

The Power of Encouragement Acts 11:19-30

In 1914, Sir Ernest Shackleton attempted to make the first land crossing of Antarctica. Unfortunately his ship, the *Endurance* became stuck in the ice and sank before it even reached that continent. Shackleton and 27 crew members were stranded on icebergs 1200 miles from civilization, with only a few tents, three old lifeboats and very limited provisions in incredibly cold conditions. Eventually they reached a small island and waited for Shackleton and a few men to row 800 miles to a whaling station and return with a rescue boat. Yet every member of the crew survived that 18 month ordeal. How? First, Shackleton modeled optimism which he described as “true moral courage.” He always believed that he and the crew would survive and his optimism became contagious. Second, he nurtured each man’s personal sense of significance, involving them in tasks, seeking their opinions and making them feel like they were a vital part of the solution. Finally, he encouraged them with humor and created a light-hearted atmosphere. Napoleon once said that a leader is a dealer in hope and Shackleton kept his men’s hope alive; and thereby kept them alive. Every person needs encouragement and so encouragers have a profound influence on those around them. A teacher’s encouragement can change a student’s life. A coach’s encouragement can enable an athlete to reach her full potential. A spouse’s encouragement can save a marriage. Poet Walt Whitman struggled for years to get anyone interested in his poetry and often considered quitting. In his deep discouragement, he received a letter from an admirer. “Dear Sir” it read. “I am not blind to the worth of the wonderful gift of *Leaves of Grass* (a collection of Whitman’s poems). I find it the most extraordinary piece of wit and wisdom that America has yet contributed. I greet you at the beginning of a great career.” It was signed Ralph Waldo Emerson. Everybody needs encouragement and thrives on encouragement. Most of us are not natural encouragers but encouragement is an art and a skill that anyone can develop. And since the Scriptures command us to encourage one another and stimulate one another to love and good deeds, as we continue our study in the book of Acts, I want to look at a man who was so encouraging that he was nicknamed, “the Son of Encouragement” to learn more about the power of encouragement and how we can exercise that power.

The book of Acts is the New Testament history of the early church as the gospel – the good news about what Christ has accomplished for all people - spreads from Jerusalem to Rome. Last week we looked at a major step forward in the progress of the gospel as the first Gentiles – the first non-Jewish people – become Christians. Following that account, Luke now tells about the first Gentile church. Barnabas is one of the main characters in this story and this morning, we’re going to learn three lessons about encouragement: 1. Encouragers include those others exclude. 2. Encouragers see potential where others see only problems. 3. Encouragers motivate where others only nag.

How can I be more encouraging? The first lesson we learn from Barnabas is that encouragers include those others exclude. When I worked at Cal with Campus Crusade for Christ, I met a student who became one of my closest friends. Eric was the best man at our wedding and is one of the most encouraging people I’ve ever met; because Eric has never met a stranger. He makes everybody feel like they are a valuable part of the group. I used to think that Eric was my best friend until I realized that everybody thought Eric was their best friend. He is that inclusive, drawing everybody in, giving everybody a silly nickname, introducing them to everybody, opening doors, making connections. When I met Eric, I didn’t just make a friend. I made a whole bunch of friends because that’s what encouragers do. They draw you into the group and make you feel not only wanted but like you’re essential to the group. And Barnabas did the same thing. “So then those who were scattered because of the persecution that occurred in connection with Stephen made their way to Phoenicia and Cyprus and Antioch, speaking the word to no one except to Jews alone. When Stephen became the first Christian to be killed for his faith, many of the Christians fled Jerusalem, scattering in all directions and preaching the gospel. Some went north along the coast of the Mediterranean Sea. Phoenicia was a province just north of Galilee with three principal cities, Ptolemais, Tyre and Sidon where churches were planted. Cyprus is a large island a little more than 100 miles from the mainland. Antioch was the capital of Syria and the third largest city in the Roman Empire. Only Alexandria in Egypt and Rome

