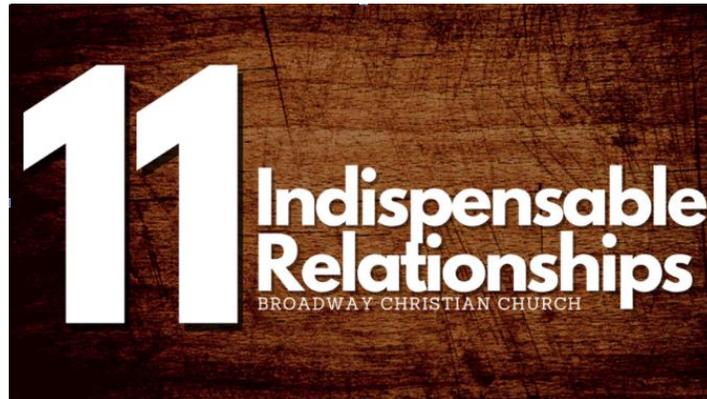


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The Worship of God • July 4, 2021



The Scripture
Acts 9:23-28

After some time had passed, the Jews plotted to kill him, but their plot became known to Saul. They were watching the gates day and night so that they might kill him; but his disciples took him by night and let him down through an opening in the wall, lowering him in a basket. When he had come to Jerusalem, he attempted to join the disciples; and they were all afraid of him, for they did not believe that he was a disciple. But Barnabas took him, brought him to the apostles, and described for them how on the road he had seen the Lord, who had spoken to him, and how in Damascus he had spoken boldly in the name of Jesus. So he went in and out among them in Jerusalem, speaking boldly in the name of the Lord.

The Message
“11 Indispensable Relationships: You Need an Encourager”
Mark Briley

Happy Independence Day! I hope you’ve had a good holiday weekend thus far. My Mom’s birthday is July 3rd and this year was a big one – “*Happy Birthday, Mom!*” The holiday always holds both of those things for our family so lots of good memories. I know this day means something different to all of us even as it conjures up that desire to be unified at the same time.



The Nathan's Hot Dog Eating contest will take place today at Coney Island, and someone will try to eat more than 75 hot dogs in ten minutes to rake in the \$40,000 cash prizes and famous Mustard Belt in front of thousands of fans. Joey "Jaws" Chestnut – the best competitive eater in the history of the world will attempt to break his own record.

The stakes for today are lower for many of us. Some will eat homemade ice cream

and watch fireworks light the sky. Others will make an appearance at the annual family reunion. Some are already celebrating with friends at the lake. There will be horseshoes, and cheering, and laughing, and grandma's red, white, and blue Jell-O salad. Yet we know this is just the *celebration* that we share. The *stories* are different. The stakes are higher.

The Declaration signed in 1776 brought about a hope of freedom for all yet was signed by a number of men who held hundreds of slaves captive for many more years. Other men and women would sign up to fight for this freedom over time. Those stepping foot on the beaches of Normandy look at this day differently. Some who have faithfully served our country, who experienced with their bodies and souls that freedom is not free, are sitting among us today. Today is ultimately less about hot dogs and fireworks and more about courage.

We are talking about encouragement today. Encouragement is essentially the gift of giving another courage to press on. The word encouragement comes from the French word *Coeur*. It means to put "*heart*" into someone. It's the story of our nation's founders who gave us heart to step into a better story than we were currently telling with our lives... a story of hope, of life, of freedom under the guidance of a loving God.

We have not always done this perfectly as a nation, but this is our ideal. We need these idyllic people in our lives. You need an encourager... one who will put "*heart*" into your existence. We are up to *Withness* number five in our summer series entitled, "*11*".¹ We are talking about the eleven indispensable relationships that you need to have in your life to realize your full potential. These are people who walk with you, who serve different purposes along your life's journey to make your presence as full as possible in the world. You need an encourager. Who is your Barnabas? He is today's *withness*.

¹ References in support of this message stem from Leonard Sweet's "*11 Indispensable Relationships You Can't be Without*" which inspired this summer series. David C. Cook Publishing. Colorado Springs. 2008.

Whenever you get in church circles and talk about encouragement, usually somebody can name Barnabas. It isn't the most popular name. It didn't seem to catch on as people have searched for biblical names to give their children over the years. But his name literally means "*encourager*". His given name was actually Joseph... Joe... a name we've heard much more often than Barnabas. He was a part of the Levite tribe... they were known as a tribe for producing scholarly, teacher types. Jesus' disciples gave Joe the name Barnabas when he sold a field he owned and gave the proceeds to the apostles to further the movement Jesus had started. His gift encouraged the work they were doing and gave them the energy and stamina they needed to press on, a gift of encouragement for sure!

His encouragement didn't stop with that gift. The church in Jerusalem sent Barnabas to check out an issue that came up in the church at Antioch, and he brought a lot of joy and encouragement to that congregation when they were struggling. The believers in the Antioch church were the first ones to be called "*Christians*."

