

Easter 6
May 10, 2015

"The Risen Savior Provides Encouragers Like Barnabas"

ACTS 11:19-26

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

Charlie did not like to pass the basketball to his teammates. I am not talking about my brother Charlie, but a ten year old boy on a basketball team that I once coached. If someone passed the ball to Charlie he immediately shot the ball toward the basketball even though another teammate was wide open under the basket.

Before us this morning we have an example of the ultimate team player in the early Christian church. His name was Simon but the early Christians gave him the nickname Barnabas which means "The Encourager." You see, Barnabas was always looking for ways to encourage his fellow Christians. He was much more concerned about giving attention to them and supporting them in their faith than bringing attention to himself.

One of the hardest jobs in the world is being a mother, and yes also a father. Being a Christian mother is even more difficult because we are living in the last days. Our Christian moms need lots of support and encouragement from parents, family members, husbands and members of the congregation.

As I look back at my life I see all these people the Lord strategically placed into my life who have encouraged me greatly and helped me serve the Lord and stay faithful to him. At the top of the list are the Christian mother the Lord gave me and also the Christian wife. All of you have been so blessed with people who have encouraged you and helped you stay faithful to Jesus. Let's take a closer look at how our risen and ascended Lord Jesus provides encouragers for his church like this man named Barnabas.

We need encouragers

As the early church experienced exponential growth, there was a great need for people like Barnabas who were good at encouraging new Christians and new congregations. **"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 the Jews.” The Jewish Christians living in Jerusalem were scattered by the persecution that took place in Jerusalem. They fled to distant cities such as Phoenicia, Cyprus and Antioch. They fled for their lives leaving behind homes and jobs and the close fellowship of other Christians. Think of your fellow believers in Africa and the Mideast who are driven from their homes and even put to death by Muslim fanatics for their Christian faith. We have it so easy compared to what they are going through. They need our prayers. They need our encouragement.

As much as their lives were upset and turned upside down, they saw this major turn of events in their lives as an opportunity to tell more people about Jesus. Being Jewish they felt comfortable connecting to other Jewish people in such prominent cities as Cyprus, and Cyrene and Antioch. Did they keep the good news of Jesus’ resurrection from the dead to themselves? No they boldly proclaimed the resurrection just as they had done when they were living in Jerusalem. They encouraged each other. Remember how they prayed in Jerusalem: “Now Lord, consider their threats and enable your servants to speak your word with great boldness.”

How often haven’t changes in your life given you new opportunities to bear witness to your faith! Jesus is there. He is always there to encourage you. He gives you the Holy Spirit to comfort you and he places people in your life who are right there for you to encourage you and strengthen you.

Now it gets really exciting. **“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. And the hand of the Lord was with them, and a great number of people believed and turned to the Lord.”** Some of these Jewish Christians came up with the idea of going to Antioch to tell Gentiles or non Jews about Jesus. Do you realize how radical that was at this time in the history of the early church? Jewish Christians did not feel all that comfortable telling the good news of Jesus to people who were not Jews. Think of your challenge you have of talking to people in your life about Jesus and his resurrection from the dead.

Antioch was located in modern day Turkey. It was one of the largest cities in the Roman Empire next to Rome and Alexandria in Egypt. Because it had a good seaport and was along a major trade route, it was filled with all kinds of people from different parts of the world. It was an ideal place to begin telling the good news about the Lord Jesus to people who were not Jewish. Can’t you hear them encouraging each other? “We can do this. The Lord will bless us.” And the Lord did bless them. Many came to believe.

Our congregation has developed a prayer to encourage each other in our outreach. Here are the words to this beautiful prayer that was put together by our outreach committee: “Lord God, You know the challenges we face in a world that does not want You. Place Your hand of blessing on Your servants and make us bold to proclaim Your pure Word. By Your Holy Spirit lead many to know Your Son, Jesus Christ, the only hope of salvation.”

The Lord knows the challenges we face in a world that does not want Jesus and his

resurrection from the dead. The Lord sees the large number of people living in your mobile home park who are over fifty five and do not get into their cars and drive to worship on Sunday morning. The Lord sees the families in your neighborhood who have more important things to do on Sunday morning than coming to worship. The Lord sees your classmates in high school and college who have already chosen to walk a path as far away from our risen Lord as they can. The Lord also knows how to provide people in your life and mine who will encourage us to not be ashamed of the gospel. He has given us people like Barnabas who have encouraged us in the past and he will give them to us in the future.

The Lord gives us encouragers

Now let's take a closer look at this man named Barnabas. **"News of this reached the church at Jerusalem, and they sent Barnabas to Antioch."** Why did the leaders in Jerusalem send Barnabas to Antioch? Did they send him to spy on these people to make sure they were doing things right? No, the leaders in Jerusalem sent Barnabas to do what Barnabas did best. They sent him to encourage these new Christians and this growing congregation.

Did he find an opportunity to encourage these people? He sure did. **"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 saw in these people the evidence of God's grace. Here were people who once lived in darkness of sin and worshipped false gods. Now he finds people who have come to realize that the sin in their lives makes them unworthy of God's love and eternal life. He finds people who believe that Jesus completely paid the price for their sin when he died on the cross. and rose from dead. Have you ever been deeply moved and touched when you meet someone who shares the same hope and confidence in Jesus that you have? Sure you have. Many times. It brings you great joy just as it did Barnabas.

Barnabas was a good man. He was full of the Holy Spirit. He stepped up and helped the new Christians bring the message of Jesus to even more of their friends and neighbors. One of the very special gifts of the Holy Spirit mention in Romans 12 is the gift of encouraging. I have served congregations in Santa Barbara, Tucson, and now in Santa Maria. Over the years I have always been amazed at the people like Barnabas who are so good at encouraging. I know I have a sinful heart that sees the cup half empty instead of overflowing with blessings. I know I have a sinful heart that can look for a dark lining in every silver cloud. But then our risen Lord and Savior sends people who lift up my eyes and your eyes to the blessings we have in the risen Christ and his kingdom. I need to hear over and over again in ten thousand different ways Jesus saying from the cross, "It is finished." I need someone to sing to me, "Living, loving, dying, rising, Christ has done it all for me." And so do you.

Barnabas does not give up. He is relentless in his pursuit of different ways to encourage people. **"Then 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 number of people. And the disciples were called Christians first at Antioch."**

I am going to bring out our meter here today and ask you on a scale of one to ten how hard would it be for these early Christians to accept Saul or Paul as God's chosen instrument to bring the gospel to Jews and Gentiles. Some of the Christians who were now living in Antioch probably knew Stephen personally and heard him preach. Now he was dead. Stoned to death by Saul of Tarsus. Some had relatives and friends who were put to death because of Saul of Tarsus. Think of how hard it would be to forgive this man for what he had done to people you loved and admired. The risen Lord and Savior had a plan. He had a plan to help these early Christians accept this Saul now Paul as their new missionary. Jesus used Barnabas the great encourager to encourage Paul and to encourage these new believers to unite together to carry out Jesus command to bring the gospel into all the world.

On this mother's day, we thank our risen Lord for the great encouragers he has raised up for us in these last days. We are thankful for the dear mothers who there for us even though we didn't deserve them. We are thankful for people who seemed to have just the right words for us when we needed them. We are thankful for all the Barnabas's in our lives. And we pray, "Lord help me be an encourager like Barnabas." Amen.