

Be a Barnabas!

Most of you probably don't know this, but last week, our offering counters approached me and said that our Sunday morning offerings totaled over \$4000. The weekly average is around \$1700. That total included one check for \$2000 for the building fund. You probably don't know this but two weeks ago a young couple in their early twenties was joined in Christian marriage in one of our WELS congregations. They received over \$7000 in cash gifts from family and friends. They chose to set aside \$800 as a thank offering to the Lord. Our church body, the Wisconsin Synod, has a Committee on Relief, that sends relief funds to different areas of the world that have been struck by natural disasters. The Committee was informed about a family in our congregation who suffered damage from the flooding we experienced a last month. Last week our congregation received a check from the WELS Committee on Relief in the amount of \$5000 to give to this family.

Why do I share these stories with you? It's encouraging! It cheers to heart to hear how other believers step out in faith. When an individual takes to heart the wonderful life saving message of Jesus and his gift of forgiveness and eternal life, faith reacts in thankful and generous giving, not just of money, but of time and abilities.

Today we celebrate the Church Festival of St. Barnabas the Apostle. We first read about Barnabas in Acts 4:36. His real name was actually Joseph. He was a Jew who could trace his ancestry to the tribe of Levi. He was from the island of Cyprus in the Mediterranean Sea. Acts 4:36 tells us that Joseph sold a field he owned and brought the money and put it at the apostles' feet. How encouraging it must have been for the apostles and the other members of the Christian Church, to witness this example of generosity from one of the leaders of the Church. It's no wonder that the apostles' nickname for Joseph was Barnabas, which means, *Son of Encouragement*.

We next hear about Barnabas in Acts 9. If you remember, before Paul became an apostle, his name was Saul, who, as a Jewish Pharisee, relentlessly persecuted Christians. Saul set out from Jerusalem north to Damascus, to go house to house and weed out the Christians. On his journey the Lord Jesus appeared to him on the road and called him to be his apostle. After spending some time in Damascus Saul went back to Jerusalem and tried to join the Christians. They recognized him as the guy who had been dragging their fellow brothers and sister from their homes and putting them in prison for preaching Christ crucified. They were afraid. They did not believe he really was a disciple. Acts 9:27 informs us that Barnabas took Saul and brought him to the apostles. Barnabas told the apostles how Saul had seen the Lord, how the Lord called Saul to be an apostle. Barnabas told the disciples how Saul had proclaimed the name of the Lord Jesus fearlessly in Damascus. No wonder the apostles nicknamed him *the Son of Encouragement*.

In Acts 11 we read the story about the apostle Peter and how the Holy Spirit called him to visit a man named Cornelius, who was a commander in the Roman army. The Holy Spirit used the gospel through Peter to convert these Gentiles to Christianity. When the apostles found out that the Holy Spirit was working among non-Jewish people and that Christian congregations were sprouting in non-Jewish communities, whom did they send but Barnabas! Acts 11:23-24 tells us, **“When he arrived and saw the evidence of the grace of God, he was glad and encouraged them all to remain true to the Lord with all their hearts.”** What a blessing Barnabas must have been to the members of that congregation, as he shared with them the truths of Scripture!

Barnabas also traveled with the apostle Paul through Asia Minor on Paul's first missionary trip. When they reached the city of Derbe, Acts 14:22 tells us that Paul and Barnabas **“strengthened the disciples and encouraged them to remain true to the faith, saying, ‘We must go through many hardships to enter the**

kingdom of God.” In one of the cities on their journey Paul had been dragged out of the town by an angry mob of Jews who did not want to hear the message of Jesus. They threw stones at him until they thought he was dead. The other disciples gathered around him, Paul got up and walked back into the city. The missionary duo had also been run out of another town. How encouraging it must have been for those disciples to hear those words, that they were not alone as they suffered for preaching the gospel!

Then we don't hear too much more about Barnabas in the New Testament, except in Galatians 2:11-14, where, in his letter, the apostle Paul informs us that he **opposed Peter to his face, because he was clearly in the wrong**. Peter had been hanging out with Gentile Christians, and not following Jewish customs, which there was nothing wrong with. But when Jewish Christians came to town, he withdrew from the Gentile Christians, and hung out with the Jewish Christians and joined them in their false belief that in order to be “true Christians,” it was necessary for the Gentile Christians to observe Jewish customs and regulations. Paul says in his letter, **“The other Jews joined [Peter] in his hypocrisy, so that by their hypocrisy even Barnabas was led astray.”**

Barnabas found himself on the other side, the one needing encouragement. He was indeed a saint, but at the same time he was also a sinner. In this situation he had lost a battle to his sinful nature (Gal 5:17). But how refreshing it must have been to Barnabas, to be lifted up by a fellow brother in Christ, who showed love and concern by pointing out his sin and leading him to repentance!