In our text for today, we see Barnabas vouching for Paul when the disciples first learned he had supposedly converted to the ways of Jesus. Paul had been one of the greatest persecutors of the movement, and they weren't so sure that his claim, "*I'm a new man!*" was sincere. Can't blame them for that. Barnabas encouraged the disciples to give Paul a chance, and he encouraged Paul in the missionary movement he had begun. All of this encouragement didn't mean that Barnabas was an "*awe-shucks*" pushover. He encouraged the right things and meant what he said. He wasn't blowing hot air. Your encouragement carries less weight if you aren't intentional about the way you encourage others. Len Sweet, author of the book from which we are basing this series, suggests that your Barnabas may appear in a number of different ways and through a variety of people.

One Barnabas may appear to you is as a Good Samaritan. This encouragement may come from someone you don't even know. It's that person that pulls over to ask if you need help when your tire has gone flat. If nothing else, they encourage your hope in humanity... that we are not as selfish and conceded as you were thinking moments ago as car after car drove by you, making sure they hit the puddles to drench you while you were jacking up your car.

This could be that person who steps over to you having noticed you've worked hard or done something well, and they don't just say, "*Good job!*" but they give you some further encouragement about why what you did or how you handled something made a difference. If we long for a more kind and just society – we could use more of this kind of encouragement. It won't require much more of you than to notice – pay attention – see others and then, compliment, encourage, boost the spirits of another.

It might be tipping well. Did you know Sunday lunch tips are on average the smallest tips of the week? People leave church and go out to eat but are tipping little. We could flip that script. Just think if each of us committed to do this even once a day for someone we encounter. We could start an entire movement with the smallest of gestures.

Scripture reminds us, “*one who is faithful with little, will be faithful with much.*” On our pursuit of a deeper spiritual life and deeper relationships with others... creating these encouragement habits prepares us to go to deeper levels ourselves. Every new depth has a surface... it is your entry point.

Another Barnabas you might encounter is more of a Big Brother Barnabas. Some people will always focus on your negatives. You may be struggling with this or that, and some people will only see you for those flaws. That’s exhausting, isn’t it? On both sides – you get tired of the criticism, and it must get tiring to always be criticizing others. You all know someone who is just negative all the time and you think, “*They must be miserable.*” A Big Brother Barnabas will not be fixated on your defects; he or she will be focused on your promise. This person will remind you that God’s nature is Love when you are caught up in believing God is first a God of Judgment and Fear.

The book of Job is considered by many to be the oldest book in the Bible. Such is fitting in some ways... it is an incredible story of suffering. Tragic to know the pain Job experiences but an important early story of perseverance, wrestling with God, and ultimately trusting that God does not abandon us but walks with us through the worst and into something redeemable.

The longer you live, the more complicated things seem to become. The chances that you will have a family crisis... or a terrible disease... or loss of your life’s work... increases. Some kind of setback or heartbreak is evitable. And in these moments... the deepest valleys of life, you will easily find people who will dump on you. They will be the ones that tell you, “*You had it coming,*” or “*I told you so,*” or “*You are worthless.*”

Some of these heartaches are moments in life we help bring about ourselves, but there is a time (*and a witness*) for such correction, and that’s not your Barnabas. A Big Brother Barnabas will pull you up when your life is in a crumpled heap. “*They can’t keep your soul from breaking, but they can lift you up when your soul is broken.*” (Sweet).

The great Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote, “*But in the mud and scum of things... there is always, always something that sings.*” That encourager can remind you of your song when you can no longer hear it when the mud is too deep. This person knows you and

can awaken the best *you* to come to life. You need this type of encourager too. Robin Hood had Little John. Frodo had Samwise. Solange has Beyonce. Who is your Big Brother Barnabas?

What about a Praying Barnabas? Your praying Barnabas will empower you in ways you won't even know. Len Sweet points out, this is not the person who says to you, "*I'll pray for you,*" which he says is just as much a dismissal as someone who says, "*Don't call me, I'll call you.*" Your prayer Barnabas is connected to you with a prayer covenant... this is serious, intentional, not just in moments of despair kind of prayer... but they are covering you on a sunny Tuesday afternoon when you're happy, healthy, and living your best life. To enter this kind of *witness* with another, you need to "*make sure you're ready to give up who you are for who you might become.*" (Sweet). That comes with a big gulp. This Barnabas will listen to God with you and help you hear God's "No's" as well as God's "Yes." There is a trust level with this encourager that you know is pure and without agenda. They are tough to come by but worth the investment of your time and energy if you can make such a commitment. You might do well to seek this person out in your life if you do not have them already. Create a *witness* on the premise of prayer... set up a plan and see how powerful it can become in your life. Paul and Barnabas had this sort of relationship.

