



THE WITNESS OF BARNABAS
Acts 4:36-37, 9:26-31, 11:22-26, 15:36-40

One of my wife's favorite new television shows is **HEROES**. We all love heroes and need heroes. Today, I want to introduce you to one of the unsung heroes of the New Testament and the Christian church. His birth name was Joseph – and he was a Jew. He had further credentials in that he was a Levite. Levites had diligent training in the Jewish scriptures – and played key roles as worship leaders. They also helped to distribute the tithes to the needy. Perhaps this is where he learned to contribute to the needs of others – and saw the plight of other believers.

His family was scattered during the Jewish exile and wound up on the island of Cyprus in the Mediterranean. The island of Cyprus was inhabited by many Gentiles. Here he would be exposed to a highly diversified community which would serve him well when he is assigned to represent the church in Antioch.

As we open our lesson in **Acts 4:36** we read “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.” Scholars debate whether the land was in Jerusalem or in Cyprus – however, it is clear he sold a parcel of land and gave the profits for ministry and mission purposes. Simply put, he did a beautiful thing. He caused the beauty of sacrifice and generosity to grow in other believers. He provided a powerful example. However, Barnabas gave because his life had been touched by the sacrificial gift of Jesus Christ dying on the cross for the sins of the world. He gave because he served a giving God. Perhaps he had heard the story of the poor widow and her gift of the two copper coins. John Wesley taught his followers to “Earn all you can, save all you can, give all you can.”

As Bishop Schnase reminds us, “Every sanctuary and fellowship hall in which we have worshipped, every organ and piano that has lifted our spirits, every pew where we have sat, every classroom in which we have learned, every communion rail we have knelt at, every church kitchen that has prepared our meals, every salary paid to a staff person, are all the fruits of someone else’s generosity.”¹ Yes, Barnabas’ generous gift transformed both himself and those who were blessed by it. No country – or church – or civilization has ever been destroyed by generosity. However, greed is another story. The past 3 weeks of the stock market and Wall Street I believe is in some way God’s wake up call to America and the world. As one radio show host recently said, “We buy things we don’t even need with money we don’t even have to impress people we don’t even know.”²

In every place I have served – there has always been at least one family who God provided to bring encouragement and generosity to the Ritz family. They just simply give to benefit those in need as God leads. They know that Jesus said, “Where your treasure is, there will be your heart as well.”

Last week we celebrated the third anniversary of the 8:30 a.m. service. That service was made possible by the generosity of others. Every chair, every table, every screen, every piece of multimedia equipment was donated by others – some who will never attend the 8:30 a.m. service – but wanted to reach out and touch others for Christ.

Second, let us turn to **Acts 9:26-30**. You and I have already studied the story of the conversion of Saul of Tarsus to the Apostle Paul. Saul was one of the great enemies of the church.

When Saul was converted on the Damascus road and presented himself as a disciple of Jesus Christ to the leaders in Jerusalem – he was not welcomed with open arms. Much like Chuck Colson – his conversion was greeted with suspicion and fear. The Apostles were not convinced. They wanted nothing to do with him. They were not singing “Blest be the tie that binds our hearts in Christian love” – or “Let us break bread together.” Once again it was Barnabas who stood in the gap – and became an advocate for Saul. He interceded on his behalf. I believe everyone of us needs an advocate and encourager. When others wanted to harm Saul – he helped him to a safe place in Tarsus – where he could grow in his newfound faith and wait upon the Lord for his next assignment. I am grateful for Ray and the youth ministry team for their encouragement of our youth. I am grateful for Beth Keretzman and her team for being advocates for our children. Barnabas invested his life in Saul. Saul becomes the Apostle Paul – however, it might never have happened without Barnabas. We need people to pour their lives into others.

Now to **Acts 11:21-26**. Let us review what I taught from this text on July 13, 2008: The church at Antioch begins a missionary outreach to the Gentiles or pagan population. These were not Gentiles who had had some contact with Jews before – but were utterly pagan in culture, class, and orientation to life. Lo and behold, these folks respond to the preaching of the gospel. We read in **verse 21** “The Lord’s hand was with them and a great number of the people believed and turned to the Lord.” The news of the bold adventure reaches back to Jerusalem in **verse 22**. They wondered amongst themselves – what is going to happen to the good ole church in Jerusalem? These people are not circumcised. These people don’t know the laws or our traditions.

In the providence of God in the latter part of **verse 22** it says, “They send Barnabas to investigate” for them and check out this church. We already know Barnabas is a generous man – and a bridge builder. We know he spoke Greek and was comfortable living as a believer in Greek culture – the perfect person for this

assignment. It would be like us welcoming Mexican immigrants into our church. We would need someone who spoke Spanish – and knew about Mexican culture.

In **verse 23** when Barnabas arrived we are told – “He saw the grace of God and rejoiced.” Barnabas could clearly see God’s grace in the changed lives of the believers of Antioch. The Holy Spirit was alive and well and was doing a beautiful thing among them. He reports that there was nothing to write home to be worried about.

