

“Partners in faith: Barnabas”

Acts 4:32-37

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A guy got up and spoke at a conference once. His message captured my heart. All he did was tell about driving a bus. All he did was tell about driving a bus, and yet it was a powerful message. I have not forgotten that message even though it was 25 years ago. His message made such an impact, here a quarter of a century later I am going to preach a sermon about a bus.

Imagine that we have been traveling together on a bus. Since January our bus has made numerous stops. Each time we stop, a new person climbs on board. Our bus has slowly and surely been filling up. With each stop we picked up a new partner in faith.

- A woman ninety years old had a surprising spring in her step as she stepped on the bus. She was doubled over, but not from pain. This old woman was laughing, laughing a deep belly laugh. And after spending time with Sarah, the matriarch of the Old Testament, we said, “If God can make Sarah laugh, a woman who had experienced so much disappointment over so many years, if God can make Sarah laugh...” And sure enough that 90 year old woman had a son named, “Laughter.”
- Joseph climbed on board, a man who was thrown in the pit, cast into prison, rejected and sold into slavery by his brothers. Somehow Joseph was able to say, “All these things were intended for harm, but God intended them for good.”
- Week by week we added more travelers on our journey of faith, more partners on our journey of faith. Shiphrah and Puah, the Hebrew midwives...Aaron and Hur, the ones who lifted up the hands of Moses...The bold adventurer Caleb who had no fear of the giants populating the Promised Land...Joshua who courageously took up the mantle of Moses...Gideon and his

fleece...Samson and his strength...Ebenezer and those stones of help...David and his slingshot...the donkey who knew who knew exactly the type of king Jesus came to be...Dorcas, that dear woman who was always doing good and helping the poor. Now on the final stop, this journey that has taken us from Ur of the Chaldeans to Canaan, from Egypt to the Jordan River, from the falling walls of Jericho to the tumbling giant named Goliath, from Samson and his steamy romances to David who was a man after God's own heart, from the nation of Israel with its centuries long traditions to a brand new church born of the power of the Spirit...we come to our final partner in faith, a Levite from Cyprus whom all the apostles called Barnabas.

- On this bus filled with so many partners in faith, we encounter a pleasant surprise. When the bus makes the final stop for Barnabas, no one climbs on board. Instead, the driver turns around and says to all these faithful partners who have not only talked the talk, but who have also walked the walk, the driver shares words of encouragement with each and every one. And yet still no one climbs on board as we await the entrance of Barnabas. Realizing the confusion, the driver says, "Oh, I thought you understood. This is my bus. I'm Barnabas and this is my Barnabus. I am the Son of Encouragement, and each one of you, each partner in faith, you have brought encouragement. Climb on board. Welcome to the Barnabus. What a joy to travel together. What a joy to be partners on this journey of faith."

When I tell you a story about our partners in faith and I use my imagination to find a bus holding numerous figures from the bible who have brought encouragement to us in our journey of faith, I am putting a little twist on something a good friend told me many years ago. He said, "Wayne, make sure you keep a Barnabas file." Keep the cards of encouragement that come your way. Remember the acts that others did that lifted your spirit, that kept you going during tough times. Take note of people who pray with you. Surround yourself with a community of believers who will rejoice when you rejoice and weep when you weep.

Nurture relationships that will be like that cord of three strands that is not easily broken. I followed his advice. I have boxes with just those types of things, as my friend called it, a Barnabas file. In the same way, I am suggesting you imagine a Barnabus, a traveling collection of the people with who have been your encouragers, your supporters, your keepers of confidence, your mentors, your brothers and sisters in Christ, and yes, your partners in faith.

Today I am going to preach about a Barnabus. I am going to preach about how this man named Barnabus drove a Barnabus opening the doors time and time again to offer encouragement at just the right time and in just the right way as he helped the early church grow in faith.

First Stop: Barnabus makes an extravagant gift. He sells a piece of land and gives every last penny of the proceeds to the apostles. Once a woman made an extravagant gift to Jesus, pouring out costly perfume. She was criticized by some who said her gift could have been used for the poor. There is no criticism when Barnabus makes his costly gift, because in this very passage we learn that because of Barnabus and others who gave extravagant gifts, there were no poor people among the believers, no needy people. They were sharing what they had so that no one would go without. No wonder they called him The Son of Encouragement.

Second Stop: There is a new believer who has a bad track record. A fellow named Saul gets converted in a dramatic experience on the road to Damascus. Trouble is Saul has a history. He has been breathing fiery threats and persecuting the followers of Jesus. There is no doubt from chapter nine in the Book of Acts that Saul has an authentic conversion. But there is plenty of doubt in the minds of the disciples who have been running in fear. Is this new believer sincere? Can he be trusted? And there is a real risk that Saul will be pushed away, treated like he treated others. The risk is real until Barnabus steps up and defends Saul. “Barnabus took Saul and brought him before the apostles. He told them

how Saul on his journey had seen the Lord and that the Lord had spoken to him, and how in Damascus Saul had preached fearlessly in the name of Jesus.” (Acts 9:27) From that moment on Saul was welcomed. No wonder they called Barnabas The Son of Encouragement.

