

***Barnabas***  
**Acts 4:32-37**  
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This morning I have the privilege of preaching about one of my favorite passages, a passage that portrays the church in all its beauty and wonder, in all its glory and grace, in all its harmony, unity, and community. “All the believers were one in heart and mind.” This morning I have the privilege of preaching about one of my favorite passages, and I have the privilege of preaching about one of my favorite people in the bible, a man named Barnabas. Barnabas is the personification of the church we read about in Acts 4. Barnabas embodies the heart and the soul of the church we read about in Acts 4. We will learn more about Barnabas as the story of the church unfolds, but here in Acts 4 we get a first look at Barnabas. “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.”

The link between the name Barnabas and the meaning of being a “Son of Encouragement” has played a crucial way in sustaining me throughout my life as a follower of Christ and throughout my years serving in the church. It is true not only in my life. Barnabas lives whenever and wherever God raises up people who follow in the footsteps of the Son of Encouragement. Once when I was going through a time of discouragement, a friend named Roger pulled me aside and asked, “Wayne, do you keep a Barnabas file?” I asked Roger, “What is a Barnabas file?” He said whenever something happens that encourages him, he files it away, a nice card, a telephone call, a visit from a friend, a thoughtful gesture, anything along those lines. He files them away, and when the times of discouragement come, he opens his Barnabas file and remembers the many ways he has been encouraged in his life.

I’m no good at keeping files. My files become piles, my piles become clutter, my clutter becomes chaos, and my chaos becomes a confused mess. At the risk of being embarrassed and having to apologize for being a failure at filing, at least filing as you would normally think of it, I am going to allow you a glimpse at my Barnabas file. I keep my Barnabas file in a gunnysack. I might be a sorry failure at filing but at least my file is easy to remember. This is my

Barnabas burlap bag. For short I call it my Barnabag. In my Barnabag I keep a file of encouragement.

An older couple visited our church in Houston, and we had a nice visit. They asked if they could come and talk about joining the church. A few days later I saw a car drive into the parking lot and this elderly couple slowly got out and made their way to the church office. Watching them move from the car across the parking lot to the front door was a thing of beauty. Their journey was a carefully choreographed dance of opening doors and extending an arm and cautiously taking steps together in a well-rehearsed waltz that got them to their destination, although it did take about fifteen minutes. Undaunted, the husband handled the introduction, saying, “Hi, we’re Don and Millie. I’m the cane. She’s the brain.” I immediately knew theirs was a society of mutual encouragement, the cane and the brain, working seamlessly as a team, modeling Acts 4 where there was unity and community.

Encouragement is like a cane. Encouragement is something you can lean on. Encouragement is something that gives you support. Moses needed encouragement. While Joshua was fighting the physical battle, Moses was fighting the spiritual battle. As long as Moses could keep his arms raised up Joshua had the upper hand. When in fatigue the old prophet would drop his arms, the tide would turn and ground would be lost. In this pitched battle Aaron came to one side of Moses and Hur to the other. In this case they were the cane and the cane as they lifted up and supported and sustained Moses until the victory was complete.

My good friend Roger suggested I keep a Barnabas file. My Barnabas file is a Barnabag, a burlap sack. My Barnabas file has a cane in it. It is fitting that a Barnabas file suggested by my good friend Roger has a cane in it. Roger and his wife Jerry traveled with us on a journey in the Footsteps of St. Paul in March of 1999. My mom and dad were able to join us on that trip. My dad had been diagnosed with the illness that would lead to his death, but he was in the early stages, so they signed up and had what I hope was the trip of a lifetime. My dad loved walking in the footsteps of St. Paul as we stopped in Athens and Corinth and Thessalonica, all places where Paul ministered and served as a missionary and shared the message of salvation in Jesus Christ. As much as my dad loved walking in the footsteps of St. Paul, he struggled to actually walk in the footsteps of St. Paul. The terrain was rugged, where there were steps,

they were broken and jagged, and loose stones were everywhere. We got to Philippi and the ruins stretched out for hundred of yards in every direction. Our guide said, “Let’s walk...” A look of concern filled my father’s face. And then he felt someone grab his arm. He felt someone come alongside him. He felt someone steady him. He felt someone who had stepped in to be his cane. I watched this all happen with a deep and profound sense of gratitude. I watched someone come alongside my father and take his arm. I watched someone be a Barnabas for a man who was very dear to me. The man who came alongside and steadied my father was my good friend Roger, who suggested I keep a Barnabas file. Roger, I have a Barnabas file. There’s a cane in it. Roger, thanks for being a Son of Encouragement.

