

Message: The Encourager

Everyone in this room today has a name. Sometimes, there is a story behind your name. You are named after your grandmother or Uncle Milt or even a famous person. Many of you today also have a nickname, and there is always a story behind a nickname; the story may be good, bad, or ugly--but there is a story. You got it because of an ability you have, or a story you went through, or a distinguishing feature, or even a mistake you made. Nicknames have a story.

I thought it might be fun to have a quick "nickname trivia" contest. I'm going to list 18 somewhat famous nicknames, and I want you to see how many you can identify. As you consider these nicknames, however, I want you to think of how the person got the name. Now, remember that this is just for fun; There are no cash prizes, so let's not get ugly with this. See how many of these you can identify.

"Magic"	Earvin Johnson
"Bloody Mary"	Mary I, Queen of England
"Ol Blue Eyes"	Frank Sinatra
"Sting"	Gordon Sumner
"Louisville Lip"	Muhammad Ali
"Man of a Thousand Voices"	Mel Blanc
"Wizard of Menlo Park"	Thomas Edison
"Man of a Thousand Faces"	Lon Chaney
"The Boss"	Bruce Springsteen
"Wrong Way"	Douglas Corrigan
"Tricky Dicky"	Richard Nixon
"Broadway Joe"	Joe Namath
"Old Hickory"	Andrew Jackson
"Brockton Bomber"	Rocky Marciano
"Waltz King"	Johaan Strauss
"Scarface"	Al Capone
"King of Pop"	Michael Jackson
"The Encourager"	

Actually, "the encourager" was the nickname of a guy in the Bible. He lived about 2000 years ago. We first read about him when the church first began. Quick Bible lesson overview: The Bible is loosely divided into two sections: The Old Testament and the New Testament. The New Testament is basically when Jesus shows up. So the first four books of the New Testament (Matthew, Mark, Luke, John) describe the life and ministry of Jesus. He dies, He comes back to life, and He calls his followers to live out his ways in a community. Jesus launches the church. The next book of the Bible, then, a book called "Acts" describes the infant days of the church. It all starts in Jerusalem. The earliest followers of Jesus came from all walks of life: Men, women, young, old, Jews and Gentiles, rich and poor. Some, in fact, were seriously poor, but the church was committed to providing for their basic necessities. So, how did the church do that? Let's read and find out:

There were no needy persons among them. For from time to time those who owned lands or houses sold them, brought the money from the sales and put it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to anyone as he had need. Joseph, a Levite from Cyprus, whom the apostles called Barnabas (which means Son of Encouragement), sold a field he owned and brought the money and put it at the apostles' feet. (The Bible, Acts 4:32-37 NIV)

"There were no needy persons among them." People didn't stay needy. If someone in the church was in desperate need, he or she didn't stay desperate. Someone stepped up to help. People who had land or even houses sold them, gave the sale proceeds to the church to meet needs. In other words, people didn't live as if they owned their stuff. They lived as if God did. And they lived out God's heart for the poor by giving their resources freely and sacrificially.

That's when we meet a guy named Joseph. He was from Cyprus but had family in the Jerusalem area. Joseph has trusted Jesus and is a part of this new church. But the people of this church give him a nickname. They start calling him Barnabas. If you got a "nickname" in that culture, it was directly related to the kind of person you were. The name "Barnabas" means "son of encouragement" or more simply "the encourager." Here is what is interesting. He is mentioned many more times in the Bible, but not by the name Joseph. He is always called Barnabas. In fact, some of you who have read about Barnabas in the Bible may have had no idea that his real name was Joseph. It's like Magic Johnson. His nickname has become his name. We don't say, "I'll never forget that baby hook shot that Earvin made." No, it's "the baby hook shot Magic made." Some of you may not have even known his name was Earvin. In the same way, Joseph's nickname becomes his name: Barnabas.