itself were larger. Antioch was a very important city of around 500,000 people at this time with a large Jewish population because Jews had lived there ever since the city was founded 300 years before. As was customary, the Jews lived in a separate part of the city called the Jewish quarter, because they believed the Law of Moses required them to not associate with non-Jews, and it was to the Jewish quarter that the scattered Christians first took the gospel when they reached Antioch. During the 1980s so many Koreans migrated to Los Angeles that an entire section of the city was designated, "Koreatown," similar to the Jewish quarter in Antioch. Pastors and evangelists who came from Korea to Los Angeles to evangelize the Koreans and start churches saw incredible success. When the Korean missionaries arrived in Los Angeles, they found people who spoke the same language, ate the same food, had the same prejudices and culture which they had. And like the evangelists from Jerusalem who only reached out to their fellow Jews in Antioch, the Korean evangelists preached the word to Koreans only; because they were the people most like them. They didn't try to reach non-Koreans but they saw so much success with Korean immigrants that around 70% of first generation Koreans in Los Angeles are now Christians. However, once a church was planted in the Jewish quarter of Antioch, there is a surprising development. *"But there were some of them, men of Cyprus – the island of Cyprus in the Mediterranean Sea - and Cyrene, - a city in North Africa - who came to Antioch and began speaking to the Greeks also, preaching the Lord Jesus."* Luke doesn't give us much information but apparently, either the Jewish Christians who started the churches in the Jewish quarter of Antioch – or some other Jewish Christians who came to Antioch later, began preaching the gospel to the Gentiles – to the non-Jews. Luke doesn't tell us why. Maybe they heard the story of Peter and Cornelius. Maybe the Spirit of the Lord told them to. But for whatever reason, for the first time in history, the mission now involves not only taking the good news of what Jesus has accomplished for all people to Jews but also to non-Jews; to people very unlike the Jewish Christians culturally and ethnically. This would be like missionaries from Korea taking the gospel to Beverly Hills; a completely cross-cultural experience. *"And the hand of the Lord was with them, and a large number who believed turned to the Lord."* So in Antioch we see the first Gentile church. We don't know how long it took before the Gentile Christians and the Jewish Christians worshiped together but we know they eventually did from Galatians 2. By the way, the church of Antioch eventually replaces the church in Jerusalem as the center of Christianity and for several centuries, the Eastern branch of the church will be centered in Antioch while the Western branch will be centered in Rome. So this is the beginning of a very significant church in the history of Christianity. *"The news about them reached the ears of the church at Jerusalem, and they sent Barnabas off to Antioch."* Just as the church sent Peter and John to the Samaritans when they first believed, now the church sends Barnabas who was also an apostle to the new Gentile church in Antioch. *"Then when he arrived and witnessed the grace of God, he rejoiced and began to encourage them all with resolute heart to remain true to the Lord; for he was a good man, and full of the Holy Spirit and of faith. And considerable numbers were brought to the Lord."* (Acts 11:19-24) We first met Barnabas in Acts 4 in the early days of the church in Jerusalem. His real name was Joseph and he was a Jew from the island of Cyprus and so he may have been acquainted with the Jewish Christians from Cyprus who planted this church in Antioch. The apostles nicknamed him, Barnabas, which means "son of encouragement" or "encourager" and the name stuck. And so it's no surprise that when he arrives in Antioch, he begins encouraging the new Gentile Christians. So why does Luke add, *"...for he was a good man, and full of the Holy Spirit and of faith?"* I think it is because Barnabas' behavior is so unusual – especially for someone from a Jewish background. All his life, Barnabas has been taught that to associate with Gentiles is to compromise his relationship with God; that Gentiles are cursed, unclean idolaters and to be avoided. And when he is sent to Antioch as the official representative of the church to see what's happening in this brand new Gentile church, the natural thing would be to reserve judgment; to be nice but distant; to make sure these pagans really are followers of Jesus before fully embracing them. That's the way I would have behaved. I don't want to compromise the truth or give a false impression or be too inclusive too early. Let's see where these people are really at. Let's wait until we know they've got the real disease and then slowly assimilate them into the church. Prove yourself and then I'll accept you. That's why the church didn't send a guy like me to Antioch. They sent Barnabas; because Barnabas was inviting, welcoming and inclusive. When he sees what God is doing among the Gentiles of Antioch – which by the way was one of the most immoral and depraved cities of the world of that time – Barnabas rejoices. He's hugging people he wouldn't have touched earlier in his life, "Welcome to the family! Isn't it great to know Jesus? I remember when I first came to know Him; can I tell you about it? How can I pray for you? I'm so glad you and I are brothers now!" Why did Barnabas behave that way? Luke tells us. Barnabas was a good man, full of the Spirit and of faith. Barnabas responded to God, not to his old prejudices. He welcomed whomever God welcomed.

