. Maybe he was named for the man who raised Jesus. Maybe he was raised for the kid sold into slavery who became ruler in Egypt. Joseph was the name his mother gave him, but his friends called him Barnabas.

Barnabas was a partner of the Apostle Paul. Barnabas introduced Paul to the church leaders in Jerusalem. And when Paul set out on his missionary journeys across the Roman world, Barnabas traveled with him. They established congregations across the ancient world. Without Paul and Barnabas, we might not be here today.

Joseph is the name his mother gave him. Joseph is a

respected name. But those who knew him called him Barnabas. According to the Book of Acts, Barnabas means "son of encouragement."¹ We can only assume that he was called Barnabas because people experienced him as a source of encouragement. If you encounter a genuine and reliable source of encouragement, you may not rename that person Barnabas, but I bet you remember that person.

In our text this morning, we witness a critical moment in the life of Barnabas. Paul and Barnabas separate. They had shared ministry together, so I can only imagine this separation was not something they took lightly.

Some scholars suspect that a theological disagreement arose between them, which could be. But the text doesn't say that. The text says there was a ministry disagreement. They disagreed not on doctrine, but on a person. They disagreed about John, who is called Mark. Mark had traveled with Paul and Barnabas before. He had been an assistant to them. But for some reason, during the journey, Mark packed his bags and went back to Jerusalem. We don't know why. Maybe there was a disagreement. Maybe the opposition that the early church

was facing frightened Mark. Maybe he had a faith crisis of his own, we don't know. We just know that in the middle of the important work of ministry, he left the team.

Paul didn't forget that. Who could blame him? Mark had let them down.

Later, they were preparing for another trip of ministry, and Barnabas wanted to take Mark with them. But Paul, remembering what Mark had done before, says no. *He can't be trusted. Remember how he left us before. We were counting on him, and he let us down. I can't take that risk again.* Paul said they had to leave Mark behind.

But Barnabas ... no wonder they called him Barnabas ... said, *Paul, you go without me; I'm taking Mark with me. I'm not leaving Mark behind. I'm not giving up on him.* Paul takes Silas; and Barnabas travels with Mark. It was a risky decision — a courageous decision. But it is what a son of encouragement would do.

I think there is a lesson here. I don't know anyone who doesn't benefit from some encouragement. I'm not talking about just care for self-esteem. I'm not talking about getting a trophy just for showing up. En-

couragement is more demanding than that. When we offer encouragement, like Barnabas, we imagine a better tomorrow than our yesterdays indicate. That requires some hope, a kind of courageous hope. This kind of encouragement considers all the facts and chooses hope anyway.

Encouragement, when we experience it, is not something we can take for granted because the truth is it is much easier to criticize. It is easier to be cynical. It is so much easier to tear one another down, to see what is wrong in each other. It's easier because it is always true. People are people. We mess up, and if someone wants to point out the failings in someone else, well, that will never be too hard to find. Life humbles everyone.

I was in elementary school, and my friend Danny and I were riding our bikes — one speeds with banana seats. We would clip playing cards in the spokes to make a sound “just like a motorcycle.” And we would ride all over the neighborhood. At the far end of the schoolyard, there was a creek; and a bridge that crossed the creek would take you into another neighborhood. I was told clearly more than once, don't cross the bridge. That was the rule.

Well, I didn't mean to cross the bridge. It just happened. Just over the bridge was a new grocery store being built, and they had laid the new pavement for the parking lot. There were sawhorses in the entrance to keep cars out — which left this wide open space for us to ride.

It wasn't until we were on our way home that we noticed our tires had pulled up bits of pavement, not fully dried, which flung up on our bikes and the backs of our shirts. Some was in my hair. We were covered in “parking lot.” And you know, you can't just wipe that stuff off.

I got home and my dad said, “What's all over you?”

I was caught ... no escaping. “What's all over you?”

“Parking lot.”

“Did you go over the bridge?”

I had disobeyed, and I couldn't hide it; I couldn't fix it. My “sin” was upon me! I had no idea how often that moment would be a parable for my life: My flaws, my failures are frequent, and everyone can see them. There is no hiding.

It's easy to pull one another apart, but to encourage, that's another work all together.

It was over thirty years ago, and I had dropped out of seminary. It was partly a financial decision, but partly other things as well. I had questions: Was I really called to ministry? Was this something I had the gifts to do for the rest of my life? I had been invited to lead worship at a Presbytery youth retreat in upstate South Carolina. I don't remember much about the retreat. The keynote speaker was dynamic, and we became friends.

Over the course of the weekend, I talked with him about my questions. Before that retreat ended, he pulled me aside and said, “I can't tell you if you are called to ministry or not, but I

can tell you that God has given you gifts that should be used in the church. I hope you will stay with it. I think this is where you are supposed to be.”

Now that conversation isn't the only reason I am here, but it is one reason I am here. And for over 30 years, I have been grateful to Rodger Nishioka for offering me that encouragement that weekend when I needed it most.