Before we begin to explore the numerous things, we might place in our Barnabas file, I think it is only appropriate that we take a closer look at the life of this great man of encouragement named Barnabas. In Acts 4 Barnabas gives an important gift at an important time. The church was just getting their feet on the ground, building a sense of community. The church was exploring what it meant to be witnesses in the name of Jesus Christ. When Barnabas sold a field he owned and brought the money and put it at the apostles’ feet, his action became a model of sacrificial giving. His gift was a great encouragement to that fledgling fellowship of believers. His gift stood in marked contrast to others whose commitment was not whole-hearted. On the heels of the great gift given by Barnabas a couple named Ananias and Sapphira give their own gift, but their gift is filled with deception. They hold back a portion for themselves, pretending they are giving all. This kind of deception and dishonesty and hypocrisy damages a fellowship. Encouragement builds. Unfortunately, not every person builds, nor does every action.

So, the church faced many crises. Some were internal, like the deception of Ananias and Sapphira or the complaints that arose in Acts 6 when there seemed to be favoritism that played out when food was distributed. Some threats to the community were internal and some were external, like the persecution that the church faced. A disciple named Stephen was put to death by certain ones who were threatened by the teaching and the growth of the church. When Stephen was put to death, we are told that the ones doing the hateful act laid their clothes at the feet of a young man named Saul, and that the young man Saul fully approved of their actions. As the church scattered in response to the death of Stephen and further persecution, Saul gathered letters so that he could track

down followers of Christ and put them in prison, or worse. Acts 9 tells of the dramatic conversion of Saul, and the change in his heart that transformed him for the chief persecutor to the chief preacher. Such a dramatic conversion was hard to trust, the change was so radical. When Saul went to Jerusalem, he tried to join in with the disciples, but they were understandably afraid. They didn't believe he was really a follower of Christ. At this critical moment, now in Acts 9, we are reintroduced to Barnabas. "Barnabas took Saul and brought him to the apostles. He told them how Saul had seen the Lord and that the Lord had spoken to Saul, and how in Damascus Saul had preached fearlessly in the name of Jesus." (Acts 9:27) Barnabas vouched for Saul and so Saul was welcomed. Remember that when you think of creating a Barnabas file.

Later the gospel would spread to a town in Syria named Antioch. In Antioch the church would become very diverse as people from other nations, other cultures, other tribes, and other tongues heard the good news of the gospel and turned to Jesus. The church in Jerusalem sent Barnabas to disciple those believers in Antioch. Barnabas went and found Saul and brought him along. Together they taught the believers in Antioch for a whole year. In Antioch the believers were called Christians for the very first time. True to his name, when Barnabas was teaching and making disciples of the Christians in Antioch, "he was glad and encouraged them to remain true to the Lord." (Acts 11:23) The church in Antioch sent Barnabas and Saul out as missionaries. Their specific purpose was to travel and teach others this good news of salvation.

Barnabas and Saul formed a formidable team. They had a great adventure. Others were with them, including a young man named John Mark. They had great success as they shared the gospel. What I want to say next is not written in the scripture, maybe not even implied, but this is my take on things. This Son of Encouragement, named Barnabas, had the gift of allowing others to shine. Barnabas had a central role in the church in Jerusalem, in the church in Antioch, and when he and Saul traveled together it was Barnabas and Saul. And then Saul's name changed, and we learn that this Saul is Paul, the great missionary of the New Testament. Not long after Saul becomes Paul, Barnabas and Paul become Paul and Barnabas. The implication, as I understand it, is that Paul assumes the lead role. And apparently that is okay with Barnabas. His role is to encourage. It is in that role of encourager that we have a final encounter with Barnabas. Although he is, as always, the encourager, it is one of the more difficult passages in the Book of Acts.

