

I. Transition:

A. We've been talking about Stories. You have heard parts of the stories of those who went through the first LakeLight Fellows program – doing so in order to shape their own story. I am very excited about this. It's designed to stretch people in a specific way. If you want to learn more go to the Lakelight Web site.

II. Introduction

A. Ian McClaren, a 19th century Scottish pastor, is believed to be the first to say, “Be kind, everyone you meet is fighting a battle.” He is not the last because, well, many people on many days are fighting a battle. Life is hard.

B. For some it is harder than for others. And some have the ability to make it look easier than it is. But broken people (which we all are) living in a broken world (which this is) routinely face headaches, heart aches and hassles. These “battles” – to use McClaren's term – these battles can be held at bay for some time, but not forever. At some point life stops working. At some point plans fail. At some point, we get sick. Or we get fired or we are betrayed. Or we face a problem we can't fix. At some point friends and family die. At some point, unthinkable things happen.

C. Which means, encouragement is more than helpful. It's occasionally required.

D. And so, this morning – in this fifth week of our series, *My Story* – we are going to look at a 1st century Cyprian Jew named Joseph who doesn't get a lot of ink in the Bible, but he does get some, and it's clear from what he gets that he is an encourager

1. The word for encouragement – in Greek it is *paraklesis*. It suggests someone who emboldens others in their belief or a course of action. Lifting their spirits

2. Our English term has Latin roots which are pretty transparent, pretty self-explanatory. En-couraging someone is about putting courage into their heart. It's about instilling positive feelings or motivation so they can face the battle they are fighting.

E. Our text today makes it clear that this man – Joseph, a Cyprian Jew who is only briefly mentioned – is someone from whom we can learn.

III. Last week we were in The Gospel of Luke – thinking about Mary. The Book of Acts was also written by Luke. Having told the story of Jesus in the Gospel of Luke – remember: he was writing to Theophilus and he started with the angel appearing to Zechariah, telling him that his wife (Elizabeth) would give birth to John the Baptist. And he continues from there giving an orderly account of Christ's life through his death, resurrection and ascension. Well, after the Gospel ends – after Jesus ascends – Luke keeps on writing, telling what happened during the next thirty years.

A. He starts with the disciples being told that under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit they were going to take the Gospel throughout Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria and beyond.

1. The Gospel is news that people need to hear. It's not a philosophy we can reason our way to or an intuitive notion we can look inside ourselves and find. It is news that someone needs to tell us.

B. Luke reports that the disciples were told what was going to happen – how the Gospel was going to spread – and then we read about that happening. He takes it up to Paul entering Rome, but stops there (remember, the Book of Acts doesn't really finish, it just stops) and we know this is in the late 60s because Rome falls in 70 and nothing about that is mentioned.

C. A lot happens in those 30 years. If you have read Acts, you know that most of the ground gained is hard fought. Starting churches, seeing people won to faith and grow – it's uncommon and hard.

D. In the Book of Acts the storyline is carried primarily through the impact of two people: the first is Peter, who is restored by Jesus after he denied Christ three times. Under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, Peter is the key leader in the early church and the main player in in the first part of The Book of Acts.

E. But about a third of the way through the book of Acts, Peter is replaced by Paul. Who comes to faith in chapter 9. It's there we get the famous Damascus Road conversion. From that point on Paul becomes the main player. He will become a church leader, the first missionary, he will write much of the New Testament. (Luke actually writes more words, but Paul writes a lot more pieces). From Acts 9 on it's Paul who is driving the story line.

IV. Our focus today is on neither Peter or Paul. It's on a man named Joseph, who is a good friend of Paul, though calling him Joseph is a bit of a head fake. Because he doesn't go by Joseph, he goes by Barnabas, which is a nick name meaning, "son of encouragement."

A. *Bar* = Son. *Bar Mitzvah* is to become a Son of the Commandments.

B. Barnabas literally (etymologically) means "son of consolation." But in Acts 4:36 we are told that it's given to him to signify that he is an encourager.

C. Let me read this. Acts 4:32: All the believers were one in heart and mind. No one claimed that any of their possessions was their own, but they shared everything they had. With great power the apostles continued to testify to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus. And God's grace was so powerfully at work in them all that there were no needy persons among them. For from time to time those who owned land or

houses sold them, brought the money from the sales and put it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to anyone who had need.

1. Joseph, a Levite from Cyprus, whom the apostles called Barnabas (which means "son of encouragement"), sold a field he owned and brought the money and put it at the apostles' feet.

