

PARTNERS WITH GOD: The Gift of Encouragement  
Acts 4: 32-36, 13: 1-3                      Nov. 10, 2013

The story is told of a Special Olympics race.  
The contestants had practiced long and hard.  
They were ready to run their best and perhaps win.  
But soon after the starting gun had sounded,  
    one of the runners tripped and fell.  
As he lay on the ground crying from hurt and frustration  
    one of the runners came and comforted him.  
Soon all the other runners gathered around.  
One of them gave the fallen runner a hand  
    and helped him to his feet.  
Then the entire group linked arms,  
    negotiated the remainder of the track together  
        and crossed the finish line at the same time.  
Needless to say the crowd exploded with cheers.  
The gift of encouragement had  
    made them all winners.

This story stands in sharp contrast to the prevailing culture.  
We hear stories of athletes, politicians, and businesses,  
    who harm their competitors in order to get an edge.  
We are often so competitive and individualistic  
    that our only concern is for our own interest  
        and the interests of our families.  
In fact, a sports referee once told me  
    that his job has become increasingly difficult,  
        not because of the attitudes of the players,  
        but because of parents who argued with every call  
            that did not promote their son or daughter.

Good sportsmanship always means  
    recognizing and wanting the best for everyone.  
We know that racism continues to be an issue  
    & ethnicity has become increasingly destructive.  
    Jews against Palestinians.  
    White supremacists against Blacks.  
    Blacks against Hispanics.

Violence has become a way to solve disputes.  
And families have become so busy that they have little time  
    to stop and encourage one another by listening,  
        and helping each other up when one stumbles and falls.

So how do we become a people who stop and help each other win?  
How do we build each other up  
and refuse to knock each other down in order to gain advantage?

Scripture talks a lot about building each other up.  
It says that we are the body of Christ, a unit, a functioning whole,  
and what hurts one hurts everyone else.  
And what encourages and builds up one  
builds up everyone else.

So this morning we meet Barnabas,  
a man whose name means SON OF ENCOURAGEMENT.  
Why is he called that?  
What does it mean to be sons and daughters of encouragement?

The first thing we learn is that early Christians  
shared everything they had with each other.  
So Barnabas went and sold a field  
and brought the money to the apostles  
so that it could be shared with those who had nothing.

This commitment to be FOR others as well as for oneself  
is the starting point of being an encourager.  
It is a choice to stop running when someone is in need  
and help them get on their feet  
so that everybody can reach the finish line.  
It is a choice to build up the entire body of Christ  
instead of building only for oneself.  
And it means committing resources—  
things like time, energy, and money  
to help others as well as oneself.  
It is the call to become like Christ  
who didn't grasp at the power of God  
but became a servant  
so that he could join arms with us  
and help us across the finish line.  
I think of people who not only encourage their friends  
but join a Circle of Hope  
to support someone trying to find their way out of poverty.

I think of businessmen who join Menno. Economic Dev. Assoc.  
to join arms with and build up small businesses in  
third world countries.

I think of people who give time to build houses for the poor,  
who clean up after natural disasters,  
who make quilts for relief sales,  
who spend time helping with MCC's meat canner,  
who listen to a friend,  
who take a meal to someone after surgery,  
who visit a shut-in,  
who spend time at the Homeless Shelter.

You can think of many other illustrations.

Encouraging others,  
building up others takes a commitment and a decision  
to spend one's life for others as well as for oneself.

That may be money, but it may be time—  
whatever the resources we have to share.

The second thing we learn about Barnabas is that  
he was a prophet and a teacher.

Here was a man who was willing to share his knowledge and skills  
to help others grow.

This is an important way we encourage others and build them up.

I think of the coach who teaches the fundamentals  
to the players so they can do their best.

And I think about how it tears down self-esteem  
to be yelled at for not doing something  
when you've never been taught how to do it.

All too often in the church  
we give people jobs but don't adequately prepare them.

Building each other up and encouraging one another  
means that we pass on the gifts of knowledge and experience  
so that others can be winners, too.

Teachers, coaches, mentors—these are important functions  
of an encourager.

The third thing we learn about Barnabas  
is that he was an advocate for his young cousin, John Mark.  
as well as for the new Christian, Saul

Both Saul and John Mark were suspect.

Saul had been a primary persecutor of Christians.

So how could he be trusted in Christian circles?

Was he sincere, or was he just infiltrating their ranks  
to destroy them all?

And John Mark was suspect

because he didn't finish his first assignment,  
so how would he be entrusted again with the same job?

Barnabas went to bat for both of these men.  
He trusted their motives, their growth, and their abilities.  
Because Barnabas accepted and built up  
these new and untried people  
and helped the community to trust and embrace them,  
everyone was built up.  
Scripture says that because Saul was accepted  
the church had peace, was built up, and multiplied  
The principle that applies then continues to apply today.  
When we build one up, we are all built up.  
This gift of making space in our lives and in our groups  
for those who are outsiders, are new, and are young,  
is to encourage them and build them up.  
And when their gifts are accepted, we are all much rich and stronger.

The fourth thing we read about Barnabas,  
is that he was set apart by the church for a special ministry.  
He was to leave his friends and comfortable group  
and take the gospel to new places.  
I think that this set-apartness is important to being an encourager.  
If I am to help another person to grow,  
I must care about them but have a certain amount of  
emotional detachment.  
A person who is drowning doesn't need another drowning person.  
A fearful person needs someone who understands,  
but if that someone has the same fears,  
they may find it difficult to be encouraging.  
And encourager is empathetic and understanding,  
but is willing to be set apart enough  
to offer a bit of outside perspective.  
They are willing to go to new places and new people  
to both bring the perspective and gain that perspective.  
It means getting out of ones comfort zone  
and allowing oneself to be stretched  
so that one can be an encourager to others.  
I am reminded that some of my greatest encouragers  
have been people outside of our own tradition  
that have helped me gain a broader perspective.  
They have helped me learn how I am a part of a larger whole,  
and who I am and what I have to offer  
in a larger context.  
That is the gift that I bring back with me, then,  
as I continue to live and minister in my own tradition.

To be an encourager one needs perspective  
and the ability to set oneself apart a bit  
to gain the needed insight to be helpful.

We become partners with God  
when we encourage each other  
and build each other up.

We do this by our commitment to each other,  
by passing on our knowledge and skills,  
by bringing new people into our circles,  
by setting ourselves apart to bring perspective,  
and by constant friendship.

When we do this the church, the body of Christ, the church  
will experience peace, be built up and multiply.  
May it be so with us.