Of all of the *witnesses* we have engaged so far, your Barnabas may be spread throughout a number of people as opposed to simply being one person. There's your Funny Bone Barnabas that can always make you laugh even when you're entrenched in a hellacious situation. It is in those moments when you find the guts to, as the great poet Wendell Berry wrote, "*Be joyful even though you have considered all the facts.*"

There's your Duration Barnabas who will pledge to go with you to the end no matter what. Whose face is coming to your mind as you consider these Barnabi in your life? (*Is that the plural of Barnabas?*) Would your face be pictured in the minds of others if they were asked the same question? That's always the telling and convicting question for me to consider: Who sees my face when they think about these *witnesses*? In whose story are you regularly featured? How can we help the stories of all our lives rise to new heights?

A man named Jason had a 15-year-old daughter. He and his wife were down because they found some marijuana hidden in her closet, and her boyfriend seemed to always smell of smoke himself and only spoke to them in what seemed to be some language that just grunted at different pitches. A friend asked him, "*You gonna ground her?*" "*We've tried that. We've punished every way we know how.*" His friend responded, "*Sounds like she is living a terrible story.*" That statement haunted Jason but he began to think it through. He realized he wasn't helping create a better story for his daughter to be a part of. He hadn't considered that living into a better story himself might also

encourage his family. There wasn't really a story the family was living into at all... just everyone doing their own thing, trying to survive each other and whatever the current moment required. In the absence of this family story, she'd chosen another story where there was some risk and adventure, rebellion, and independence. "*She's not a bad girl,*" Jason said. "*She was just choosing the best story available to her.*"

Jason decided to stop yelling at her and, instead, created a better story to invite her into. He came across an organization that builds orphanages around the world and thought that was a meaningful story... maybe something his family could get involved in together. So Jason called the organization and learned that it costs \$25,000 to build an orphanage and the truth is, he said, "*We didn't have that kind of money, but I knew to live a better story it would have to involve risk. So, I went home and called a family meeting. I didn't tell my wife first, which it turns out was a mistake. [truth!] But I told them about this village and the orphanage and all these terrible things that could happen if these kids didn't get an orphanage. Then... I told them I agreed to build it. My wife looked at me like I had lost my mind, and my daughter's eyes were as big as melons for she knew that meant she'd lose her allowance and who knows what else. And the longer they sat there, the more I wondered if I had lost my mind, too.*"

His friend said, "*Yeah... I think you **did** lose your mind.*" "*But,*" Jason said, "*It's working out.*" The next day, his wife came to him while he was doing some dishes. She put her arms around him and leaned her face into the back of his neck and said, "*I'm proud of you.*" He apologized, rightfully so, for not talking with her about it and she forgave him for that but she then said it didn't matter... "*We have an orphanage to build.*"

Their daughter came to them a few nights later and crawled in bed between them which she hadn't done for years, and she began to ask about the orphanage. She said she could talk about it on her social media platforms and see if others might get involved. She could post pictures. She wanted to go and help build it and meet the kids who would live there and tell their stories back home so others might help. "*You know what else, man?*" Jason said as he was telling this to a friend. "*She broke up with her boyfriend last week. She had his picture on her dresser and took it down and told me he said she was too fat. Can you believe that? What a jerk. But that's done now. She has a better story to live. She knows who she is. She just forgot for a little while. [and maybe I did too.]"*²

As the church, we are called to be a Barnabas to the world, and I ask myself regularly if we are, in fact, a place of encouragement. I believe we are. If we don't take that role seriously, we can quickly become a discouragement. We can do this explicitly or implicitly. We can exclude others from our fellowship. We can live bitterly and without

² A Million Miles in a Thousand Years. Donald Miller. Pg. 49-54. 2009.

hope. We can get lost in some minor details that lead us to lose sight of the big picture, or we can live with dreams in our eyes. We live as if the words “*I Hope*” are tattooed on our foreheads. We can give generously of our money and time and energy as if we have truly discovered that the life that is truly life is one that gives, not one that hoards.

I believe we are to gather together day after day and encourage each other, inviting others and one another into a better story over and over again. It doesn't matter our age or status... we always have this gift of encouragement we can give; giving courage – which stems from what word? Heart. On this day that reminds us of our freedom... go freely, thank the Barnabas's in your life... and put some “*heart*” into someone else, too.

Song of Response
“My Barnabas / Doxology”
Words by Ed Varnum

Music: “Amazing Grace!” (NEW BRITAIN) Virginia Harmony, 1831

1. When I am down, then you're around
to lift me if I fall.

Believing in me, you help me to see
around life's every wall.

2. What would I do if not for you?
You fill my life each day.

With help that I trust, you're my Barnabas!
Encourager, strength, and stay!

“Doxology” (OLD 100TH)

Praise God from whom all blessings flow.

Praise God all creatures here below.

Praise God above all heavenly hosts:

Creator, Son, and Holy Ghost. Amen.

BROAD HEARTS | BROAD MINDS | BROAD REACH