

This sermon was preached by Dr. Wilson on July 9, 2006 at Oakmont Presbyterian Church.

A Minor But Influential Character

Acts 4:36-37

³⁶There was a Levite, a native of Cyprus, Joseph, to whom the apostles gave the name Barnabas (which means “son of encouragement”). ³⁷He sold a field that belonged to him, then brought the money, and laid it at the apostles’ feet.

Acts 9:26-27

²⁶When he (Paul) had come to Jerusalem, he attempted to join the disciples; and they were all afraid of him, for they did not believe that he was a disciple. ²⁷But Barnabas took him, brought him to the apostles, and described for them how on the road he had seen the Lord, who had spoken to him, and how in Damascus he had spoken boldly in the name of Jesus.

Acts 15:36-41

³⁶After some days Paul said to Barnabas, “Come, let us return and visit the believers in every city where we proclaimed the word of the Lord and see how they are doing.” ³⁷Barnabas wanted to take with them John called Mark. ³⁸But Paul decided not to take with them one who had deserted them in Pamphylia and had not accompanied them in the work. ³⁹The disagreement became so sharp that they parted company; Barnabas took Mark with him and sailed away to Cyprus. ⁴⁰But Paul chose Silas and set out, the believers commending him to the grace of the Lord. ⁴¹He went through Syria and Cilicia, strengthening the churches.

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Of the early Christians, Paul and Peter get most of the press. There were others who were influential in the earliest church. One of them was a man named John who was originally from Cyprus.

He was a man of some means because he owned a piece of property that he sold for early Christians who were in need.

But what is seen most in his life is how he encouraged others. The followers of Jesus gave John of Cyprus a new name; they called him Barnabas which meant “son of encouragement”.

It was this Barnabas who supported Paul’s acceptance by the apostles which given Paul’s earlier history must have been vitally important.

Barnabas accompanied and worked with Paul on a missionary journey to Cyprus.

Barnabas supported the forgiveness of Mark after Mark had dissented him and Paul in Pamphylia. In Paul’s last letter, he mentioned Mark favorably which suggests that he eventually shared Barnabas’ opinion of Mark’s importance to their mission.

The writer of Acts says that Barnabas sailed for Cyprus and that is the last that we hear of Barnabas.

I'm guessing that the words about Paul in Scripture vastly outnumber those about Barnabas, but what Scripture does say of Barnabas was that he was influential by being an encourager. And that is our focus today.

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This week we have learned of overwhelming needs in the world. Few of us have the ability to do much more than be informed and pray.

But just as Barnabas did in the early church, each one of us will encounter people who are facing a challenge.

Some of our children will be moving from 10th Street and Verner Schools to the Junior/Senior High School building. Most of us remember those first day of school nightmares that remind us that going to a new school can be a scary thing.

Babies will be born and their siblings will question their importance to the family.

Couples will marry and old single-person routines will no longer work.

People will get sick and face their mortality.

A friend will ponder the unknowns of retirement.

Some will go through grief after a loved one's death.

People will struggle at work and some will change jobs.

High school seniors are anticipating being college freshmen.

Many of your encounters with people facing a challenge will be in your circle of family or among friends, some encounters will be with strangers.

One of our members recently looked into the street where a repairman was having a fit, swearing and grabbing items from his truck and throwing them onto the street. Whatever this stranger's challenge was it was getting the better of him.

All of us will come across people who are walking a steep uphill path.

You will have opportunity to help. What can you do?

In this way Barnabas is our example. Barnabas encouraged people.

Scripture speaks about encouragement being a spiritual gift at which some individuals are especially good, but Scripture also calls all of us to be encouragers: Paul wrote, for example, "...encourage one another and build one another up."¹

¹ 1 Thessalonians 5:11

This means that encouragement is not only a ministry for those we love, it is a way that we love in the midst of their challenges.

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Perhaps the first requirement for encouraging others is listening. Not all needs are as obvious as the man who was swearing and throwing things off of his truck.