I want to take the rest of our time this morning looking at snapshots of Barnabas' life in which we see "the encourager" at work. At the end of the morning, it will become very clear why he was called the encourager. My reason for sharing his story, however, is this. Every follower of Jesus is specifically called to be an encourager. One of the best ways to learn a skill is to watch someone practice it. Barnabas is this wonderful, down-to-earth example of how to encourage. Let's see what we can learn.

So, what is Joseph doing when we read that he was given this nickname, Barnabas? He was selling a field that he owned and was giving the proceeds to the church to be distributed to the needy. This is not a coincidence. Generosity is deeply encouraging. As Luke, then, describes Joseph's generosity, he goes on to note: "I guess I should tell you that people started calling Joseph 'Barnabas,' or 'the Encourager.'"

Generosity is encouraging on a couple of different layers. It deeply encourages those who receive the gift and it gives courage to others to give generously. A number of years ago, when our family was in a significant financial bind, a friend loaned us several thousand dollars, and we began the process of slowly paying it back...very slowly. Needless to say, his generosity was encouraging, but I will

never forget the day a few years later when he told me that he and his wife had decided to cancel the debt. We owed nothing more. It's hard to describe how refreshing that is. Generosity encourages those who receive.

But generosity also encourages those who observe it. It "gives courage" to others to be generous. If he can do that, so can I. If she can trust God that way, then so can I. We read in the Bible that several people sold land to raise money for people in need. I expect that Barnabas' gift was a catalyst for that.

In these early days of the church, God was powerfully at work. People's lives were being changed. Needs were being met. Miracles were being done. And the church was growing in numbers substantially. Not everyone was excited about this growth, however. They believed that followers of Jesus were dangerous to the culture. One prominent church leader, Stephen, was stoned to death by an angry mob. In fact, Acts 8 describes a wave of persecution against the Jerusalem church that was so serious many believers fled Jerusalem and went to neighboring regions. There were those who wanted to put an end to this new church movement.

One man, in particular, was notable for his effort to try and eliminate the Christian church. His name was Saul. He was an accessory to the stoning death of Stephen. He was passionate, and he was resourceful. He talked to local authorities, and he obtained authorization to arrest and imprison Christians. For all the wrong reasons, Saul was a household name among Christians. If he showed up in your town, you were in danger.

We learn in the Bible in Acts 9 that the next town Saul was headed for was Damascus. He was going to arrest Christians there and bring them back to prison in Jerusalem. On his way to Damascus to arrest Christians, Saul encounters God in a highly unexpected way. A dazzling bright light sends him to the ground at which point God begins to speak to Him and ask Saul why he is fighting God. Long story short, Saul decides to become one of the Christians he had been trying to eliminate! He begins teaching and telling people in Damascus that Jesus is God. So Saul decides he is going to return to Jerusalem. Why? He wants to join the church there. He is a new follower of Jesus, and He wants to connect with the faith community.

So, imagine you are a Christian living in Jerusalem. You get word that Saul is coming back to Jerusalem, but you hear this crazy rumor that Saul has become a Christian and wants to meet as many Christians as he can when he gets to town. Now, you tell me what you are thinking. I know what I'd be thinking. "Wow, how low will this guy go? Now, he's pretending to be a Christian so he can get Christians to identify themselves, so he can arrest them. How dumb does he think we are?" That's what I'd be thinking. So, let's read what Christians in Jerusalem were thinking:

When he came to Jerusalem, he tried to join the disciples, but they were all afraid of him, not believing that he really was a disciple. But Barnabas took him and brought him to 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 he had preached fearlessly in the name of Jesus. So Saul stayed with them and moved about freely in Jerusalem, speaking boldly in the name of the Lord. (The Bible, Acts 9:26-28 NIV)

Saul is in this incredibly vulnerable position where, understandably almost no one believes him. He really is telling the truth, but no one trusts him, apparently not even the apostles or leaders of the church. This is a job for "the encourager!" In steps Barnabas. He embraces Saul; He believes Saul's story; He trusts Saul, and he stands up for him. He personally arranges a meeting for Saul to meet the leaders of the church, and He vouches for him. There was a risk for Barnabas in this.

