

THE BARNABAS MODEL

Jesus People Seek to Lead Like Barnabas

Jesus People (Part 6)

Text: Acts 9:26-31; 11:19-30

Son of Encouragement

Some years ago, Amy and I attended a dinner at which we met one of the most formidable leaders in the San Diego charitable community. From a physical standpoint, the woman did not seem imposing. She was neither tall nor apparently strong. But there was an enormous joy and an amazing spirit of authority and power that came from her. As I was to learn, she had had a ministry of encouragement in this world that had directly and indirectly touched millions.

Years earlier, Helen had met her husband while the two of them attended the same school. Her eventual husband had a particular passion for art, although he had not received much encouragement from other people along the way. "You will never really learn to draw", his high school art teacher told him. His Dartmouth College fraternity voted him the least likely to succeed in the entire house. But as a student later at Oxford University in England, he heard a single sentence of praise one day while sitting in class which was to prove enough to motivate him to continue to pursuing his dream of being a writer and an educator. While doodling on a sheet of paper, he drew a cow with wings, an acrobat's body, and a mischievous expression on its face. Suddenly, he heard a young lady behind him whisper, "That is a very fine flying cow!" And thus began the career of Theodore Geissel, whom many of us know better as "Dr. Seuss."

Have you ever had someone believe in you and invest in you to a level that it overcame the natural resistances – the obstacles, the internal blocks – that stood between you and your dreams?

The Book of Acts paints portraits of a lot of amazing Jesus People. We learn of Peter and Paul, of James and John, of Lydia and Timothy. But of all the leaders from which we might learn, the one we meet today is among my very favorites. When we first encounter him in Acts chapter 4, he's still going by his formal name, "**Joseph.**" We're told that he is "**a Levite,**" which is to say that he's from a long line of Jewish priestly leaders. We're tipped to the fact that he comes "**from Cyprus,**" an island nation in the Eastern Mediterranean.

But then the text tells us the most important thing about him. It seems that the other apostles have given Joseph a nickname and, like most nicknames, it sums up the spirit they meet in him. Acts 4:36 says that they call Joseph "**Barnabas (which means Son of Encouragement).**" "If you boil down Joe's life and leadership to its very essence," they're saying, "what you meet in him is such an amazing Encourager of others."

A Generous Giver

We see one dimension of this pictured in Acts 4:37 where we read that Barnabas **“sold a field he owned and brought the money and put it at the apostles' feet.”** Barnabas didn't have to do this. There was no law that compelled this. The money was his to keep. He could have spent most of his windfall on himself. But there were needs in the community beyond himself. There were despairing people for whom that money could provide some pretty profound encouragement. And so Barnabas made a choice. We see this same pattern later on, in chapter 11, when news reaches the place where Barnabas is living that the believers back in Judea are undergoing extreme hardship because of a famine. Again, we see Barnabas opening up his heart and wallet. He doesn't just make a token gift. He doesn't just toss anything into the plate. He asks: “What am I able to give?” Acts 11:29 says, **“The disciples, each according to his ability, decided to provide help for the brothers living in Judea. This they did, sending their gift to the elders by Barnabas...”**

Do you know how blessed this church is with encouragers like that? I know there are probably some people who simply come along for the ride. Some of those folks are simply so strapped that we want to carry them right now. Of course, every church has a few folks who aren't particularly strapped but nonetheless let other people carry the load. There are others whose giving bears little relationship to their actual ability. But there are so many more who are such generous givers. There are people here who anonymously drop off envelopes full of cash or bags of groceries to needy people. There are households who take people into their home, who help others with tuition or medical bills, who make meals, or help with childcare for others. Recently, I traveled down to the Gulf Coast and met some of the people who have been aided by the commitment so many of you made and are making to the hurricane recovery effort. This ministry couldn't go forward were not so many of you giving to the limits of your ability. All I can say is, what an encouragement you've been and how much the generous giving of Jesus People still matters.

A Vocal Supporter

Barnabas encouraged others with his generous giving. But he did so, secondly, with his vocal support of them. Listen to what we read in Acts 11:19. **“Now those who had been scattered by the persecution in connection with Stephen traveled as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus and Antioch, telling the message only to Jews.”** Did you catch that? At this point in time, the gospel message is mainly being shared with Jewish people. The Jesus People figure that the Jewish people are the ones who are far more likely to get the message since they know the Old Testament prophecies about the Messiah. **“Some of them, however, men from Cyprus and Cyrene, went to Antioch and began to speak to Greeks also, telling them the good news about**

the Lord Jesus. The Lord's hand was with them, and a great number of people believed and turned to the Lord."

Acts 11:22 says: "**News of this reached the ears of the church at Jerusalem, and they sent Barnabas to Antioch,**" obviously to check the situation out. He could very easily have gotten there and said, "Whoa, wait a minute here, you folks aren't doing things exactly the way we Jews have been doing them. Hold on, who gave you guys permission to share the message over here and who said you other people could start meeting like this? Barnabas was one of the elite group of Jerusalem Jesus People. He could have been threatened by this novel thing happening in Antioch. He could have been all about critiquing, controlling, monitoring, and regulating what was happening up there in Antioch.