"You're saved by grace, I'm saved by grace – we're family!" And as a result of Barnabas' ministry, even more Gentiles come to Christ in Antioch.

Encouragers include those others exclude. They're always making the circle larger, always drawing more in, always open and inviting. When I think of our local Barnabases, I immediately think of Kathy Greer- who is at the women's retreat so I can talk about her without embarrassing her. Kathy is always positive and encouraging but the thing that really impresses me about her is that she never meets a stranger. She is constantly reaching out to people new to Creekside and drawing them in; not because that's her job but because that's who she is. Kathy is an includer. Every week, she'll ask me, "Did you meet so and so yet? What a great person!" Kathy knows more people at Creekside than anybody because that's what encouragers do. They don't avoid people or ostracize people or make people feel like they're on the outside or don't measure up. Reading about Barnabas, I asked myself, "Would Christ describe me as a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and of faith? Am I encouraging and generous of spirit? Do I rejoice when I see God's grace at work in the lives of others even though they are very different from me? Am I comfortable ministering to and encouraging people who are very unlike me? Do I include or exclude, invite or neglect, reach out to people or wait for people to reach out to me? Encouragement starts with our general stance toward people; open or closed, inclusive or exclusive, taking the initiative or waiting for people to initiate toward us; being the host or being the guest in every relationship.

The second lesson I learn from Barnabas is that an encourager sees potential where others see only problems. It's easy to think of yourself as a self-made man or woman and to imagine that you are where you are because of your hard work and intelligence. But really, wasn't there somebody who took you under their wing; who saw in you something nobody else saw; who opened doors and opportunities you would never have had otherwise? Encouragers see with different eyes. They have a unique gift for spotting talent nobody else can see; for discovering strengths nobody else can recognize, for seeing potential when everyone else can only see problems. When Barnabas sees the situation in Antioch, he immediately leaves town. *"And he left for Tarsus to look for Saul; and when he had found him, he brought him to Antioch. And for an entire year they met with the church and taught considerable numbers; and the disciples were first called Christians in Antioch."* (Acts 11:25-26) The Gentile church in Antioch faces a problem the church has never faced before. When Jews became Christians, they brought their knowledge of the Old Testament and the history of God's dealings with Israel with them. They were already biblically literate people – they just needed to understand how Christ tied the whole thing together. But the Gentiles had no such background. They were pagans and idolaters and knew nothing about God or how He had revealed Himself and His plan over the past 2,000 years. These Christians were starting from square one and desperately needed to be taught. Barnabas is smart enough to know that he can't do the job himself and so he leaves Antioch to go to Tarsus in the Roman Province of Cilicia to look for Saul. We read the story of Saul in chapter 9; how Christ turned one of His most vicious enemies into one of his most fervent disciples; so fervent in fact that the church had to send him away from Jerusalem because he was causing so much conflict with the Jewish community. Saul went home to Tarsus and has been quietly sharing the gospel there for several years; but now Barnabas realizes that the Christians in Antioch need Saul and Saul needs the Christians in Antioch. They need his great learning and he needs the opportunity. Other people looked at Saul and saw only the problems he brought. "He's brash, headstrong, too direct, too uncompromising. We're better off without him." Barnabas saw potential and he opened doors for Saul. Barnabas is not threatened by Saul's strengths; nor does he attempt to hold on to his leadership at Antioch as a personal possession; but generously and wisely brings Saul into the church for both his and for the church's benefit. This was a crucial step in the progress of the gospel; since Antioch will become the church which sends Barnabas and Paul out as a missionary team in the future.

