



**Thank You - Concord
Group Curriculum
November 20, 2016
Sermon Passage: Philippians 1:1-7
Curriculum Passage: Acts 11:22-26**

Introduction

A couple of years ago I was at a conference for church leaders. One of the main speakers, Craig Groeschel, pastor of LifeChurch.tv, told a story about a conversation he had with Mark Button, co-creator of the Koosh ball. In effort to improve his diving ability, Mark Button dared Groeschel to hold his breath underwater for a minute. Groeschel, never one to back down from a challenge, describes the experience by saying, “At 40 seconds, I was rededicating my life to Jesus. When I finally reached 60 seconds, I exploded up out of the water.” He described at length the burning he felt in his lungs and how difficult it was to make it the full minute.

To his surprise, Button’s only response was to say, “if you do what I tell you to do, I’ll bet you can double that amount of time.” The idea of doing that again, only at twice the duration, bordered on the inconceivable for Groeschel. Nevertheless, a challenge had been issued! Button coached him on how to breathe deeply in such a way as to fully saturate his lungs with oxygen. Periodically, he would add, “your brain does not understand what your body is capable of.”

After the coaching time had passed, it was time for the second challenge. The agreement was that Button would keep time for this challenge, signaling Groeschel every thirty seconds along the way. The only thing was, Button didn’t exactly signal every thirty seconds. He would signal every forty seconds or so, but since Groeschel wasn’t being faced with the measurement of the difficulty and had confidence in this new technique, he continued to hold his breath. While it was still difficult, Groeschel was impressed that he did not struggle to hold his breath for the whole two minutes nearly as much as he had during his first attempt at one minute. He was shocked to learn, when he finally came up for air, that what he thought was two minutes was actually two minutes and forty-five seconds!

While I’ve forgotten exactly what the point of the remaining session was, I remember hearing that story and thinking about how important skilled encouragement and coaching are. We all need that type of encouragement at some point in our lives in our jobs, schools, and various other endeavors. Much more significantly, though, we need it as we pursue Christlikeness. The likelihood is that each of us has received that type of encouragement at some point in our walk with Christ. When we stop and consider the people that God used to offer that encouragement, we realize how many ways God blesses us as we follow him.

Biblical Background

Acts makes up the second half of Luke’s two-volume work. The first part of the two volumes, the Gospel of Luke, is Luke’s account of Jesus’ life and earthly ministry. At the opening of Luke’s Gospel, he states clearly that his reason for writing his gospel was to

present as accurate and historical account of Jesus' life and ministry as possible. By the time Luke wrote his gospel in the late 60's, numerous stories about Jesus had circulated throughout the region. Luke's desire was to set the record straight, so to speak, about what had really happened, according to eyewitnesses and first-hand sources.

As Acts opens, Luke ties the two volumes together by chronicling the interaction between the risen Christ and His followers in the forty days following His crucifixion and resurrection. After a time of preparation, waiting together in the Upper Room for the coming of the Holy Spirit, the believers miraculously display the glory of God at Pentecost by speaking in languages previously alien to them. As Peter preaches, 3,000 new believers accept Christ and are baptized. The New Testament Church is birthed.

From this point on, Luke traces the expansion of the Church, the effects of persecution, and the central figures in the establishment of the Church throughout the region covered by the Roman Empire. Luke does so by connecting the lives that God uses to spread the Gospel to different people groups, cities, and provinces. The pace of Acts is frenetic, giving the very real sense that the Apostles were doing the very best they could to keep up with the incredible ways God was expanding His kingdom.

One of the people we are introduced to is Barnabas, a Levite whose actual name was Joseph. Because of his influence in the early church, which was greatly characterized by generosity and encouragement, the Apostles called him Barnabas, meaning "son of encouragement." (Acts 4:36-37) While Barnabas' influence in the Church is demonstrated in many places in Acts, our passage for this week shows the crucial role he played in the expansion of the Church in a unique way.

The Text

Our passage this week occurs during Luke's description of the growth of the Church in Antioch. Verse 19 opens mentioning the persecution that arose over the death of Stephen. Stephen, one of the first deacons in the Church, was martyred in Acts 7 after preaching the Gospel to a group of Diaspora Jews (dispersed from Palestine due to persecution). Many believers were scattered due to this persecution, taking the Gospel with them as they fled. Interestingly, the man with whom Barnabas is most commonly linked in Acts, Paul (then Saul), was the one of the driving forces behind the persecution, prior to his own conversion. The three cities Luke mentions as representative of the outskirts of the area to which the believers fled were Phoenicia, Cyprus, and Antioch.

