

May 17, 2009  
Easter 6

*"The Risen Savior Raises Up People Who Encourage"*

## **ACTS 11:19-26**

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**N**ow 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. <sup>20</sup> 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. <sup>21</sup> The Lord's hand was with them, and a great number of people believed and turned to the Lord. <sup>22</sup> News of this reached the ears of the church at Jerusalem, and they sent Barnabas to Antioch. <sup>23</sup> 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. <sup>24</sup> He was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and faith, and a great number of people were brought to the Lord. <sup>25</sup> Then Barnabas went to Tarsus to look for Saul, <sup>26</sup> 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. The disciples were called Christians first at Antioch.

He led his Lansing high school basketball to the state championship in Michigan. He led Michigan State to the National Title. He led the Los Angeles Lakers to an NBA championship in his rookie year. His name was Earvin, Earvin Johnson with the nickname of Magic. He was 6 feet 9 inches tall, but he could dribble the ball like small point guard. Where he excelled the most was his magical ability to pass the ball to his teammates, help them score and lead them to play a better game of basketball.

Before us this morning we have an example of a man who was also good at assists, not in basketball, but in helping other Christians and encouraging them. The man's name was Joseph, but the early Christians gave him the nickname of Barnabas which means "son of encouragement." Wherever he went, he helped people in their faith and helped them serve the Lord at a higher level. He encouraged the Jewish Christians in Antioch in their work of reaching out with the gospel to people who were not Jewish. He encouraged the Apostle Paul by inviting him to come to Antioch and get involved in the exciting mission work done in that city.

Romans chapter 12 tells us that encouragement is one of the gifts the Holy Spirit gives to the church. The risen Lord and Savior will always bless the church with people who are good at encouraging others. We think of how the Lord has given people to us here in this congregation who are good at encouraging others in the faith and the work of the Lord. The Lord will also help us improve in this important work of encouraging others.

### **The Lord sees the challenges the church faces**

The Lord certainly sees the challenges the Christian church faces in these last days, challenges that require more people who encourage, not people who criticize unfairly. Listen again to the challenges facing the Christians living in Jerusalem. "Now those who

had been scattered by the persecution in connection with Stephen, traveled as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus and Antioch." You will recall that Stephen was stoned to death for witnessing boldly to Jesus and his resurrection. You will also recall that it was Saul who breathed out murderous threats against Christians and put them into prison.

The Christians in Jerusalem fled from the city just as the people evacuated parts of Santa Barbara to escape the Jesusita fire. It says they traveled as far as "Phoenicia, Cyprus and Antioch." Perhaps some of them stayed with relatives and friends. Others hooked up with the Jewish communities in these cities. What if leaders in our community started persecuting Christians and even putting them to death? Where would you go to escape the persecution? Would someone be there for you to help you and encourage you? Early Christians even sold their property to help other Christians who were in need. It says of Barnabas in Acts 4 that "he sold a field he owned and brought the money and put at apostles' feet."

These early Christians knew how to make lemonade from a lemon. They knew how to use being scattered by persecution to witness to Jesus and his resurrection. Notice it says the Lord's hand was with them and a great number of people believed. They even spoke to Greeks or Gentiles and a large number of both Jews and Gentiles came to faith in Jesus. This large influx of Gentile Christians was a real test and challenge for Jewish Christians as they worshipped together and took communion with Gentile believers. At this time in history Antioch was one of the largest cities in the Roman Empire, third in size and importance to Rome and Alexandria. It's location on the Orontes River near a mountain pass and the Mediterranean Sea meant there were people from all over the world living in the city and passing through. You can still see remnants of large stone colonnades that once lined a major street of this city. The congregation was a blend of Jewish believers and a wide assortment of people who were not Jewish.

Maybe a comparison will help us understand how tough this adjustment was. Have you ever brought a puppy home to the house where the family cat has ruled supreme for years? The puppy, eager to make friends, runs to the cat, only to hear hissing and feel the pain as sharp claws rake across its face and tear into the puppy's sensitive nose. And it only gets worse when the puppy decides to eat from the cat's dish. Jewish Christians had a hard time accepting the Gentiles when they came to faith. A few months ago, in our WELS Connection, we heard of a congregation in Des Moines, Iowa that has seen its congregation almost double in size the last couple of years, but almost all of the people are from the Sudan region of Africa. They have different customs, different food and a different color of skin. As much as a congregation likes to see growth, there are always adjustments when new people enter the church, especially in large numbers, and especially if they come from different cultures and walks of life. The Lord who takes care of his church provides the people necessary to step up and do the encouraging necessary to help Christians work together as a team for the Lord.