Every position of leadership I've held in my adult life can be traced back to somebody who believed in me and encouraged me and opened doors for me. Warren Willis was my campus director at Cal and after only two years, he stepped aside into another role so that I could become director, even though I had only been a Christian for

four years and was incredibly proud, tactless and immature. But Warren believed in me. I went to work at First Covenant Church of Oakland because John Notehelfer believed in me and pursued me for four years until I finally left Crusade to work in the local church; even though he knew I would have some hard lessons to learn about working in the church after the freedom I enjoyed running the show at Cal. And when I went to my current pastor, Randy Roth with the idea of planting Creekside, rather than looking at how my leaving would affect First Covenant, he encouraged me and believed in me. Every major step of faith I've taken God has given me tremendous encouragement by people who saw potential in me while others saw only problems. Encouragers don't protect their own position or influence but use that position to open the door for others. Encouragers aren't concerned about their own advancement but about the advancement of the entire church and of the gospel. And so they look for talent that needs to be developed, gifts that need to be encouraged, and opportunities which need to be taken advantage of. So Barnabas finds Saul and together they teach the church for a year. Do you know anyone whose life would be changed if you really believed in them? Is there anyone you could open a door for? Provide an opportunity for? Encouragers spot talent nobody else sees and nurture that talent. By the way, Luke mentions that the believers were first called "Christians" in Antioch, probably because the term "Christian" was originally a term used by the Gentiles to make fun of believers. It is first used in Antioch because a significant number of Gentiles have become Christians which gets the attention of the larger Gentile community. It would be like the term "Methodist" or "Quaker": terms originally coined by the enemies of those movements which stuck. Now in verses 27-30, we see what distinguished the Gentile Christians from their non-believing neighbors and at the third lesson we learn about the power of encouragement.

An encourager motivates where others only nag. When I was a senior in high school, I got straight A's for the first time in my life. I rushed to our grocery store, report card in hand, to show my dad. My dad looked at it, and then as he went back to work, he said, "About time." My parents were wonderful people but they weren't encouragers. We were expected to do the right thing and you only heard about it when you didn't do it. And I eventually stopped listening. The couple who led me to Christ was just the opposite. They praised the smallest advances I made and I lived to please them. God used them tremendously in my life because they believed in me. I'm motivated by people who encourage me. I'm demotivated by people who nag. Let's read vs. 27-30. *"Now at this time some prophets came down from Jerusalem to Antioch. One of them named Agabus stood up and began to indicate by the Spirit that there would certainly be a great famine all over the world. And this took place in the {reign} of Claudius. And in the proportion that any of the disciples had means, each of them determined to send {a contribution} for the relief of the brethren living in Judea. And this they did, sending it in charge of Barnabas and Saul to the elders."* (Acts 11:27-30) Some prophets from the Jerusalem church come to Antioch for a visit. In the Bible both Old Testament and New Testament prophets are people through whom God speaks directly to His people; sometimes about present events and sometimes about future events. In this case, a prophet named Agabus whom predicts a worldwide famine; and Luke, ever the historian, points out that this famine did occur during the reign of the Emperor Claudius. The Christians in Antioch realize that if a famine and the resulting economic downturn is coming, the poor Jewish Christians living in Jerusalem will be affected most severely, since the Jewish community as a whole has turned their backs on them. So the church takes up a contribution for the relief of the Christians living in Israel, to which every Christian in Antioch contributes. Now this is an amazing thing. First, Christians are giving to total strangers. Second, Christians are giving, knowing that a depression is coming. And third, Gentiles are giving to Jews, in spite of centuries of prejudice and mistrust. The Gentile church freely gives to their Jewish brothers and sisters and sends the contribution back to Jerusalem with Barnabas and Saul. The same generosity of spirit which marked the church in Jerusalem following Pentecost now marks the Gentile congregation in Antioch. But here is what really struck me. Who does the church in Antioch look more like at this point, Barnabas or Saul? You would expect Saul to have been the major influence on this church, because of his brilliance, his ability to communicate and his passion which will become more and more apparent as he becomes the apostle Paul; and next to Jesus, the single most influential person in the history of Christianity. But I would argue that at this point, Barnabas has had greater influence on the church in Antioch than Paul, because the Christians at Antioch look like him. Look at the first thing we learn about Barnabas in Acts 4:36-37, *"Now Joseph, a Levite of Cyprian birth, who was also called Barnabas by the apostles (which translated means Son of*