John Mark traveled with Paul and Barnabas on their first missionary journey. Early in that journey John Mark left them and returned to Jerusalem. Paul and Barnabas oversee the expansion of the gospel, which means the inclusion of many, many Gentiles. When some of the Jewish believers insist the Gentiles must practice the Jewish laws, Paul and Barnabas come to Jerusalem where they make a spirited defense for including the Gentiles without requiring that they practice the Jewish laws. The day is won. The gospel is free. Paul and Barnabas gather their supplies and they are getting ready to head out again when an issue arises. Barnabas wants to find John Mark, the one who left them on the first journey and bring him along again. Paul does not think that is a good idea. Paul thinks John Mark deserted them. We are told in Acts 15, “They had such a sharp disagreement they parted company. Barnabas took John Mark and sailed for Cyprus, but Paul chose Silas.” Ouch. This is a division. Without knowing all the facts behind the story, to me it seems Barnabas once again stands alongside a fellow who needs a friend. Barnabas defends John Mark and takes him under his wing.

With that as background, let us consider what might comprise our Barnabas file. Let us consider what might go in our Barnabas Burlap Bag. Let us ask what might fill our Barnabag. Our first introduction to Barnabas found him giving a great gift, a gift of money. Today we are remembering the life of Jean Mase. Jean not only gave her money faithfully to the church, she served as a counter, gathering with others in our financial office after worship services to count the money that was given to the church. Jean was also the financial secretary when we expanded our building and raised the money for that expansion. Outside of church Jean was a member of the International Order of the King’s Daughters. This is a service organization. This is their motto:

Look up and not down...Look forward and not back...Look out and not in...and lend a hand.

Their watchword is: Not to be ministered unto...but to minister.

In support of the King’s Daughters Jean would have summer picnics at her house and organize a little rummage sale to make money for their circle. And oh, by the way, from 2008 until 2017 Jean was the treasurer. Barnabas sold his whole field and gave all the proceeds. Someone like Jean gave faithfully,

counted faithfully, accounted faithfully, and true to the motto looked out and not in. Jean was an encourager. I love that her granddaughter Meredith was watching this all, observing Jean, experiencing the love and encouragement of Jean, her grandmother. At one point in the eulogy she wrote for Jean Meredith says, "I could spend the rest of my life talking about Jean. And guess what? I will!" For Jean, who followed the example of Barnabas, I'm dropping many coins in my Barnabag.

Jean and Florence Madison had a friendly competition here at Dunn's Corners Church. Jean turned 100 in July. When Jean turned 100 she caught up to Florence. But sure enough, Florence turned 101 on August 31<sup>st</sup>. They teased each other about who was the oldest member of our church. Florence encouraged so many in this church and so many in this community. Today I am thinking of a story Florence told me of someone else who brought her encouragement. When Florence's husband Burt died many years ago, his death was sudden. Florence was in shock. Her grief was difficult. One day Florence was out driving her car and she said, "It was like someone took over the steering wheel. I didn't know where the car was going. Then I recognized the car had taken me to the home of Elizabeth Bowman. I got out, knocked on the door, and Elizabeth greeted me and invited me in. We shared tea. She listened to me talk about my sadness and grief." Not long before Burt died, Elizabeth had lost her husband. She knew the sadness of being a widow. Elizabeth comforted Florence. Elizabeth, true to our friend Barnabas, encouraged Florence. My Barnabag gets a little toy car, and a bag of tea, in honor of Florence and Elizabeth.

You might not understand why I would put a can of kidney beans into my Barnabag, but if I mention what a great encouragement it was to so many here at church when Mary Slattery donated a kidney this past summer, maybe that will clear things up. Of course, any Barnabag would have a heart, so that shouldn't surprise you. And yet what a heartfelt moment it was for us this summer when Linda Olsen introduced a friend at Chapel in the Pines. Linda received a heart transplant several years ago, and because of that we are blessed to have her warmth and kindness as part of our life together. The woman Linda introduced at the Chapel was the mother of the girl whose heart was given to Linda. Sometimes the gift of encouragement takes us into deep waters, and the mystery of God's providence surrounds us.