I'd be asking myself: What if I'm wrong? What lives could be lost? But it seems that Barnabas was asking a different question. What if I'm right? If someone doesn't stand with him, what opportunities might be lost? This was a huge turning point in Saul's life. Because of Barnabas' brave stand, the church embraced Saul, and he ended up being a kind of Billy Graham in his day, ultimately leading hundreds and thousands of people to follow Jesus. In fact, he and Barnabas ending up going to city after city after city calling people to trust Jesus and starting new churches. Ironically, Saul changes his name to Paul and God uses Paul to write a significant part of the New Testament portion of the Bible. It raises the question for me: What if Saul had not had an encourager in his life?

I cannot stress enough how vital encouragement is. All around us are people who desperately need someone to believe in them, to believe their story, to see their potential, to stand beside them.

I told you that Paul and Barnabas went on a city-to-city tour telling people about Jesus and starting churches. So, one day, they have this conversation about going back to visit those churches and see how they're doing. The conversation is recorded in the Bible in the book of Acts:

Some time later Paul said to Barnabas, "Let us go back and visit the brothers in all the towns where we preached the word of the Lord and see how they are doing." Barnabas wanted to take John, also called Mark, with them, but Paul did not think it wise to take him, because he had deserted them in Pamphylia and had not continued with them in the work. They had such a sharp disagreement that they parted company. Barnabas took Mark and sailed for Cyprus, but Paul chose Silas and left, commended by the brothers to the grace of the Lord. He went through Syria and Cilicia, strengthening the churches. (The Bible, Acts 15:36-41 NIV)

Paul and Barnabas start planning this return trip to visit these churches. I can hear Barnabas now: "What a great idea, Paul. It will be like old times. We can see how God has been at work and hear new stories of people turning to God. I'm going to text message my cousin, John Mark, right now and tell him to start packing for the trip!" And Paul is like: "Whoa, Barnabas. John Mark? But he bailed on us in Pamphylia. Don't you remember how much we had to scramble when he quit on

us? We can't take him. It's too much of a risk. He might fail us again. We can't take him."

And Barnabas now has this huge quandary. A man he respects enormously doesn't believe they should take John Mark, and is quite adamant about that. Then there is John Mark, and Barnabas knows he needs a second chance. I suspect he asks the question: What could be lost if we don't give John Mark a second chance? So, Barnabas does a remarkable thing. He tells Paul he won't be able to go with him and instead, calls up John Mark and says, "let's go on a ministry trip together."

Can you imagine the impact of that decision on John Mark? One of the most encouraging things you will ever do is to give someone a second chance. Many of you will recognize the name, Ted Haggard; He has been in the news a bit over the last couple of years. Pastor of a sizable church in Colorado, president of the National Association of Evangelicals, married with Kids--he was exposed as having a gay affair for some period of time. His hypocrisy and failure was front-page news and the brunt of late night comedy. His choices deeply wounded a lot of people.

A few weeks back, however, I came across an interesting video. It turns out that Steve Furtick, pastor of Elevation Church, a rapidly growing church in Charlotte, NC, had invited Ted Haggard and his wife in for an interview in one of their Sunday morning services. He gave them a chance to tell their story--the broken choices along with the steps toward healing and reconciliation. You could hear how deeply encouraging it was to Ted and his wife that someone would be willing to listen, to embrace them, to give them a chance to make a difference again. Steve Furtick was a Barnabas who believed that Ted needed a second chance, that the church should not be a place where we shoot our wounded. Steve did a gracious, encouraging thing, but it was risky, and I'm sure there's been some fallout. I can only imagine what his grace did for the Haggard family.

