



Lakeside Sermons

Lakeside Baptist Church • Rocky Mount, North Carolina
Jody C. Wright, Senior Minister

MAY 6, 2018

The Sixth Sunday of Easter

We Could Use More Folks Like Barnabas
Acts 9:1-31

“No man is an island,” declared John Donne, expressing his belief that we are inextricably linked to one another. And while I wholeheartedly agree with the 17th Century poet, I know all too well that there are clearly times when we feel like an island—with sharks circling all around!

Just ask Saul. He had to have felt like the loneliest person in the world. He was young, energetic, bright, and ambitious. As a stellar student, he was a rising star among the Pharisees. Saul was savvy—he knew how to be in the right places at the right time. He knew how to get things done without getting his own hands dirty. Think about the stoning of Stephen which took place after he preached about Jesus and his resurrection. Was it simply coincidence that Saul was present to hold the cloaks for everyone else as they hurled stones at the young martyr? Or did Saul, perhaps, even orchestrate the brutal murder of Stephen? He certainly tormented the believers in Jerusalem and beyond, seizing them and having them thrown into prison, extracting blasphemous confessions from them, and advocating for their deaths.

On a roll, Saul obtained letters of introduction from Caiaphas, the high priest in Jerusalem to the Jewish leaders in Damascus endorsing Saul’s campaign to eradicate any followers of “The Way,” as the Christian faith was being known. Saul was a “fixer” and was going to “take care of the problem” of these followers of Jesus.

He certainly did not expect any problems as he made his way to Damascus. Things had gone well in Jerusalem and those heretics were on the run. But there was one problem—a big one—which was Jesus. Before he could reach Damascus, a bright light from the sky blinded Saul and sent him to the ground. A voice pleaded with him, “Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?”—a reminder that when any of God’s children suffer, God suffers. Then the voice identified itself as Jesus and instructed Saul to go ahead to Damascus where presumably an acquaintance named Judas took him in. With great misgivings, a believer named Ananias went to Saul to explain Jesus’ claim on him and pray for him. In one of the most dramatic stories in

scripture, Saul regained his sight and strength and became a follower of Jesus. Instead of terrorizing the synagogues, he began sharing his experience preaching about Jesus. In an ironic twist, some Jews in Damascus began plotting to kill him. His new friends helped him to escape and he headed for Jerusalem and the apostles.

Not surprising, the believers in Jerusalem did not trust Saul. He had left behind a trail of blood and terror and suddenly returned professing Jesus. He was not trusted and some of the Hellenists, the Greek believers, tried to kill him. Paul was an island in hostile waters.

He was not alone, however. A fellow named Joseph stood up to support Saul, but you would not have known him by that name. Everyone called him Barnabas, a nickname which meant something like “Son of Encouragement.” We first heard of him a few chapters back in the Book of Acts. As the believers were anticipating Jesus’ immediate return, they sold their possessions and gave the money to the apostles so that everyone would have their needs met. We are told that Barnabas sold some property and donated all of the money. We know he was originally from Cyprus and that later he would be tapped as the person to go to Antioch and share the Gospel there.

Barnabas stood up for Saul when no one else would. He told the other disciples about Saul’s experience with Jesus on the Damascus road. He shared with them how Saul had preached about Jesus all over that city. He vouched for Saul when no one wanted anything to do with him. Barnabas put his reputation on the line for Saul—and for God.

Perhaps you know how Saul must have felt. Most of us have, at one time or another, made choices and done things that hurt other people and alienated us. Even when we came to our senses and sought to make things right, some relationships were severely damaged. Others of us have known that frustration that comes when you try to do everything just right but to no avail. You work hard. You do what is right. You have the talent and skills and passion to do what is your heart’s desire, but you never get that break and discouragement sets in. Surely you know how Saul felt as he was trying to do what he believed he was called to do.

I wonder what would have happened if Barnabas had not supported Saul? What if no one had helped Saul escape Jerusalem when the Hellenists tried to kill him? What if Saul had decided that if the people who had actually

been with Jesus had no charity in their hearts for him then all of this “following Jesus” stuff must be false indeed? What if Saul had given up on sharing the Gospel altogether? No doubt God would have tapped someone else to share the Gospel, but could they have been the great influence that Saul—who became Paul the missionary—was in spreading the Gospel?

Fortunately, none of those things happened, in large part, I think, because Barnabas did stand up for Saul. Saul had an encourager in Barnabas and other people took note.

We could use more people like Barnabas in the world. We need more encouragers and fewer critics. William Arthur Ward said, "Flatter me, and I may not believe you. Criticize me, and I may not like you. Ignore me, and I may not forgive you. Encourage me, and I will not forget you."

The story is told of a young boy who desperately wanted to be a singer. Another aspiring vocalist heard this boy singing on a wharf and insisted that he audition for his voice teacher. Yet, when the teacher, Guglielmo Vergine, heard the boy sing, his judgment was harsh. The boy's voice, he said, was "too small and sounded like the wind whistling through the windows."¹ The boy's mother, however, believed that he could learn to sing. They were poor, but she said, "My boy, I'm going to make every sacrifice to pay for your voice lessons." The urging of another singer, the encouragement and sacrifice of a mother, and the patient skill of a teacher proved invaluable for the boy became famous as one of the world's greatest operatic tenors. We know him as Enrico Caruso.²

We all need encouragement, especially when we are chasing after dreams that we may never realize. We need people to nudge us in the right direction, to take a turn we might never have taken otherwise. And when it is obvious that we are headed down the right path but continuously encounter obstacles along the way, we need encouragers to help us believe in ourselves and get over those barriers.

