

ENCOURAGEMENT

by *Will H. Loring*

Several years ago, I was preaching at Steele Creek; it was my third Sunday there. The first two Sundays had passed without incident. On the third Sunday I was preaching away and an elderly gentleman, a newcomer to the congregation, delivered a loud AMEN and his fellow worshipper, also an elderly gentleman, answered with an equally fervent AMEN. I was startled, but managed to contain my composure. The AMEN's continued at intervals throughout the rest of the sermon. I must admit I was encouraged; it gave momentum to the sermon. I'm not sure I would want it as a steady diet, but at least someone was listening, and that is always encouraging.

Today let's talk about encouragement. To encourage is to make another bold, to hearten, to reassure, to comfort. To encourage is to inspire with courage, to make another confident.

The Bible is the story of God's encouragement of men and women. God chose Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, each with his unique gifts, to be the patriarchal leaders of the nation. He made them bold to be pioneers of faith. Moses he inspired with the courage he lacked so that he might be the great emancipator. He heartened Jeremiah, Isaiah, Amos, Hosea, and Micah to be prophets. Prophetic vocation is a hard taskmaster, and it would not have been possible without God's encouragement. The Bible is a book of encouragement. It is significant that the word in the New Testament for encouragement and the word

for Holy Spirit have the same root.

Beyond this, our encouragement is found in the deeds, death and raising of Jesus and in his being lifted to power. Jesus Christ is God's supreme act of encouragement to us. It says that God has not destined us for wrath but for salvation, not for despair for for hope, not for destruction but for wholeness. Is ^{there} ~~that~~ better or more encouraging news than that?

In fact it is the case that the work of Christ's encouragement enables us to be encouragers. We see it in the life of the Christian about whom we read this morning. His name is Barnabas which means "son of encouragement." A great Christian scholar has written this moving tribute to him: "Barnabas is one of the most attractive characters in the New Testament. He possesses the rare gift of discerning merit in others. Probably inferior in ability to Paul, he was his superior in Christian graces. He seemed to have been utterly without jealousy, eager to excuse the fault in others, quick to recognize merit, ready to compromise for the sake of peace. Paul's elevation of character seems to have been hardly human while the virtues of Barnabas make him singularly lovable. The Paul of history contributes to the progress of the world. Barnabas and those like him make the world endurable to live in."

Barnabas does not dominate Acts as do Paul and Peter, but he always seems to appear at the crucial time, not just in the life of the church but in the lives of individuals. His first act of encouragement was financial. He sold his farm and put the proceeds at the feet of the disciples to be used for evangelism and for the help of the needy. His stewardship illustrates

his encouragement of mission and people.

He was Paul's great encourager. After his conversion to the Christian faith, Paul came to the church to be put to work. They rejected him. It is no wonder, for he had been a literal monster, the one who consented to the death of Stephen and persecutor of many more. Their rejection deeply depressed him, for he believed his call to ministry was a genuine one. Self-doubt began to creep in. Was he wrong, had he not been called? Barnabas took him for real. He stood up for him, he stood beside him, he spoke for him. It was because of Barnabas that Paul had a future in the church. Later Paul wrote "love thinks no evil" and Barnabas illustrates the point in the superlative. In a sense Barnabas represents the gospel in microcosm, his grace is illustrative of God's grace for us all, forgiving our past and giving us a future.

Another incident indicates the part of encouragement which involves wisdom. The church at Jerusalem had heard of strange happenings in the church at Antioch. There Gentiles were being swept up into the church. Disturbed, they needed an investigator. Barnabas was the overwhelming choice. William Barclay said, "It was by the grace of God they sent the man they did, for they sent the man with the biggest heart in the church." When he saw this marvelous sight of Gentile converts being swept up into the church, he was glad and encouraged a ministry to these new believers. Not only did he encourage them with his words, but with a better form of encouragement by rolling up his sleeves and going to work. There was more work there than

he could do and so he sought help. The partner he called was Paul, and the first real missionary team was formed. He gave Paul his first real job. It takes great wisdom to find the right man for the right job. It takes even more grace to push another ahead of you, because you perceive that he is abler and will enhance the cause for which you are both working. The being willing to be upstaged for a cause more important than your own career is at the heart of encouragement and may be its most eloquent part. And that too is why Barnabas is known as the "son of encouragement."