V. We know other things about Barnabas besides that he sold a piece of land and gave the money to the apostles to give to the poor;

A. he is the guy who vets Paul after his conversion.

1. Because Paul – known as Saul before his conversion - because he had made a name for himself persecuting Christian, word of his conversion was met with skepticism. Acts 9:26f makes it clear that more than a few people thought he was lying so he could infiltrate the church in order to undo it.
2. As a result, he was treated like kryptonite by many until Barnabas intercedes. Barnabas makes the 100 mile trip to Tarsus (which is a few days walk), and he meets with Paul and then ends up vouching for him. (The first guy to help is Ananias).

B. And then, because Paul is so smart and so zealous, he quickly eclipses Barnabas and takes over as the leader of the early church.

C. Barnabas will also show up as one of the first two missionaries in Acts 13 – it was the church in Antioch that finally got around to sending people out. The church in Jerusalem (that had all the money and leaders was moving too slow).

D. In Acts 15 he comes in from the field with Paul for the Jerusalem conference – where he and Paul sharply disagree with the other leaders. And then later in Acts 15 he and Paul sharply disagree with each other over what to do with John Mark.

1. John Mark, who later goes simply by Mark had washed out on an earlier trip. When it comes time for a second trip Barnabas wants to give him a second chance and Paul says no and they part company over it.
2. Given Mark's later contributions – he wrote the book of Mark – it's pretty clear that Barnabas was right and Paul was wrong.¹
3. Which isn't to say he was perfect. Barnabas sides with Peter against Paul over another issue and is wrong on that front. And he appears to be too easily discouraged at another point. There are no perfect people in the Bible – except Jesus. We get the true story – faults and all.

E. But Barnabas is a key guy. And he does a key thing: he encourages people. He finds ways to help people do the right thing.

F. We are not told that much about him, but from what little we hear we can see that he is a man full of the Spirit of God, who sees the best in others and finds ways to bring that out. He is an encourager.

G. In light of that, I'd like you to think about the opportunity you have – even the responsibility you have – to comfort, console, implore, grow, protect and challenge others. In short, to encourage one another.

VI. There is much that could be – should be – said about encouragement.

A. It's important to know that in the New Testament it's both commanded and assumed.

1. In Hebrews 10 we are told to “encourage one another to love and good deeds.” In I Thess. 5 we are told to “encourage one another and build one another up. Parents are told to encourage their children (and to avoid discouraging them). In his letters to Timothy and Titus, Paul not only encourages them in their leadership, he encourages them to encourage others.

2. And beyond all of those specifics, it's worth noting that the ministry of the Holy Spirit is a ministry of encouragement. And that many of the New Testament letters are letters of encouragement.

B. Secondly, it's important.

1. It's important because it is commanded – and it's helpful if we can move to that point. But it's also important because, as C.S. Lewis notes: Courage is not simply *one* of the virtues, but the form of every virtue at the testing point, which means at the point of highest reality. A chastity or honesty or mercy which yields to danger will be chaste or honest or merciful only on conditions. Pilate was merciful till it became risky.

C. Third, it's needed:

1. I suspect you get that we could use some encouragement right now. A growing number of people are depressed and despairing. Addictions are up. Resilience is down. Deaths of Despair are up. The Ambient Anger index is up.

2. I am assuming that you've made note of the fact that in many ways this is surprising. We are living at a moment when more people have more money and more stuff and better health and live longer – in other words when things are in many ways better than before. And yet, more people are anxious and fearful and medicated (or addicted to some form of self-medication) than ever before.

D. Fourth: it's worth noting that a little bit costs almost nothing to give but can go a long way.

1. It takes very little time to say, “You are really good at that. Thanks.”
2. And sometimes that’s all it takes – a small push can change the direction of someone’s life.
3. You’ve heard enough stories about coaches and teachers changing a kids life – or you had your own experience of someone encouraging you and it changed your thinking – to know that sometimes a small nudge can make a big difference.
4. There is a sense in which Life is a series of inflexion points.
 - a) We do not always see them for what they are. But there are times when a little bit pushes us in one direction. If we get a 70 on the final exam we pass the class and get the degree. And if we get a 69 on the final we fail the class and do not get the degree, which means we do not get the internship, etc. etc.
 - b) I don’t want to make too much of this, but I do want to note that sometimes a little bit of encouragement can make a big difference.

E. The fifth thing I’ll mention here – number five – is that I’m going to assume that you know that the best encouragement needs to be specific to the person.

1. Behind Judson Swihart’s book, *How do I Say I Love You?*, Ken Blanchard’s *The One Minute Manager*, all of Gary Chapman’s books, all the Enneagram material – is the idea that people process feedback differently. For some it needs to be verbal, for some it’s acts of service, etc., etc. I am simply noting, we need to be students of the behavior of others.