Why do we need people to encourage us, people like Barnabas? Listen to that fellow over there in the corner mumbling under his breath, "Why can't we get more of our own Jewish people in the church?" We still hear this grumbling and complaining today and it comes from within our own hearts. We lose our perspective; we fail to see the big picture. We see the cup half empty instead of overflowing with blessings.

Ephesians 5 says, "Christ love the church and gave himself for her to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing of water with the word." I am this beautiful bride of Christ washed clean of my sin by the blood of Jesus and so are the Christians around me. Imagine a young man married to the most beautiful girl not only on the outside, but on the inside as well, and to make it even better she is a Christian. The only problem with her is she has a small wart on her finger, a tiny little wart. He cannot get that wart on out of his mind. His friends say, "Boy, you sure are blest." He says, "I know I am, but she has this wart on her finger, this little wart, and she bugs me because of that wart on her finger." You might be tempted to say that person is in need of serious counseling, but before you do, remember you how often we need to have a serious adjustment about grumbling and complaining. We always need people like Barnabas to encourage, tell us the facts, tell us to get real, set us straight and show us the big picture.

This past week I was driving through Santa Barbara, and I noticed signs of all different sizes and shapes, thanking the firefighters for all the hard work that went into saving homes. Look around you. The person sitting next to you has been spared from eternal death and punishment by the blood of Jesus God's own Son. That person sitting next to you will spend eternity with you in the place Jesus as prepared for you. There is another person, and another. In Ephesians 3 Paul prays, "I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, may have power with all the saints to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to know this love that surpasses knowledge-that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God." The Lord provides encourages who constantly point us to the wounds in the hands of the risen Christ to show us how blessed we are.

### **The Lord provides the people who encourage**

The Christians in Jerusalem heard about the spectacular growth of the church in Antioch so they sent Barnabas to encourage them. It 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." Barnabas saw the grace of God. He saw people come from trust in false gods to belief in the Triune God. He saw them clinging to Jesus for their hope of eternal life instead of trusting in themselves. He encouraged them to stay true to the Lord. Remember what Jesus once said about the seed that fell on good ground that grew up so beautifully but then it was choked by cares and concerns and riches of this world. Every single Christian congregation in this nation of ours has people who are so excited about what they believe, but then their precious faith is choked by the cares and concerns of this world. They need people like Barnabas who will step up and encourage them and pray for them and strengthen them.

It says of Barnabas, "He was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and faith, and a great number of people were brought to the Lord." Barnabas was always behind the scenes encouraging people who then boldly witnessed to their faith in Jesus and his resurrection. We once had a president who was fond of saying, "There is no limit to what one person can do if they are willing to give another person the credit." When you encourage other Christians you help them be the salt of the earth and the light of the world the Lord has called them to be. Barnabas was full of the Holy Spirit. One of spiritual gifts mentioned in the list of spiritual gifts in Romans 12 is the gift of encouragement. "We have different gifts, according to the grace given us. If a man's gift is prophesying, let him use in proportion to his faith. If it is serving, let him serve. If it is teaching, let him teach. If it is encouraging, let

him encourage." It is OK to pray for the Holy Spirit to give us these gifts. It is OK to covet this gift of encouraging, to long for it and pray for it. It is such a beautiful gift of the Holy Spirit.

It was Barnabas who encouraged the Apostle Paul and helped him get his start. "Then Barnabas went to Tarsus to look for Saul, and when he found him, he brought him to Antioch." Barnabas helped Paul transition from being the great persecutor of the church to the great missionary of the gospel. He helped him get started in Antioch where they taught great numbers of people. There in Antioch believers were first called Christians. Later on Barnabas hooked up with Paul on one of his missionary journeys. When a young man named John Mark flaked out on them, Barnabas wanted to give him a second chance, but Paul said no. They parted ways and Barnabas took John Mark under his wing and encouraged him. When Paul was in prison facing his final days on earth, he wrote, "Get Mark and bring him with you, because he is helpful to me in my ministry." It was Barnabas who assisted John Mark and then John Mark was there to assist Paul in his last days. May our risen Lord raise up encouragers for us in these last days, and may our risen Lord help us encourage others. Amen.