As Barnabas lived among them – he encouraged them to remain true to the Lord with all their hearts. In order to help in their journey of faith – he knew they needed a good Bible teacher and leader. This leader had to be able to communicate the faith to both the believers who had Jewish heritage – and those of Greek heritage. He must be skilled in language and the Bible to meet the double challenge of Jewish and Gentile attacks upon their faith. We know in **Acts 2:42**, they devoted themselves to the Apostle’s teaching. To build a strong church in this pagan culture – it had to be rooted and grounded in the word of God. This church needed to be nurtured.

It was then that Barnabas remembered how the Holy Spirit had led him to Saul of Tarsus – now Paul – almost 10 years ago. Here was the perfect teacher to lead and teach them in the ways of the Lord.

So Barnabas and Saul (now Paul) team taught the church family for one year. Barnabas knew he could not do the job alone – and was willing to share the spotlight with Paul. As Dr. Charles Stanley rightfully teaches, “No Christian has ever been called to go it alone” – in his or her walk of faith.

Barnabas has not only defended Paul – he called out his gifts – and placed him in a position of authority to teach and serve. In the beginning of the relationship it was Barnabas and Paul. In a few chapters later it will become Paul and Barnabas. In **verse 24** we read of Barnabas, he was a good man and full of the Holy Spirit. This means he obeyed God’s will rather than human authority and tradition. He was willing to submit and risk for the sake of the gospel. He was willing to decrease – while Paul’s influence was on the increase – for the growth of the kingdom of God.

I believe the reason the believers were first called ‘Christians’ at Antioch was the result of people like Barnabas – whose life so represented Christ that you would look at them and see Jesus. As one poet put it:

“To me t’was not the truth you taught
to you so clear – to me so dim.
It was that when you came
You brought a sense of Him.
And from His heart your love is shed
Till I lose sight of you –
And see the Christ instead.”

Now to our fourth insight found in **Acts 15:36-40**. We see that a sharp disagreement takes place between Paul and Barnabas. This is why I trust the word of God. It does not hide our faults and dirty laundry. Paul and Barnabas had labored together on what is called ‘the First Missionary Journey.’ It produced some great results – but they believed their tasks were not finished. They had planted good seeds – but they felt they needed cultivation.

On the first missionary journey John Mark accompanied them both. Somewhere along the journey John Mark got discouraged or questioned his calling and returned home. Paul and Barnabas completed the journey. Paul was crushed by Mark’s defection. Paul took it very personally.

When the itinerary was being developed for the second trip – Paul balked at Mark’s going with them. Barnabas comes to the defense of John Mark. Barnabas knew missionary work is tough – and Mark deserved a second chance. I believe we all do. So Paul and Barnabas agreed to disagree. Paul takes another believer named Silas and pushes off – and Barnabas takes Mark and sails for Cyprus. Here he would mentor and encourage John Mark for future service in the kingdom of God. He believed in John Mark – when John Mark doubted his own calling. John Mark – encouraged by Barnabas – gets another chance to prove himself faithful. In **II Timothy 4:11** – Paul writes “Get Mark and bring him with you because he is helpful to me in my ministry.” (NIV) I hope we all can agree that every church could use a few more believers like Barnabas whose saintliness shines forth even in the most challenging of circumstances.

Today, in front of us is the Lord’s Supper. Here we see – lived out in word and deed – the greatest encourager of all – Jesus Christ.

Here we see generosity in its greatest light - for you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that – though he was rich – yet for your sakes he became poor – so that you through his poverty might become rich.

Here we see the one who is our advocate even in our moments of sinfulness: “But if anyone does sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the Righteous – and he is the expiation for our sins.” (RSV, **I John 2:1-2**)

Here we see the greatest missionary of all “God was in Christ Jesus reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation.”

To those of us who need a second chance (which is all of us) – as he said to the fallen woman he declares to us “Neither do I condemn you. Go and do not sin again.”

May this cup and bread remind us today of our identity and calling in Christ and renew us in our ministry and mission to each other and the world.

Let us go to the Holy Table.

Reverend Eric S. Ritz
October 5, 2008
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ENDNOTES

¹ Bishop Robert Schnase, **FIVE PRACTICES OF FRUITFUL CONGREGATIONS**, Abingdon Press, Nashville, TN, 2007, page 116.

² Schnase, *ibid.*

PASTOR'S NOTE: This sermon on Barnabas is dedicated to the late Mr. Joseph Eubanks of Schuylkill Haven, Pa, and Bert and Josette Evans of Orwigsburg, Pa. They all shared the ministry and spirit of Barnabas with the entire Ritz family in our ten year journey among them as pastoral family and beyond. Through their lives and Generosity of spirit, our lives were blessed and enriched. Thus, we experienced a living model and example of Barnabas and his life and witness. Their witness was contagious and has inspired us to grow in this dimension of our Christian faith as well. To God be the glory.