One of the great tragedies of the early church was the severing of the friendship between Barnabas and Paul, but that too was the result of Barnabas' habit of encouragement. The issue was John Mark, a cousin of Barnabas' who was a member of the team that went out on the first missionary journey. He had gotten cold feet and quit. Paul refused to take him on their second trip. Barnabas thought he should be given a second chance, just as Paul had been given a second chance. Though his friendship with Paul was important, it was not as important as the future usefulness of another person, so he let Paul and Silas go on their way, and he took John Mark under his wing. He saved John Mark, and as Paul later acknowledged, Mark became a valuable disciple. Wherever Barnabas went he left lives and churches enriched and growing. Barnabas and those like him make the world livable and illustrate that the encouragement of Christians of one another is indispensable for Christian growth.

BUT I am not encouraged about the abundance of Barnabas in each of us or the number of Barnabases among us. We live in a time of put-downs. The

"nabobs of negativism" have center stage in our culture. Churches often make the mistake of confusing piety or orthodoxy or their special cause as being of more importance than the harmony of body, the nurture of persons or the proclamation of the gospel. Frankly, I am depressed by the rigidity, the hostility (downright hate) that appears in letters by Christians in the newspaper. There seems to be more delight in imagining people in hell than joy in their calling to heaven. Is encouragement a forgotten grace? More to the point, is it even a possible one in our kind of world? There is much about the style of the Christian community and individual Christians that discourages rather than empowers.

Moreover, we need to look at the sources of discouragement among us. Why are we more prone to be negative and discouraging than encouraging? The first reason is a low opinion of ourselves. If we do not feel good about who we are, when something is missing in our lives, then the basic instinct is to put down the other guy. Negativism about other people is bred in insecurity. It festers in jealousy. It breeds in failed personal expectations and goals. Hostility is another origin of the discourager as is frustration and unhappiness. There are many reasons why we neglect the grace of encouragement and we need to be introspective enough about our foibles and failures to understand our condition.

Beyond this why should we even be concerned about the gift of encouragement? Because we care about people. Because we care about ideas and causes and wish to see them embraced and see them prosper. Because we care

family

we care about friendship

about institutions -- church, college, town, nation -- and desire that they be authentic ^{instruments} communities of growth and nurture and justice. It is interesting that much of the literature being written about business success is couched in positive terms, where success is attributed to a positive relationship with people rather than a negative response, where confidence building takes precedence over harrassment and motivation by fear. Because as teachers as lovers, as parents and preachers and as friends, ^{h.e.} encouragement is the best way for our fellows to grow to be healthy mentally and spiritually. Because encouragement is a more productive lifestyle than carping and faultfinding. Supremely because we no less than Barnabas are the recipients of God's great encouragement in Jesus Christ.

If we follow Barnabas' model, we find that encouragement allows people to seize upon their strengths and work through their weaknesses; to acknowledge guilt but to seize forgiveness. It is a method of trying to catch people doing something right rather than glee in finding them doing something wrong.

On the other hand, we may not make encouragement a Pollyanna exercise, merely sweetness and light. Encouragement often has in it the element of judgment. Encouragement includes often telling people what is wrong with their behavior. True encouragement tries to separate the behavior and the person.

Several years ago a clergyman designed a technique called crisis intervention and its method illustrates what I am trying to say. He discovered it when he was trying to help a lady who was dying with cirrhosis of the liver but would not admit that she had a drinking problem. He had the family gather around her bed to recount to her incidents that they had observed of her drinking and its ensuing behavior. They told her how they felt about what she did about their anger, frustration, embarrassment. Then they told how much they loved her and they instinctively touched her to demonstrate that love. They indicated how they wanted her to live and to enjoy life once again. It was because they loved her that her actions so disturbed them. They affirmed her as a person, but confronted her behavior. Such also is the nature of encouragement. It was a method our Lord has used time and again with us.

To be an encourager, to aspire to be a latter-day Barnabas, is a model for ministry well worth the attention of every Christian who wishes to build up the body of Christ. We have all been objects of encouragement by a parent, a brother or sister, a grandparent, a preacher or teacher, a friend or coach an employer or employee. It is their encouragement that has made us as whole as we are. But the question is: are you an encourager? Is your vocation to encourage adopting encouragement as a way of living and loving?