Barnabas refused to leave Mark behind. If I understand this text, we get a glimpse of the early church as she learns to trust the gospel. This is what I mean. Mark had failed. He had let Paul and Barnabas down. Paul was right; it was risky to take him along. But the gospel declares that we are not defined by our failures. None is defined by the worst thing they have done. Life will humble everyone. None gets it right all the time.

Barnabas trusted the gospel, and he lived it with Mark. I wish I could tell you how the missionary journey turned out; I don't know. But we do know this. There are scholars who believe that Mark, years later, became a writer. And what he wrote we now know as the gospel of Mark. Many believe the gospel of Mark was written by this John Mark whom Barnabas encouraged. He would have reason to trust the power of the gospel because he had experienced it in his own life.

The kind of encouragement we see in Barnabas is a form of hope, a hope that is courageous because it considers all the facts

and still imagines a future that our yesterdays have given us little reason to trust. But the gospel is like that.

Two hundred and forty one years ago this week, in Independence Hall in Philadelphia, delegates from the thirteen colonies affixed their names to the Declaration of Independence. The primary work of drafting this document was given to the brilliant 33-year-old Thomas Jefferson.

They made a choice, a courageous and risky choice, to form a new nation — a nation that would give voice to human dignity and the value of reason. A war would continue to assure independence, and it would take 13 years for the Constitution to be ratified. America was born.

We will celebrate that birth this week with cookouts and parades, lots of fireworks and prayers of gratitude for those in the armed forces. It will be a celebrative mood, but I don't think that the mood was celebrative in 1776. On that day, they were much more aware that they were making a courageous choice — courageous not only because they were declaring independence, but courageous because they dreamed of being better in the future than they had been in the past.

That requires courage because from the beginning, America has been complicated. At the same time that Jefferson was writing eloquently about human freedom, he held slaves. America would find her place on the globe in large part by driving Native Americans from their

land. Of course, some of that has changed over the last 240 years, but only some of that.

This is the land of Abraham Lincoln and Martin Luther King, Jr., but racism is as American as the flag. Oh, I'm not talking about our values; no, not at all. I'm just talking about our history.

I read about the Osage Indians.² They were driven out of Kansas because white farmers wanted the land. So they bought some worthless land in Oklahoma — worthless for farming, but then oil was discovered on their land. In the 1920s, it is reported that per capita, the Osage Indians of Oklahoma were the wealthiest people in the nation. Can you imagine that?

So the Office of Indian Affairs ruled that the Osage were not capable of writing their own checks and spending their own money. They appointed guardians to watch over their money.³ These guardians, always white, more often than not stole their money. And when they grew too impatient for that, they began to kill the Osage.

Racism is always easier to see in the past than in the present, but the American experiment has more work to do in matters of race.

We have more work to do in matters of poverty.

We have more work to do in matters of violence.

And I suppose one of the things that I love about this nation the most is that it is possible to do that work. I think the best things about us are in need of encouragement — the kind of

encouragement that requires courage because it imagines a tomorrow that is better than our yesterdays would suggest is possible. Such work of encouragement is a patriotic way to honor those men who gathered in Philadelphia in 1776.

We have never been in a position to love our nation because it was pure. Our families aren't pure. We aren't pure. Purity has never been on the table. Rather, it may be what we love most is that as a nation, we do not have to be defined by our yesterdays. We can endeavor to live toward a more perfect union, as the Constitution declares. There is beauty in our yesterdays. There have been times when we have stood tall and offered hope to the world. But that doesn't happen without encouraging the good in us.

For most of my life, I assumed America was a given. Her nature and character, her presence and values would just be. America would always be about freedom and human dignity, for all people. But I was naive. None of that is a given. All of that is a choice. America is not a given; America is a choice.

We live in dramatic times. We are surrounded by abundance and scarcity. There are refugees, and there is climate change. There is an unending war in Afghanistan and an unnamed war on young black men in our inner cities that leaves far too many incarcerated or killed.⁴

We live in times when telling untruths rather than being scandalizing is rewarded. We live in dramatic times. But what

is wrong in us and in the world is never what defines us or the world. But the good, the righteous, the faithful needs some encouragement.

His mother called him Joseph, but his friends called him Barnabas. The world needs a few more folks like him.

¹Acts 4:36

²This history is recounted in the new book by David Grann, *Killers of the Flower Moon* (2017).

³Ibid., p. 58

⁴*The Kansas City Star*, July 2, 2017, states: “It is safer to be a soldier deployed in Iraq than to be a black man in Kansas City.” The statistics are for every 100,000 soldiers in Iraq, there are 317 deaths. For every 100,000 young black men in Kansas City, there are 380 deaths. The murder rate over the past several decades is decreasing nationwide, but KC is experiencing a slower rate of decrease.

This sermon was delivered at Village Presbyterian Church, 6641 Mission Road, Prairie Village, KS 66208.

The sermon can be read, heard or seen on the church’s website: <http://www.villagepres.org/current-sermonsermon-archives.html>.