There is one thing that all of us are good at: failure. And few things in life cause us to lose courage more than failure. Failure makes us want to give up. It discourages us. It robs us of courage to keep going or try again. We have no idea how many people around us are minutes away from giving up: Giving up on a marriage. Giving up on living. Giving up on God.

It makes me think of a word of warning in the Bible:

See to it, brothers, that none of you has a sinful, unbelieving heart that turns away from the living God. But encourage one another daily, as long as it is called Today, so that none of you may be hardened by sin's deceitfulness. (The Bible, Hebrews 3:12-13 NIV)

Living in a broken world and making broken choices takes a toll on us. Almost every single day, someone disappoints us or hurts us, and almost every single day, we hurt someone or make a wrong decision, or do something foolish. These things wear on us. They make us want to give up, to stop trying.

We need people in our lives who challenge us not to give up, who inspire us to do the right thing, who give us an example of how to live. God says to us: "Be that person!" Be an encourager. And God gets very specific. He says: Encourage one another daily. Not annually. Not weekly, but daily. Think about that. Do you consciously seek to encourage people every single day? You should. I should.

So, how can you encourage people daily? Start with your words. The simplest words of encouragement carry weight beyond what we could possibly believe:

- I think you'd make a great teacher, or nurse, or carpenter.
- I love you.
- I'm proud of you.
- I didn't have nearly your ability when I was your age.
- If anyone can do it, you can.
- You should have seen the play Tyler made when we played basketball!
- I'm not sure I would have had the patience to do what you just did.
- I wish I could do that like you do.
- What an awesome idea. That is so creative.
- I wish I had thought of that.
- You are good for people. You bring out the best in them.
- I like you. You are fun to be around.
- You can make it. Don't give up. Hang in there.
- I'll always be there for you.

But sometimes, the best encouragement is silence. It is just being there. In a time of deep grief or hurt or loss what people often need from us is simply our presence. Don't worry about saying the right thing. Just listen or sit with someone in the silence. Someone can be deeply encouraged simply because you noticed, or showed up. Encouragement is given not simply with words, but with what we do.

- Doing the right thing even when it is difficult.
- Choosing a lesser player to be on your team.
- In a school lunchroom, or in an AY gathering, sitting down next to someone who is sitting alone.
- Forgiving a debt or paying a bill.
- Helping out with a project.

By the way, one of the reasons God wants his church to have gatherings like we are having this morning is for encouragement.

And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds. Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching. (The Bible, Hebrews 10:24-25 NIV)

Times like these are designed to refresh courage in us: to comfort us, to challenge us, to re-direct us, to motivate us. It is one reason we challenge everyone to be a part of a Life Group. These gatherings are critical times for encouragement. There is not a single person in this room today who does not need encouragement. But I

close with word of caution. There is a danger in coming to a church gathering and focusing simply on your need for encouragement. I expect every one of us has walked away from some church service thinking, "I didn't get what I was hoping for. I didn't come away refreshed or encouraged."

But God reminds us here to change our focus. He reminds: "Let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds." In other words, when you go in to a church gathering, go in with the thought: "I wonder who needs encouragement today?" "How can I inspire or encourage someone else around me this morning?" This is genius on God's part. If everyone in a church gathering comes in waiting for someone to encourage them, a lot will walk away discouraged. But if everyone comes in looking for someone to encourage, very few will walk away discouraged. Oh, and by the way, encouraging others will ultimately be encouraging to you as well.

Here is God's call to us. Think encouragement every day. If you are going to a barbecue this afternoon, look for someone to encourage. When you go into work tomorrow, consider how you can encourage someone. When you head back to school in a couple of months, people all around you will need encouragement, so plan to be like Barnabas; Be the encourager! The next time you come to church, ask God to help you find someone to encourage that day. Your parents need encouragement, your friends need encouragement, your kids need encouragement, your supervisor needs encouragement, your neighbor needs encouragement. Be the encourager!