Third Stop: The gospel has spread to Antioch, and now Greeks, or Gentiles are part of the mix, becoming believers in Jesus Christ. But these new believers need instruction, they need counsel, they need community, they need guidance, they need direction, and yes, they need encouragement. So the church in Jerusalem sent Barnabas to Antioch. Two things happen. Barnabas brings along Saul, giving Saul the chance to practice his gifts in ministry. And then the two of them spend a whole year meeting and teaching and instructing and nurturing and mentoring, and yes, encouraging those believers in Antioch. Was the mission successful? You tell me. You see, in Antioch, for the very first time, followers of Jesus were called Christians. No wonder they called Barnabas the Son of Encouragement.

Fourth Stop: Barnabas and Saul, soon to be known by his familiar name of Paul, make a missionary journey throughout Asia Minor, the first missionary journey. All along the way Barnabas does what Barnabas does, bringing encouragement and hope. Then as that journey comes to an end, a journey that saw many Gentiles accept a faith that once belonged only to the Jews, a conflict erupts. Do the new Gentile believers have to follow the Jewish practices, particularly the practice of circumcision and the dietary practices? If they do not adopt the Jewish practices, are they really full-fledged believers? Barnabas and Paul go to Jerusalem and share how these new believers are filled with the same Holy Spirit that filled the Jewish Christians, and the Jerusalem Council opens the door for Gentiles to be completely accepted into the community without following the Jewish laws.

Fifth Stop: Fifth and Final Stop. As unbelievable as it sounds, this big journey on the Barnabus has a rather tragic conclusion. Paul and Barnabas have a conflict. A young man named John Mark who

accompanied them on their first missionary journey and who basically bailed out and went home, well, Barnabas wants to bring Mark along on the second journey. Paul points to John Mark's earlier failure and says no way. Their disagreement is so sharp they part ways. Paul goes off with others and continues the missions that are written about in the remaining pages of the Book of Acts. Barnabas? It is almost like he gets thrown under the bus. We don't hear any more about him. The last image we have of Barnabas in the Book of Acts is the image of Barnabas and John Mark, who gets a second chance from Barnabas, heading off in their own direction. The final act of Barnabas is to stand up in defense of someone who had failed and ran the risk of being permanently rejected. In many ways it is a sad ending for one who did so much to further the gospel. But at the same point, one final time we look at Barnabas, defending John Mark, and we say in humble adoration, "No wonder they called him the Son of Encouragement."

Barnabas...and the Barnabus. Do you have some folks you want to include in your journey of faith, folks you want riding with you on your Barnabus? I mentioned at the beginning of the sermon a guy who told a story about driving a bus. It is a sermon I heard more than 25 years ago, but even now I remember exactly what he said. His name was Pastor Bill. Pastor Bill stood up and told us what he did. He said, "I drive a bus." Pastor Bill had long hair that reached way down his back. He was pretty gruff. There was an intensity about him that was intimidating. It turned out Bill was a pastor in Bedford Stuyvesant, a very rough and tough neighborhood. In the course of a week his church reached out to 15,000 children from the neighborhood. Pastor Bill would drive the bus through the neighborhood and pick up child after child.

Pastor Bill told some stories that were beautiful in their simplicity. These kids were poor, surrounded by a culture of drugs and violence, many without fathers. Pastor Bill's church provided a place of safety and security in a world of turmoil and aggression. Pastor Bill told about helping one small child fix their eye glasses. The child said, "Thanks, no one else would help." Then the child said, "I love you, Pastor Bill."

After recounting numerous other encounters like this, Pastor Bill said, “I will always drive the bus.”

Toward the end of his message Pastor Bill told one final story about a little boy whose mother had left him alone. The child was all by himself for several days. Then a man came by, driving a bus. The man picked the child up and took him to camp. The man who picked the child up was a Christian. The camp was a Christian camp. At the camp, the boy heard about a God whose love was so great for his children that he would send his Son to die, so that nothing could ever separate God and his precious children. The little boy believed the good news and accepted God’s gift of love. By this point, Pastor Bill had tears flowing down his face. Through his tears he said, “I was that little boy. That is why I drive the bus. That is why I will always drive the bus.” Pastor Bill has been on my Barnabus for more than 25 years, and I’m never letting him get off. I need people like that in my life. People like that you can call a Son of Encouragement.

When I was the young pastor, the church we served in Sacramento had a bunch of kids in our youth group. There was a small church in the Capay Valley, about 90 minutes away, in the tiny town of Esparto. The church in Esparto didn’t have enough volunteers in their church to do their Vacation Bible School. Their pastor called me up and said, “Why don’t you bring your big youth over and lead our bible school?” I thought when I told the kids we were going to Esparto, a little town in the middle of nowhere, that they were going to throw me under the bus. After all, every morning we had to load up the bus at 7 am. This was summer. The kids were on vacation. Esparto was not a vacation destination. Boy, did those kids surprise me. Instead of throwing me under the bus they filled up our rickety old church bus and every day we would drive 90 minutes each way to lead bible school at a tiny church in a tiny town.