Encouragement), and who owned a tract of land, sold it and brought the money and laid it at the apostles' feet." Barnabas was known for his generous spirit and now the church he has spent the past year teaching with Saul is also marked by its sacrificial generosity. This is an amazing thing. First, what's the natural human reaction when we know a depression or a time of scarcity is coming? Isn't it to hoard; to save up for ourselves? Yet these Christians see it as a call to be generous and to give. And to give to those who not only are complete strangers to them but are ethnically and culturally different; Gentiles giving to the same Jews who have ostracized them for centuries. Only the gospel can accomplish that. And the Christians in Antioch learned the gospel from Barnabas whose encouraging spirit motivated them to follow his example.

Charles Schwab has written, "I have yet to find the man, however exalted his station, who did not do better work and put forth greater effort under a spirit of approval than under a spirit of criticism." Sometimes I hear parents - when someone praises their child - come back with some snide comment like, "Well, you ought to see his bedroom," or "I wish he'd put in that same effort at home," and I watch that child just wilt inside. He needs your approval and encouragement more than anyone else's and if all he hears is correction and condemnation, is it any wonder he's not motivated by you? If you're not confident in him, why should he be confident in himself? People want to be appreciated, not impressed. People need to be encouraged, not just corrected. People need someone who will believe in them, who will assume the best about them, who will always have their back; someone who makes them feel special and valued; someone who builds their confidence. Encouragement isn't coddling or ignoring things that need to change but it is communicating an incurable optimism and courage you have about that person. If you have someone in your life who believes in you, you are blessed.

We all have someone in our life like that. Jesus is the greater Barnabas, the Great Encourager. He included us when anyone else would have excluded us. The Bible says that in spite of the fact that we were His enemies and rebels against Him, He loved us with an everlasting love and became one of us to make us part of His family. He lived the life we failed to live so that His Father could credit us with His perfect record as our representative; He died the death we deserved to die, paying the penalty for all our sins on the cross so that we would not have to; and He rose from the dead, defeating death for us so that we could live forever with Him. And when we put our faith in Him as our Savior and Lord, He adopts into God's family and makes us children of God. Jesus sees our potential. He knows what we can become and He is committed to helping us to become that. Philippians 1:6 says that He will complete the good work He began in us. He will make us like Himself and His plan for our life is far better than any plan we could come up with. And He motivates us to follow Him by promising us His approval from the very beginning of the journey. I don't obey Jesus to be accepted by Him, I obey Jesus because I am accepted by Him. It is His unfailing love for me that motivates me to keep following Him. That's why one of the three cardinal Christian virtues is hope. Of all people, Christians should be the most optimistic because we have a firm basis for optimism. The God of the Universe has promised that He will accomplish all things concerning us.