F. The last thing I’ll quickly mention is, we need to encourage ourselves.

1. I want to note that you can – and you should – encourage yourself. And that this is a skill we develop via various spiritual disciplines.
 - a) In the last few years, I have made much of I Samuel 23:15-18, where David is having a really, really bad day – and it looks like he might be about to be killed by his own men. When it says, “he encouraged himself in the Lord,” and that made a huge difference.
 - b) Likewise, many of the Psalms are not prayers as much as they are talking points to our own heart, where we tell our heart how to think and feel. We often have to talk ourselves into the right approach.

VII. Let me pivot and make three observations about Barnabas. Three things that positioned him to have such a powerful influence.

- A. My premise is that Barnabas wasn’t just a nice guy, which is the way nice guys – nice men and nice women – are often diminished. “Barnabas, what a nice guy.”

1. The gist is that they are lightweights. A bit happy-clappy. There is nothing wrong with that. All things being equal the glass half-full types are more fun to be around than their counterparts. But the gist is, this is just their personality. Or, they are not very bright.

2. For the record, Barnabas was a nice guy: 1) he gave his money away; 2) he walked 100 miles to help a guy he didn't know; 3) he said kind things to people; 4) he took joy in the successes of others.² Not everyone could move from first chair to second chair like he does with Paul.

B. But he was more than a nice guy and more than a background player. He changed things.

1. He doesn't get as much ink as others because he wasn't an out-front guy. But Barnabas sees potential in Paul and Mark when others only see a problems and are ready to cancel them. Where would we be without Barnabas and Mark?

VIII. But he was more than that.

A. He was a guy shaped by the Gospel.

1. We see this in what he advocates for in Acts 15. It's suggested before that – in Acts 11 he is described as a “good man full of the Holy Spirit.”

2. This makes all the difference. Being full of the grace of God allows us to relax and be attentive to the needs of others. It allows us to be shaped by the fact that our real needs are all met, because our story ends well. Eternity changes everything.

3. We see that he joins with Paul in pushing back against the apostles in Jerusalem.

4. And we see that when he later challenges Paul on the issue of Mark.

a) When – to frame this in light of the moment – he fights Paul's move to cancel Mark.

b) He stands up for Mark and argues that Mark needs another chance.

5. Barnabas isn't a go along to get along guy. And he isn't a guy who is in the shadows because he couldn't lead. He could. He is constantly developing others.

6. The fact that Barnabas stood up to Paul - who is not a timid guy - shows that Barnabas isn't weak. He could take point, but he takes joy in the success of others.

B. He took risks for others.

1. Barnabas is known for being an encourager – but it might be better to note that Barnabas had a track record of seeing people (high potential people) and taking the time – and accepting the risk – of restoring them.
2. He did it with Paul and he did it with Mark.
3. In Acts 9:26 – after Saul’s conversion – we are told that, “they were all afraid of him, for they did not believe he was a disciple.” But “Barnabas took him and brought him to the apostles.”

C. He found the good. May I say it again, anyone can criticize. Anyone can find fault. Anyone can bemoan politics or culture. Anyone can keep their head down. It takes hard work to do the right thing.

IX. How do we encourage? What should we be taking away from Barnabas’s story?

- A. He was is a minor character in the NT – but he has a major legacy. He was a quiet and self-effacing person who took joy in the success of others
- B. He was a man willing to take risks on behalf of those under his care
- C. He was a man so determined to build others up that they changed his name from Joseph to “son of encouragement.”
- D. And because of him the Apostle Paul got a chance to serve, and because of him John Mark got a second chance to serve.
- E. The world needs a lot more men and women like him.
- F. Would you make this a priority?
- G. Would you give it some thought – right now, to three people you are going to encourage.
 1. Not just with a quick word. But with a thoughtful, prayerful investment in them?
 2. Who has God placed around you that you might encourage.

X. What can you do?

- A. Study Barnabas.
- B. Encourage yourself.
- C. Identify a couple people – especially encouragers – and figure out how to encourage them!

D. Soak in the Gospel.

XI. Be kind. Everyone you meet in fighting a battle.

¹ Mark will not only write Mark, he will later become Paul's valued co-worker (Col. 4:10; I Tim. 4:11; Philm 24 and also Peter's companion and "son in the faith" (I Pe. 5:13)

² I am stating this because of the way he is glad in Acts 11:23 when he saw evidence of God's grace at the church in Antioch.