

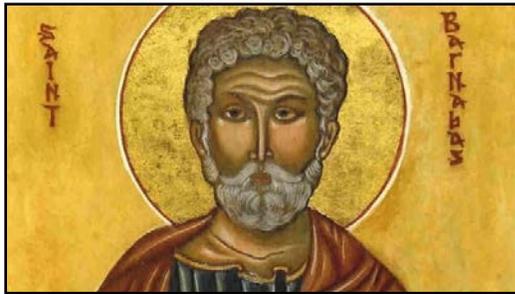
Sons and Daughters of Encouragement

Rev. Dr. Michael Piazza

Sunday, July 8, 2018 (Saint Barnabas Day)

Acts 11:19-26/Matthew 9:35-38

You may think I made up St. Barnabas Day, but the official day is July 11. I think, however, that Barnabas is too important a person and an example to pass by, so I thought we would celebrate him today by trying to learn from his example. Besides, who wouldn't love a St. Barney?

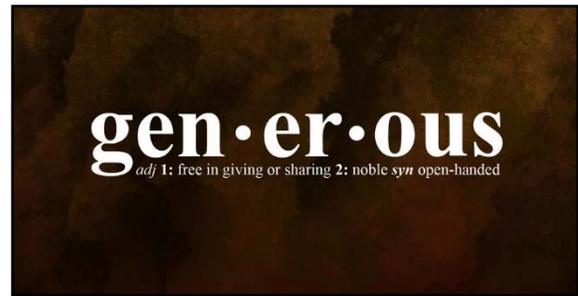


Barnabas was born in Cyprus. His given name was Joseph, but the apostles gave him the Hebrew name "Barnabas," which means "Son of Encouragement." (Acts 4:36) Barnabas was born into a Jewish family, but, as a Jew of the Diaspora living outside of Palestine, he would have spoken Greek. He may have been in the company of disciples who traveled with Jesus; at least, some of the early church writers thought so. We don't know if he knew Jesus, but Barnabas heard the apostles' preaching very soon after Pentecost.

We first encounter Barnabas in Acts 4, just a couple of chapters after the coming of the Spirit and the birth of the Church. The writer described how the Apostles gave him his new name, after he sold property and gave the proceeds to the church.

The writer is very specific that he gave ALL the proceeds to the church because, later, we see a couple name Ananias and Saphira who PRETENDED to give all but didn't. They ended up dead unexpectedly, and the moral offered is that false generosity is worse than being a miser.

So, the first key to being an apostle of encouragement is generosity. Now, before you hide your wallets and purses, I'm not taking up an offering. Generosity is not just about how much you give to the church; rather, it is about who you are, a way of being in the world.

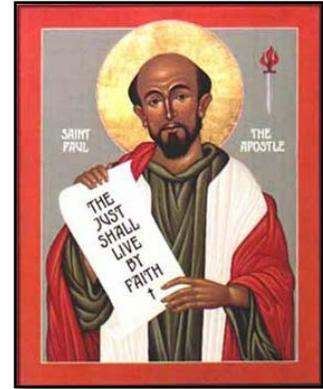


Grace, gratitude, and generosity all are linked somehow in our spirit, and they speak to the health of our souls. Living with grace, gratitude, and generosity is the way of Jesus. Grace and gratitude make generosity about more than money. Being generous with our money, our time, our energy, and our passion becomes an expression of who we are as a human being. You can't encourage another unless you are willing to give them a piece of your very life.



If we knew nothing else about Barnabas, this story would be enough to understand the quality of person he was and how he chose to live out his faith. Today, we name foundations and other ministries after his model of generous faith. But we also know more about him.

The Apostle Paul is credited with writing half the New Testament and spreading the Gospel across the Roman Empire, but, without significant encouragement, we might never have even heard of Paul. That is often the case with great people. You might recall from Sunday school how Paul originally was named Saul and was a Pharisee who aggressively persecuted the early church. He even presided over the stoning of Stephen.