Maybe you have found yourself in a position like Barnabas. Like Barnabas, you were led astray into believing false doctrine, either through something you had been reading in a book, watching on television or listening on the radio or hearing from a friend who did not belong to your church. Before you knew it false doctrine had crept its way into your thoughts so that you even believed the poison you were drinking. Thankfully a Barnabas, a fellow Christian or your pastor gently reminded you of God's Word which tells us to stay away from false doctrine (Romans 16:17), which warns us that a little bit of false teaching, like yeast, can work its way through a whole batch of dough (1Corinthians 5:6,7).

Maybe there was a time in your faith life when you were led astray by your own sinful nature. A fellow Christian offended you, by something they said, or the way they said it; by the way they dealt with a situation or the way they failed to handle it; by the way they disappointed you. You believed the hypocrisy of your sinful nature and justified your retaliation with harsh words, holding a grudge, or just blatantly avoiding them. But then a Barnabas came along. He or she shared with you Romans 12:16 which says, **“God has called us to live in harmony with one another.”** Or reminded you that **the fruits of the Spirit are love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self control** (Gal 5:22,23), which were fruits you had not been bearing. Or warned you of these words from Psalm 101:5, **“Whoever slanders his neighbor in secret, him will I put to silence; whoever had haughty eyes and a proud heart, him will I not endure.”**

You were thankful for those words because they convicted your heart and moved you to confess your sin. The Barnabas then reassured with Jesus' words, “Come to me all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest.” (Matt 11:28) Encouragement from Jesus' lips straight to your heart. You will find true rest from the weariness that comes with the guilt of your sin. You will find true rest from the burden of your failures. You have the encouragement from Jesus himself who was the Servant of the LORD Isaiah prophesied about who would come and free the captives from prison, to release from the dungeon those who sit in darkness. (Is 42) Jesus set you free from the punishment your lovelessness earned. He released you from the prison of hell which your lack of patience and kindness bought you. Jesus encourages you with your baptism, when his sinless life covered over your sinful life. Jesus encourages you that his death was the punishment you deserved, and assures you that he has taken that full punishment by giving you his body to eat and blood to drink in the Lord's Supper. How encouraging!

You were thankful for that Son or Daughter of Encouragement who then shared with you what God's forgiven people will do, **"Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love. Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ, God forgave you."** (Eph 4:2, 32)

I know that some of you have the spiritual gift of Barnabas, as Paul describes in Romans 12:8. You see a brother or sister in Christ sick, or hurting on the inside, or doing a good job with their church work and so you call, write a note or e-mail, and even face-to-face encourage them. It's who you are and what you excel at. While not all have the gift, all of you are called to encourage each other in a specific area of Christian living. In Hebrews 10:24,25 the writer tells you, **"Encourage one another to not give up meeting together for public worship, as some are in the habit of doing."** (paraphrase) Now, there is a big difference between guilt trip and encouragement. Guilt trip would be, "Why haven't you been in church or Bible study?!" Here's how you can encourage... "I miss worshiping with you in God's house. Will you join me this Sunday or Wednesday evening?" Guilt trip would be, "Why don't you step up and volunteer more?!" Encouraging would sound like this... "There's a job that needs to be done at church, and I think you have the skills to do it. Do you think you might like to try it out for a while?" Be a Barnabas. Be an encourager.

If you see or hear a fellow Christian engaged in sinful living, point out their sin, so that they might be led to repentance and saved from further spiritual damage. There's a way to do that too, in an encouraging way. Between the two of you say, "Let's talk about this... what does God's Word say about your actions?" You know what it's like to be encouraged with God's Word, to feel the hammer of the Law and then to feel the sweet, soothing salve of the gospel. Be an encourager. Be a Barnabas.

I have several cards here with me that brought from a file folder that I keep at home. Some of these cards are from past TCW teams who have worked with our congregation to do outreach, expressing appreciation for giving them an opportunity to do outreach. Some of these cards are from some of you, expressing thanks for the work I do. Why do I share these with you? Because it's encouraging for me as pastor to know that my work is not in vain, a good reminder for me to know that the Word of God that I share with my people does work, that it does convict the hearts of sinners, that it does work repentance, that it does heal and comfort, that it does motivate my people to respond in thankfulness with Christian living. I need to hear that daily encouragement from the Word of God. And so do you. Encourage each other. Be a Barnabas. Amen.