While the persecuted Jewish believers shared the Gospel with only Jews, which Luke makes a special effort to mention, some second-generation believers from Cyprus and Cyrene came to Antioch and shared the Gospel with Hellenists (Greek-speaking Gentiles). This presented a unique new growth pain for the Church in that the Apostles had not previously considered the possibility of Gentiles accepting Christ. After all, the initial presentations of the Gospel were all uniquely traced through the people of Abraham and focused on Jesus as the promised Messiah – very Jewish concepts.

It would be difficult to overstate the paradigmatic shift for the Jews of uniting with Gentiles in worship. For centuries, what had separated the Jews from the Gentiles was their unique, covenant relationship with Yahweh. The Church in Jerusalem had already previously dispatched Peter and John to Samaria to investigate Philip's missionary work there (Acts 8). So now again, they dispatch a delegate to investigate another extremely delicate matter.

"The report of this came to the ears of the church in Jerusalem, and they sent Barnabas to Antioch." (Acts 11:22)

The hand of God was upon the Apostles in the selection of Barnabas. Not only was his character of such a nature that he was known as the son of encouragement, but he was also born in Cyprus (Acts 4:36). Having been from the same locale as the men who shared the Gospel with them, the new Hellenistic believers would have been more inclined to embrace Barnabas than another Jewish believer with a different background. The wisdom of the decision is immediately apparent.

*"When he came and saw the grace of God, he was glad, and he exhorted them all to remain faithful to the Lord with steadfast purpose, for he was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and faith. And a great many people were added to the Lord."
(Acts 11:23-24)*

When Luke describes the arrival of Barnabas in Antioch, he does so saying that Barnabas saw "the grace of God." What Luke is referring to is the immediate, realized answer to the question that Barnabas was tasked with resolving: was the salvation of these Hellenistic Gentiles legitimate? Seeing the grace of God is a significant difference than saying they were doing the right things or saying the right things. The difference is in the nuance. Where Luke's writing of the validation of outward signs would have possibly answered the question of the legitimacy of their faith, describing Barnabas' response as seeing the grace of God is a more powerful description. It refers to Barnabas witnessing what only the power of God's grace can bring about. It moves the validation of the salvation of the Hellenists from probable to unquestionable.

When Barnabas observed that salvation had indeed come to this group of Gentiles, he rejoiced. Scholar F. F. Bruce describes the event this way: "When he (Barnabas) reached Antioch, his generous spirit was filled with joy at what he found. Here was the grace of God in action, bringing blessing not only to the local Jews but also to the Gentile population as they heard and accepted the good news. True to his name, he gave them all the encouragement he could."

Exhorting the new believers to remain faithful was a needed encouragement for multiple reasons. First, their background was one of aggression toward the followers of the Way. Pastor and author Dr. Lloyd John Ogilvie notes about the Hellenists, calling them one of the most hostile groups in Israel: "Remember the Hellenists? Remember what happened to Stephen and then Saul when he returned to Jerusalem as a converted follower of the Way? The Hellenists were the ones with whom Saul disputed even though he was one of them as

a Greek-speaking Jew. They sought to kill him and were the reason he had to escape the Holy City.”

Second, the culture of Antioch posed a major threat for the existence and spread of the Gospel. Antioch ranked third in importance behind Rome and Alexandria. A Roman prefect was stationed in Antioch to ensure the vibrancy of the Roman identity and power. Its culture was distinctively Greek, being cosmopolitan and metropolitan in mindset and size. The grandeur of its size and wealth was greatly tainted with corruption, however. Ritual prostitution in association with the cult of Daphne, the idolatry of the pagan imperial cult as a city of the Roman Empire, and the decadence associated with seemingly limitless wealth and sensuality combined to form a backdrop in which the Gospel was a stark departure from every form of normalcy.

The challenge was great, but as Luke continues, Barnabas was the right person to meet that challenge. When Luke describes him as “a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and faith,” it hearkens the reader back to the description of the first deacons chosen in Acts 6. Those deacons were said to be of good repute, full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom. In addition, considering the rarity with which the Bible describes anyone as a good man, the description is all the more notable. Luke is describing Barnabas’ general character and the power of presence that it yielded. As this son of encouragement exhorted the new believers, so effective was the work of the Holy Spirit in building up and equipping the new believers that many others continued to come to the Lord.

*“So Barnabas went to Tarsus to look for Saul and when he had found him, he brought him to Antioch. For a whole year they met with the church and taught a great many people. And in Antioch the disciples were first called Christians.”
(Acts 11:25-26)*

So great was the movement of God in Antioch that the weight of responsibility for discipling the new believers was more than Barnabas could shoulder alone. The challenge was finding the right person to join him in the work. Barnabas identified Saul as the perfect man to join him in his missionary effort. The choice may seem odd, given the fact that the last time Barnabas saw Saul he was being sent away to Tarsus from Caesarea because of threats against his life for preaching the Gospel. Even more to the point, the group that was threatening and attempting to kill him were the Hellenists – the same group that Barnabas was retrieving Saul to help him evangelize and teach (Acts 9:26-30).