But listen to how he handled it instead. Acts 11 says, "***When he arrived and saw the evidence of the grace of God, he was glad and encouraged them all to remain true to the Lord with all their hearts. He was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and faith, and a great number of people were brought to the Lord.***"

One of the clearest evidences that someone is a Jesus Person, that he or she is "**full of the Holy Spirit and faith**" is that he or she will be able to see "**the evidence of the grace of God.**" An ordinary person can easily see the other side. It takes no infilling of God to spot the problems with people, the things that are going wrong in the family or community, the stuff that could be better, the part of the glass that is empty. That's the normal human way. But the capacity to see the good, to name the beautiful, to affirm a strength, to tease forth the best, to spot where God is at work even in the darkness or amidst the dirt, this is the Way of Jesus.

Just like the people we meet and live with do, chances are that the new believers at Antioch had a lot of things wrong. They had a lot left to learn. But Barnabas kept encouraging them. He expressed how "**glad**" he was for the grace he saw at work in them. The text says that Barnabas also challenged them to "**remain true to the Lord with all their hearts.**" But in Acts 11:26 we get a hint about the effect of this loving blend of affirmation and exhortation. The text implies that other people began to notice the quality of character growing up in these believers. Verse 26 says: "**The disciples were called Christians (literally 'little Christ's') first at Antioch**"... "**and a great number of people were brought to the Lord.**"

A Humble Advocate

Why do you think this is so? Why does financial and verbal generosity have the spiritually attracting effect on people that it does? I have a theory. I think it is because the way of the world is to hoard and to lord. It's to keep and to criticize. So when someone meets a people who live by Jesus' Way -- when they meet a Barnabas,

someone whose basic orientation in life is to give of themselves and to build up others - it feels like they are meeting something supernatural. And they are. They are meeting the Holy Spirit, the One whom Jesus called "The Paraklete" – literally "the Encourager," moving through people. And sometimes, as Barnabas also models for us, that Spirit shows himself in one more way.

You know the name, Sir Isaac Newton, of course. You know of his famed experience of the falling apple and how his theories about the laws of gravity revolutionized the study of physics and astronomy. Few people know, however, that this might never have been so had it not been for the efforts of Sir Isaac's friend, Edmund. It was Edmund who prodded Newton to puzzle through his original ideas. It was Edmund who corrected Isaac's mathematical errors and who prepared geometrical figures to support his discoveries. It was Edmund who prevailed upon the reluctant Newton to write his revolutionary masterpiece on the *Mathematical Principles of Natural Philosophy*. It was even Edmund who edited the work and paid for its publication, though Newton had much more money and could have done it himself.

Scholars familiar with the facts regard what Edmund did as one of the most selfless examples in the history of science. Newton profited profoundly from the collaboration, while his friend Edmund receded into obscurity. He did before dying, however, do one other thing. He used the principles he'd co-discovered to predict the orbit and return of a rather large heavenly body, which only after his death would come to be known as Edmund Halley's Comet.ⁱ

One of the most enduring contributions Barnabas made to the life of the church was the humble way he became an advocate for the man who was to become the Apostle Paul. If you read Acts 9, you know the story of the conversion of the Christian-killer Saul and how hard it was for anyone to believe that this conversion was for real. Imagine if a well-known member of Al-Qaeda claimed to have been converted and started attending this church. Wouldn't there be a few of us who'd be tempted to wear flak-jackets to worship or at least take a place at the other end of the pew from this person? In a similar way, *verse 26 says that "When he came to Jerusalem, [Saul] tried to join the disciples, but they were all afraid of him, not believing that he really was a disciple."*

But Barnabas became an advocate for the credibility of Saul's conversion. Acts 9:27 says that **'Barnabas took him and brought him to the apostles. He told them how Saul on his journey had seen the Lord and that the Lord had spoken to him, and how in Damascus he had preached fearlessly in the name of Jesus. So Saul stayed with them and moved about freely in Jerusalem, speaking boldly in the name of the Lord.'** In time, however, Saul's presence and preaching attracted the attention of some **"Grecian Jews"** who sought to kill him. Either out of concern for his safety or for their own, **"when the brothers learned of this,"** the text says, **"they took him down to Caesarea and sent him off to Tarsus.** But

here again, Barnabas would not give up on him. Acts 11:25 tells us that **Barnabas went to Tarsus to look for Saul, and when he found him, he brought him to Antioch. So for a whole year Barnabas and Saul met with the church and taught great numbers of people.**"

How Barnabas spotted in this former Pharisee the gifts needed to become Christianity's greatest apostle to the non-Jewish world, only God knows. But God gave Barnabas the capacity to see it, the courage to advocate for it, and the humility to accept it when one day the student became even more famous than his mentor. All the way through Acts chapter 11, whenever you hear of Barnabas, he is always given first billing. It is always "Barnabas and [somebody]..." But after this point, it is the star of the Apostle Paul which rises higher, and you get this sense that Barnabas is there smiling.

This is the Barnabas Model of leadership. Or is that the best name for it? Who else does this? Who generously gives of all He has to meet the needs of others when they can't possibly pay for it themselves? Who supportively affirms and exhorts, in order to see God's grace grow in others? Who though He was truly great, humbly took the form of a servant, that others might be lifted up? Do you understand why I think that Barnabas was simply one of the finest *Jesus People* -- and why I believe it remains a worthy calling for you and me to follow in His steps?

Please pray with me...

¹ Craig Brian Larson ed., *Illustrations for Preaching and Teaching*, Baker Books, p.191.