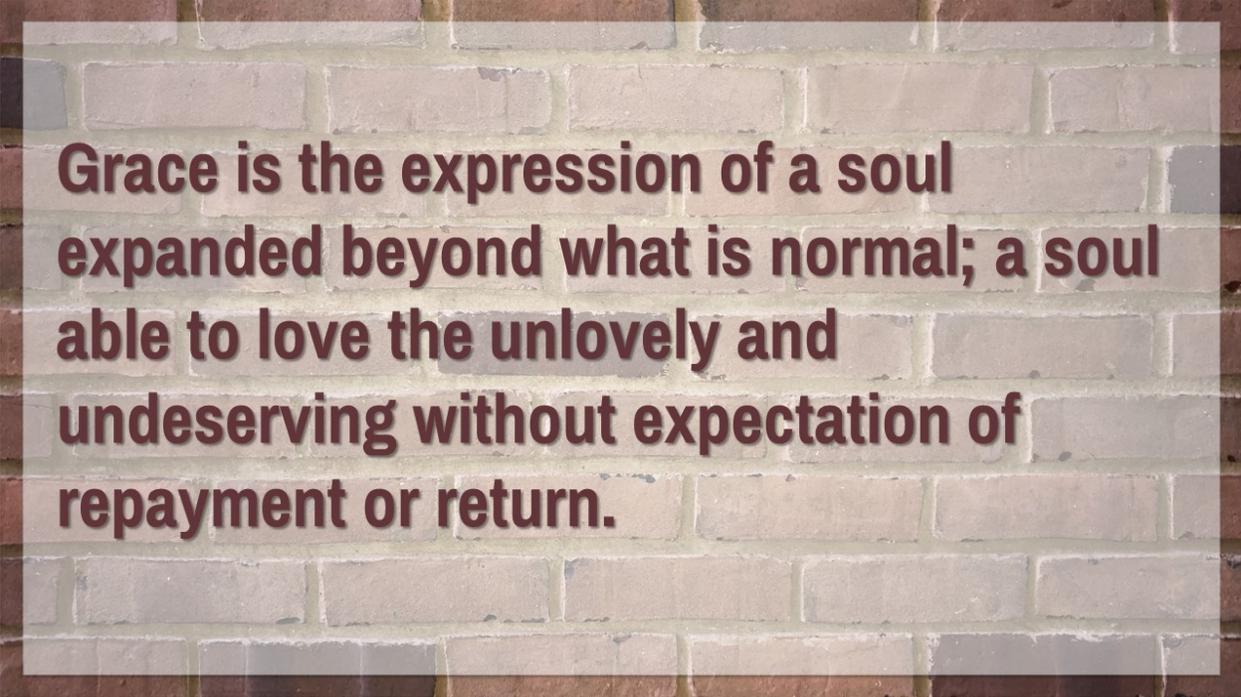
Somewhere along the Damascus road, however, Saul had a spiritual awakening that changed him completely. He went from being Saul, the persecutor, to Paul, the faithful follower of Jesus. The trouble was that those who had been hunted and haunted by Saul's rabid persecution weren't sure they could trust him. It felt too much like taking a snake or a wolf into your home.

Only Barnabas had the courage and optimism to go to Paul and see for himself, which is, perhaps, the second truth we can learn from him. If we are to be an apostle of encouragement we must extend grace. We must give people



the benefit of the doubt. Some would say, of course, that, after all the harm Saul had done, he didn't deserve to be taken into the family. **Of course, he didn't deserve it.** That is why we call it grace.

By definition, grace is undeserved. So, when was the last time you offered someone grace? Jesus questioned that when we care only for those who care for us, what have we done? Even tax-collectors do that.



Grace is the expression of a soul expanded beyond what is normal; a soul able to love the unlovely and undeserving without expectation of repayment or return.

Saul didn't *deserve* for Barnabas to give him another chance or to trust him, but it wasn't about who Saul was. It was about who Barnabas was.

Eventually, the leaders of the church sent Barnabas and Paul off on a mission trip. I can't help but wonder if they thought, "If you believe in him so much, *you* take him with you!" (Perhaps the early church was less cynical than the modern one.)