I guess I should throw in a pocket dictionary. A dictionary is full of words. You have to put some work into learning which words are encouraging. And there a whole bunch of words we need to edit out and cease from using. But when you find those right words, those kind words, those positive words, those uplifting words, those words of encouragement...well, listen to what is written in the Proverbs. "Anxiety in the heart of a man weighs him down, but a kind word makes him glad." (Proverbs 12:25) With the dictionary I am adding some cards. Spoken words bring great encouragement. Written words, boy a note, with words of concern, when that arrives it is usually at just the right moment. Many of you understand the importance of writing a card to encourage a brother or sister in faith. Thank you. To all you members of the Great Pen Pal Society of Barnabas, thank you. Your words make a difference.

If I had time I would fill my Barnabag with a Hershey's bar with almonds, a chocolate chip cookie, a pizza box, a coffee cup, and other things that someone has given or done for me at just the right moment, things that encouraged me, but the last thing I want to put in my Barnabag this morning are some flowers. Flowers always remind me of my mom, the great encourager in my life. I have told you before how my mom loved flowers, and on May Day, May 1<sup>st</sup> on the calendar, she would gather flowers from our yard, make bouquets, and send us out to deliver them to our neighbors. She had us make a game of it, leaving the flowers on the doorstep, ringing the doorbell, hiding behind a tree, and seeing the joyful surprise on the face of our neighbors as they opened their door to a beautiful bouquet of flowers. It is safe to say our neighbors were greatly encouraged by my mother's little May Day tradition.

On May 1, 2012 I told that story to the group of men who met with me each Tuesday morning for bible study when we lived in Houston. After the bible study one of the men did something really kind. My mom was in hospice care at the time. After bible study that Tuesday, May 1 in 2012, a man who has the gift of encouragement ordered some flowers and had them delivered to my mom. We were all in Houston. My mom was in California. That afternoon, as she lay dying in hospice care, my mom received flowers with a note that said, "Happy May Day." When the flowers arrived and my mom saw them, my sister Anne told me she broke out in the biggest smile. Not that my mom broke out in the biggest smile, my sister broke out in the biggest smile.

Until the flowers came from my friend who sent them from Houston, my sister Anne had forgotten it was May Day. In fact, she didn't even put two and two together when the day before a woman had come to visit my mom and talked about May Day. The woman who visited my mom was the caregiver for Mrs. Senna. Mrs. Senna lived on Fitzgerald Lane, the street we grew up on. Mrs. Senns lived on Fitzgerald Lane a long time...a really long time. At the time this was all happening, Mrs. Senna was 110 years old. Mrs. Senna was too old to come visit my mom, so she asked her caregiver to come and visit my mom. The caregiver told my sister that Mrs. Senna always talked about the Eberly kids and the flowers we would deliver on May Day. Mrs. Senna wanted our family to know something. What she wanted us to know blew me away. It blew me away then, and it blows me away now. Mrs. Senna said that she has a burlap sack in her garage. In her burlap sack are the remains of every single set of fresh flowers all of us Eberly kids ever delivered to her door on May Day. We moved to our house on Fitzgerald Lane in 1959 and my mom didn't move out of our home until 2005. In the garage of a woman who is 110 years old are all the flowers that showed up on her doorstep for some 50 years. Mrs. Senna has a burlap sack filled with flowers, but for me, that burlap sack is a Barnabag, symbolic of all the ways, all the ways kindness and concern and compassion and gentleness and patience work together to encourage others. Mrs. Senna's burlap sack saved the day for me as my mom approached her death. May we all have a Barnabas file. Maybe yours will even be a burlap sack. May we remember all the ways God has filled our lives with encouragement. And may we be willing and able members of Team Barnabas, using our days and our lives and our words and our love to encourage others.