The first day we drove into Esparto, we looked pretty ragged. Our bus really was old. And it was a clunker. We unloaded in the church

parking lot and the kids started walking up and down the streets inviting kids to VBS. The first day we drove into Esparto, these tough looking 5th graders were parked in front of the church on their bicycles. They had their arms folded and a scowl on their face. They weren't impressed with us, our bus, or our VBS. If they showed up, it would be just to check us out, not to join in.

Well, the week went really well. The 5th graders, along with just about all the kids in Esparto, not only checked us out, they joined in. By the end of the week there were hugs and tears and promises to stay in touch. We knew God had blessed our work when on the way out of Esparto on the final day of bible school, those tough 5th graders on their bicycles rode in front of the bus, giving us an escort out of town. Not a bad week's worth of work.

I still get a ringing in my ear when I think of that final bus ride home. We were spent. We were exhausted. But above all else, we were joyful. This was in the middle of the summer. The bus had no air conditioning. As we rumbled along, every window was down. Our driver was named Jack Douma. That summer, back in the 1980s, an Indiana Jones movie had come out. In honor of Indiana Jones, and with a play of words on the name of our bus driver Jack Douma, we named our bus, "The Temple of Douma."

The Temple of Douma was rocking and rolling through the Capay valley at top speed, 45 mph when one of the kids shouted out, "If you're happy and you know it clap your hands." Now, one advantage of an old beat-up church bus is that you don't have to worry about damaging it. This old bus was battle tested. The Temple of Douma could stand up to some pretty rough wear and tear. So when the kids decided instead of clapping their hands they would bang the roof, I wasn't worried. "If you're happy and you know it, clap your hands." BOOM! BOOM! The roof was rattling. If you're happy and you know it stomp your feet. Oh, the Temple of Douma was a temple of praise. If you're happy and you know it shout AMEN! In those precious moments the Temple of Douma

became a living incarnation of a true Barnabus. The Temple was filled with sons and daughters of encouragement.

One of the kids on the bus was named Monte. Monte is now a pastor. I often think back on that day. Monte was the one who started all the shouting and clapping. I wonder if that was the day he said, "I want to be a Barnabas. I want to be a Son of Encouragement." I don't know whether that was the day, but I do know it makes my heart so happy to know Monte now drives his own Barnabus. Wherever he stops he welcomes people to get on board. Get on board and find a home. Get on board and build a relationship with Jesus. Get on board. On this Barnabus, you can know for certain that you have a place, and you belong.

That same church in Sacramento where we served had a homecoming a while back. They invited all the people who had served at the church as interns and youth workers and youth pastors to come back for a big reunion. The number of those who served in that type of a role was in the hundreds. We could not attend, but many were able to attend, and all reports were that it was a glorious time. The Barnabus was filled to overflowing and memories were shared, memories of love and laughter, memories of faith and friendship, memories of excitement and countless memories of encouragement. At one point a man named Bill Steele stood up. Bill was the pastor who mentored those interns and youth workers and youth pastors. Bill Steele stood up and reminded the church that over the years they had helped to raise up many men and women who went to seminary and later served in the church. He invited all those who had gone to seminary to come forward. A bunch of people came forward. But Bill knew something was not right. Someone had not come forward. There was a man there who had become a pastor, but then had trouble in ministry. He had made some mistakes. He was broken. He was humbled. And he was ashamed. So when Bill Steele asked everyone to come forward, this man did not come forward. He felt like he had no place on the bus. He felt like he did not belong. He felt

like his name was not on the passenger list. He had a label, and that label said sinner, that label said failure.

Bill Steele would have none of that. Bill Steele knew what it meant to drive a Barnabus. Bill looked around until he found that man. He looked him in the eye. And then he said, “You get up here. You belong. You are part of this family.” It must have been such a powerful moment when the bus doors swung open and that broken man climbed on board and claimed his place. That’s what I’m talking about when I use the word Barnabus. It is a bus where encouragement comes in deep and profound ways, and ultimately, it is the encouragement that says to each and every person, “You are a child of God. You have a place on this bus. Climb on board. We’re partners in faith. Together we are going on a journey of faith.”

Alex is the youngest of our four children. Our oldest son Jake is nine years older. From his earliest days growing up, Alex would watch as Jake would get on the bus and go to school. Then Hayley grew up and she got on the bus and went to school. Then Carlee grew up and got on the bus and went to school. Finally, Alex was old enough to start kindergarten. He raced out with his backpack and stood at the bus stop. It was the first day of school. Julie drove up to the bus stop and surprised the kids. She said, “Since it’s the first day, I’ll drive you all.” But Alex would have none of that. He looked at Julie and said adamantly, “I’ve waited my whole life to ride the bus. I’m riding the bus!”

Five years old and he had been waiting his whole life to ride the bus. Friends, be you five or be ye 95, I hope you have the same kind of commitment and desire to get on board the Barnabus. May we all say, “I’ve been waiting my whole life to ride the bus. I’m riding the bus. I’m climbing on board the bus. Make room for me on the Barnabus.” Believe me, it is the ride of your life.