At anyrate, they were so successful they became a team. The interesting thing is that the writer of the book of Acts soon doesn't talk about Barnabas and Paul, but rather about Paul and Barnabas. The student soon eclipsed the teacher, but that doesn't seem to matter to Barnabas's grace-filled soul. He seemed to understand that an awful lot can get accomplished when we don't care who gets the credit.

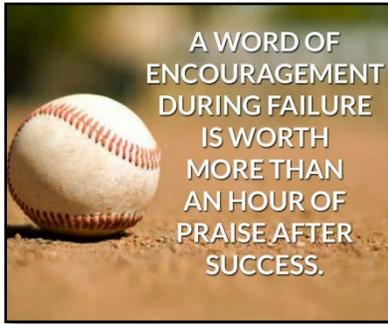
Unfortunately, the two eventually have a falling out. Again, it was because of the kind of person Barnabas was. On one of their missionary journeys, they took a young disciple named Mark. Somewhere along the way, Mark got homesick and turned back.

For Paul, the work of spreading the Gospel in a land of despair was so important that Mark's abandonment seemed like a betrayal of core values. For Paul, no sacrifice was too great, and this wasn't simply theory for him. Paul was arrested, beaten, stoned, left for dead, imprisoned, ship wrecked, suffered a mysterious "thorn in the flesh," and ultimately was executed in Rome. Who could blame him for being impatient with a kid's bout of homesickness?

So, the next time Paul and Barnabas set out on a missionary journey, Barnabas wanted to take Mark again. Paul wouldn't hear of it, and they had a heated clash. So heated, in fact, that Paul took Silas and went off in one direction while Barnabas took Mark and went in another. Who can blame Paul for not wanting this important work hindered by a Mark's unreliability? I often wish, however, that I was more like Barnabas and less like Paul.



Have you ever had someone believe in you when no one else did, when you really didn't deserve it? Have you ever had someone believe in you even after you failed them, let them down, disappointed them, or even hurt them? THAT is amazing grace.



Many people will believe in you when you are succeeding, but who believed in you when you messed up? I hope you will whisper a prayer of thanksgiving for them today. More to the point of our subject, though, how often have you stuck by someone and encouraged them when they failed you, let you down, disappointed you, or hurt you?

Whose courage have you renewed lately? That is what it means to be a daughter or son of encouragement. Never forget that, at the last meal of his life, Jesus washed the feet of the ones who would betray him, deny him, and abandon him. He did not do it because they deserved it. He did it because that was **who he was**, and that is who we are to be, as the servant Body of Christ must become.



Let me speak plainly here. This church has had its challenges during the past year or so. There is probably more than enough blame to go around, but I ask you to ponder an honest question with me: How much healthier would the church be if there had been more encouragers and fewer discouragers; more grace and less blame?

They never erect statues to critics, and you can never build a home with a crowbar. This isn't about who was right and who was wrong. It is about **who we are**.

We are called to be sons and daughters of encouragement; to help, to heal, to bring joy, to give hope, to build a community of love. When we tell people we attend First Presbyterian Church of New Canaan, THAT should be the kind of person they immediately think we are.



Barnabas and Paul had a falling out, but, later, in his letter to the Corinthians, Paul commends Barnabas to them. Paul didn't want Mark to come along, but, in the end, when Paul was in prison in Rome at the end of his life, he asks them to send Mark to him.

You see, even a saint like Paul can be wrong, but he didn't make it a lifestyle choice.



An elderly carpenter was ready to retire. He had a reputation as the finest craftsman around, so the contractor who had been his employer was distressed. He begged and cajoled him into building one more house before hanging up his tools.

The old carpenter agreed, but immediately regretted that he had. He began to resent the fact that the contractor had made so much money off his skills. He had been paid a fair wage, but still felt cheated. As he built the house, he began to cut corners and use shoddy materials and pocket the difference.

When the house was complete, the contractor came to the site to see the finished work. With a big smile, he walked up to the carpenter and handed him

the keys and the deed to the house. He explained it was a gift of appreciation for all the great work he had done over the years. Only then did the carpenter realize what he had built for himself.

Life is a do-it-yourself project, and your attitude determines what you do to yourself. You can't control who others are, but you can live as a grace-filled son or daughter of encouragement because of who YOU are. Amen.