A gentleman named Eric Butterworth told the following story:

¹Tom Frøkjær, "Caruso Biography Part I," *Homage to Enrico Caruso*; available online at: www.enricocaruso.dk/index-2.html.

²W. B. Knight, *Knight's Master Book of New Illustrations*.

A college professor had his sociology class go into the Baltimore slums to get case histories of 200 young boys. They were asked to write an evaluation of each boy's future. In every case the students wrote, "He hasn't got a chance." Twenty-five years later another sociology professor came across the earlier study. He had his students follow up on the project to see what had happened to these boys. With the exception of 20 boys who had moved away or died, the students learned that 176 of the remaining 180 had achieved more than ordinary success as lawyers, doctors and businessmen. The professor was astounded and decided to pursue the matter further. Fortunately, all the men were in the area and he was able to ask each one, "How do you account for your success?" In each case the reply came with feeling, "There was a teacher."

The teacher was still alive, so he sought her out and asked the old but still alert lady what magic formula she had used to pull these boys out of the slums into successful achievement. The teacher's eyes sparkled and her lips broke into a gentle smile. "It's really very simple," she said. "I loved those boys."³

The Apostle Paul, the same one who once was known as Saul and who found himself alone, distrusted, and under threat of death, wrote to his fellow believers and said, "Therefore encourage one another and build one another up, just as you are doing" (1 Thessalonians 5:11). The one who was encouraged became the encourager.

There was a Nebraska farmer who grew award-winning corn. Each year he entered his corn in the state fair where it won a blue ribbon. One year a newspaper reporter interviewed him and learned something interesting about how he grew it. The reporter discovered that the farmer shared his seed corn with his neighbors.

"How can you afford to share your best seed corn with your neighbors when they are entering corn in competition with yours each year?" the reporter asked.

³Eric Butterworth, "Love: The One Creative Force," *Chicken Soup for the Soul*.

“Why sir,” said the farmer, “didn’t you know? The wind picks up pollen from the ripening corn and swirls it from field to field. If my neighbors grow inferior corn, cross-pollination will steadily degrade the quality of my corn. If I am to grow good corn, I must help my neighbors grow good corn.”

If we are to have a good life, it makes sense that we will help other people have a good life as well.

We could use more folks like Barnabas in this world. But wait, I think I see a few! In fact, I see a room full of folks who have the potential this week to encourage someone else who is struggling to find their way in life. We are the beneficiaries of the courage and kindness of Barnabas toward Saul and many other people. The least we can do is to return the favor. Sons and daughters of encouragement: go out and love the world!

May 6, 2018

Prayer of Thanksgiving and Intercession

Each day of life is an opportunity for us to thank you for your goodness to us, Holy God, but in the beauty of springtime and the celebration of this Easter season, your generosity is especially apparent. The new life springing forth around us serves as a reminder that, like a nurturing parent, you take delight in your children and in all of creation. The variety of colors and textures and fragrances in every yard and field make evident your love of diversity and your artistry which dances with exuberance across every hill and valley, through every stream and forest. Warm breezes and gentle rains soothe and renew the earth just as your Holy Spirit offers the comfort and assurance of your abiding love for us. Every corner of our world bears the imprint of your creative handiwork and desire for life, and every creature sings forth your majesty. In the midst of such a bounty, Gracious God, how can we not be filled with wonder and gratitude as we recognize the abundance of gifts which give meaning to our lives and move our hearts to worship and praise?

Surrounded by such splendor and brimming with the possibilities of the joyful life you offer, we pray, Merciful God, that you would give us eyes to see and ears to hear not only the magnificence of your world but also the rich beauty of our human family. Attune our hearts to share the extravagant love we have known from you and to respond to others with a generosity of spirit because we have been shown great mercy. Teach us to sense your closeness in both the joys and challenges we face, believing your promise that you have chosen us, given yourself for us, and will never leave us. Help us to know, in the guidance of your word, in the companionship of one another, in the smallest expression of kindness or the grandest of miracles, that you abide with us and that your love is unending.

But even as we recognize and give thanks for the abundance of your gifts to us, Gracious God, we also acknowledge that we are broken, and our world is broken. Our hearts are fragile and bruised from assaults of disappointment, loneliness, and fear. Our minds are distracted and stressed by the demands of life. Our relationships are strained, our community is wounded, our nation is fractured because of misunderstanding, mistrust, apathy, and hatred. But at your table we are reminded, Loving God, that you have come to us in our brokenness, walking alongside us in the person of Christ. You have experienced our brokenness through his life and death, and in this Easter season, we rejoice that you have redeemed our brokenness through his resurrection, offering to us restored hope and new life. We rejoice once again in this good news, and we give thanks for this greatest of gifts, which is given to us through the Christ who satisfies our hunger and makes us whole, and in whose name we pray. Amen.

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