Considering Barnabas’ character, though, it makes perfect sense to go and search for Saul for this particular task. Consistent with his nickname as the son of encouragement, we see Barnabas investing himself for a prolonged period of time in the spiritual development of fledgling believers from a previously hostile group. Helping them move from enemies of the Way to fellowship with all believers in Christ, serving as their advocate, Barnabas calls upon one that was also formerly an enemy, Saul, whom he had already served as an advocate for with the Apostles. Barnabas is moving to employ the incredibly reconciled Saul to aid the reconciliation of those that were as unlikely converts as he was.

Where Saul is concerned, while he had numerous abilities that helped in the effort to teach and evangelize the Hellenists (great education, native Greek-speaker, keen mind and rhetorical skills), Barnabas was also reclaiming him for the Gospel ministry. His last foray with Barnabas in a missionary endeavor ended in him offending so many people to the point of death threats that the believers in the area forced him to leave – for his safety and theirs. After Saul is sent away in Acts 9:30, Luke records that the Church continued to grow and enjoyed a period of peace. It is no coincidence that those two statements occur next to one another.

Barnabas was using Saul, badly in need of encouragement himself, to exhort the new and growing group of believers. This partnership marked the beginning of Saul and Barnabas' missionary efforts together. As a result of Barnabas' encouragement, the Church would never be the same.

The Text in Life

Encouragement can take many different forms. As we see in our passage this week, sometimes encouragement takes the form of building the confidence and competence of others. At other times, encouragement can mean restoring someone who has failed or experienced rejection in the past. From a biblical perspective, though, encouragement always includes, as its greatest end, pointing others toward Christ. As we consider what this passage from Acts teaches us about encouragement, here are some specific points of application we can implement.

First, we can make sure that we express gratitude to those that have encouraged our walk in the Lord. As sure as the Hellenists needed Barnabas there to help them understand the Gospel, challenge them to walk in faithfulness, and develop the fellowship of faith, each of us has had those people that have done the same for us. We have the opportunity to return that encouragement to them by way of letting them know how much their investment has made in our lives. Thanks need not be extravagant or expensive, but simply a thoughtful, poignant indication of how their service to the Lord and to us has ripened into fruit of faithfulness in our lives.

Second, we can look for opportunities to encourage those around us. To do so in an appropriate way means that we have to be attentive enough to our surroundings that we can discern which form that encouragement needs to take. Perhaps it is someone that is struggling with how to apply the truth of Scripture to a particular part of his or her life. Maybe it is a new believer that is struggling with the next steps to take with regard to spiritual growth. It could even be someone that has suffered pain or rejection from previous church experience that needs to be lovingly shown what biblical community really is. Whatever the case, once we discover the form of encouragement needed, we have the glorious opportunity to be Barnabas to them.

Third, as we look to encourage and exhort others, we can consider who would be a suitable partner in that ministry. One of the great ways that Barnabas grew the Kingdom of God was by inviting and retrieving Saul to help him. Not long after this encounter Barnabas fades on the pages of Scripture, but the entire back half of the book of Acts focuses on the work of

Saul (referred to as Paul starting in Acts 13). As we minister to others, it is often easier to handle it ourselves, but it may not be most beneficial. Laboring alongside another believer helps build their confidence in serving others competently.

The body of Christ is strengthened when its members minister to one another. The truth of the matter is that none of us are strong and confident all the time. There will always be seasons in which we will struggle, stagnate in growth, or even falter in our faith. During those seasons, it is the joyous responsibility of the other members of the body of Christ to encourage, restore, and exhort us back toward health and fervency. When we do that for others, the Church will never be the same.

Discussion Questions

1. When was the first time you remember hitting a season in your faith when you felt stuck or stagnant? Who were the people that God used in your life to encourage you? How did they do that?
2. Barnabas was so widely known for his encouragement and generosity that the apostles effectively changed his name from Joseph to accurately reflect his character. If someone were to change your name for the characteristics that are most obvious in your life, what do you think they would be? What would you like for them to be?
3. Who do you regularly spend time with that most seems to change your perspective for the positive? What about them has that effect on you?
4. How would you distinguish between biblical encouragement and how our culture understands encouragement?
5. In which of your spheres of influence do you typically see people in the greatest need of encouragement? What is one thing you can do during the Thanksgiving season to help meet that need?