Listening is the engagement and acceptance of another person where they are.

Attentive body language such as eye contact tells a person that what they are talking about is important to you.

Simple affirming statements such as repeating a key word they have said tells them that you are really hearing what they are saying.

Listening for their feelings under the words and acknowledging them also affirms that the person is being understood.

Brief questions for clarification invite the person to explain more clearly their concern.

What did you mean when you said “this is such a hard time?”

These are some ways that we really listen to one another to understand them.

Before any encouragement can be given, we must listen so that we understand the challenge they face.

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A related form of encouragement is the humble application of empathy.

Once you have carefully listened, some part of your life experience may connect with the other person’s challenge.

Imagine how someone suffering through chemotherapy would be encouraged by the humble sharing of another who said, Friend, I want you to know that I survived something similar”.

In a shorthand way, it says to the person, I understand something of what this means to you...and I want you to know that I lived through it.

Such sharing is like a strong spice; in the right measure it is a blessed thing, but too much can be too much.

Too much sharing could seem that we are a know-it-all.

A rule of thumb for sharing is: ten parts of listening to one part of sharing.

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Like Barnabas selling his field, people are also encouraged when someone responds to their need. (It is almost funny that the writer of Acts wants to emphasize that the field Barnabas sold actually belonged to him!)

Sometimes giving in response to a need is a simple matter: we can hold the door for someone who follows us into a building. Most people accept help when they need a third hand.

Sometimes, however, it is best that we offer a gift before giving it.

Why was the woman angry at the boy scout who helped her cross the street? Because she didn't want to cross the street.

Offering to help honors the person who may accept or decline.

Can I help carry your groceries?

Would you like to visit the school sometime this summer?

And when it is not clear what is needed or what might be most helpful, it is best to say "I would like to help. What might I do to be helpful to you?"

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Two simple actions should not be forgotten.

I hear time and again how much people appreciate receiving cards and notes.

It doesn't have to be a gold-seal Hallmark card to encourage a person; it can be a simple note card with a handwritten message, "God loves you" or "I care". It really is the thought that counts.

The other form of encouragement is touch.

A gentle touch on the shoulder or the arm is a form of acceptance as a person shares a fear or a frustration.

A brief massage of the neck muscles can bless a weary spouse.

For a seriously ill person, holding their hand seems to be more valuable than anything you could say.

At the funeral home a two handed hand shake or a hug can mean the world to a person.

Like offering to help, touch is not always appropriate. It is important to be discrete in our touching.

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Encouragement is a basic response to people in need that helps them along their journey.

It is helping them to carry their load, not saying that you'll carry it all.

It is standing with a person in trial, not removing them from it.

It is giving your attention, your time and your compassion in a way that says to the other person: you are important and I acknowledge the challenge you face.

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Every day a drama is being played out around us. People are challenged and, at times, discouraged.

If we save enough of our energy to look around us we will see it. And we will have a holy opportunity to have a minor, but influential encounter with another.

The repairman is our example.

The member who saw the man so upset said to him something like, “it looks like you’re having a bad day. Would you like to take a break and have a piece of blueberry pie?”

He came to this couple’s porch, ate blueberry pie, drank some coffee and told them how he had no family near by and no one to talk to. Two hours later...he left refreshed and in good spirits.

There we see the blessing of encouragement: it refreshes a persons’ spirit so that they can return to their journey.

Now one final thing: Barnabas was called “son” of encouragement.

The father of encouragement is our God who knows our need, who intends our blessing and growth in life, who responds in various ways, and who restores our soul.

Our encouragement is caring and acting in a way that God cares and God acts.

Our member was partly right; “it was the blueberry pie” she said. Yes it was, but it was also the self-less gift of concern for someone having a really bad day.

Whatever your name, I pray that you will have a Barnabas heart that so cares for others, Barnabas ears that so listen to understand others, and Barnabas hands that respond to need as you are able.

In that way we are all meant to be influential characters.

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