

**Holy Trinity Lutheran Church
Des Moines, Wash.
October 9, 2011**

“Different Gifts, Same Grace” – Week 2

Romans 12:8a

The Gift of Encouraging

“Be a Barnabus!”

**Hymns: 232 – 415 – *Ready Lord*
Closing: 494**

All Scripture quotations from the NIV

... if it is encouraging, let him encourage; if it is contributing to the needs of others, let him give generously; if it is leadership, let him govern diligently; if it is showing mercy, let him do it cheerfully.

Do you know the story of Joseph? No, I'm not repeating my sermon from two weeks ago and talking about the Joseph with the Technicolor dreamcoat who lived in Egypt. I'm also not talking about the Joseph who served as Jesus' earthly father. I'm talking about Joseph from Cyprus. Do you know his story? If you know it, I will be very impressed. Though most of you probably have little idea who Joseph from Cyprus is, he had quite the role in the early Christian church. His story and his contribution to the church are fundamental to what we are talking about this morning: The gift of encouraging.

Joseph from Cyprus was, not surprisingly, from the island of Cyprus which lies in the Mediterranean Sea. He was a descendant of Levi, which means that he was born into a position where he had responsibilities in the Jewish temple.

Sometime during his adult years, he converted to Christianity. The first we hear of Joseph in the Bible is that he sold a field that he owned in order to help other Christians. It was a great act of generosity and kindness, however, his effect on the early Christian church went much further than his generous offering.

You see, Joseph's main buddy once he became a Christian was a bit of a tormented fella. He came from a terrible past and it had a way of haunting him throughout his life, even though he knew it shouldn't. This friend often lamented about the fact that he was a wretched man and at times he even claimed to be the worst of sinners. Joseph's friend also struggled with a lifelong ailment that often affected his self-worth and his ability to do his job. This friend also spent his life in and out of jail, being falsely accused and maliciously attacked.

But despite all of that, this friend had some incredible gifts. And because of those gifts, he had an incredible job to do. Yet, his struggles had a way of dragging him down. He admittedly found himself not doing the things that he wanted to do, and the things he didn't want to do he kept on doing. And that is where Joseph's work and contribution to the early Christian church came in. He accompanied his friend as he travelled around and he encouraged him. Joseph had this wonderful ability to say just the right thing and pick a person up. With Joseph's help and the Lord's guidance, his friend, the Apostle Paul, accomplished much through his work as a missionary. It is fitting, then, that Joseph was given a nickname by those in the early Christian church, and perhaps you know him by that name. Joseph's nickname was Barnabas and it means "Son of Encouragement."

Through the apostle Barnabas, we see that the Lord often works in unique ways through the unique gifts that he gives. Barnabas was never the center of attention

in the early Christian church. He is not the headliner of the apostles that Peter or Paul often are. Perhaps, you didn't even know that he was an Apostle. However, you could argue that Barnabas' role and his gifts were invaluable to the early church. His seemingly simple ability to encourage is mentioned numerous times throughout the Book of Acts as something that was necessary to the work that was being done. Do you find that strange? Does it strike you that as Luke wrote about the Acts of the Apostles and the spread of the Christian church he would make mention of a man who did some encouraging? At first thought, that seems kind of like a sportswriter talking about a game winning score and making mention of the cheerleader on the sidelines. We probably wouldn't think of encouragement as having a dramatic impact on the church. But I think the fact that the Holy Spirit led Luke to repeatedly mention Barnabas and his encouraging attitude shows the importance of helping the church in small ways. And, in a way, it also highlights the fact that encouraging attitudes aren't always easy to find. With a quick glance at our lives, we can probably understand why a man would stand out if he was continually encouraging others.

As we take that look at our lives, we probably find that encouraging does not always come that easy. Why is that? I suppose the easiest excuse would be to say that often the words aren't there. As we see someone struggling, it can be difficult to know what to say. It can be intimidating to approach someone at a moment of pain or sadness while trying to give the right kind of help. A timid attitude can certainly keep our mouths from speaking when we see an opportunity.

At other times in life, however, I think we simply miss the openings to offer much-needed encouragement to others because we are too focused on ourselves to

see those opportunities. We become too focused on our own problems to realize that others are hurting and that they need help. We are too busy trying to figure out how we can succeed rather than taking time to encourage others to use their gifts. I, personally, wonder how many times in life I have missed an opportunity to help someone out because I was worrying about the many things that needed to get done in my life. And, finally, we must admit that we struggle to encourage others when they need it because we are downright sinful. Encouraging others does not always come easy because that isn't who we naturally are. Being positive when things might not be going that well is not an attitude the devil encourages us to have. He wants us to jump on the bandwagon of negativity. When someone is down, he wants us to pile on. When plans are made, he wants us to pick it apart and nail the flaws, rather than offering an encouraging word. And what the devil wants, he often gets in regards to sinners like us. It is easy for us to find that attitude of discouragement at home, at work, at school, and at church.

And whether it be a timid attitude to shy away; or a selfish attitude which misses the chances; or a negative attitude that tears apart; there are people that each of us knows that needs encouragement and yet they are not getting it from us.

So, how can it change? How can we get rid of the timid attitudes, the selfish attitudes, the negative attitudes. How can we become better Barnabas', how can we join Joseph in being sons and daughters of encouragement?

The easy answer would be to look at what allowed Joseph of Cyprus to be a Barnabas. Acts 11:24 tells us something insightful about Barnabas. It says there that "he was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and faith."

It is a pretty easy answer, isn't it? And it shouldn't surprise us at all. The Holy Spirit dwelling in Barnabas' heart produced love, it produced kindness, it gave him the ability to be a man of encouragement in a negative world. That fruit of the Holy Spirit came out because Barnabas fed his faith on a consistent basis. He nourished his soul with the goodness of the Gospel and the Holy Spirit allowed his faith and his fruits of faith to grow.

And ultimately, it was the object of his faith that allowed Barnabas to serve in any way. The work of Jesus Christ and the forgiveness that he gave to Barnabas allowed him to be an optimist. It changed his worldview. The good news changed the way that Barnabas viewed any kind of struggle. It filled his life with an overwhelming joy and we see that in the ways that he served as an encourager for the church.

Though Barnabas probably thought he wasn't doing anything special, the Holy Spirit chose to note in many places of Scripture ways in which Barnabas served in ways that would encourage the early Christian church. In Acts 9, Barnabas stood up in support of Paul when the other Apostles were doubting whether the freshly converted former persecutor was actually on their side. In Acts 11, we hear that Paul sent Barnabas to the church in Antioch for the specific purpose of offering them encouragement to persevere in their faith. In Acts 15, we hear how Barnabas stood up for Mark when Paul had doubts about him, again encouraging a disciple of Christ to not give up.

Time and time again, we see Barnabas encouraging others through his words, his actions and his life.

As we look at our spiritual gifts and the ways in which we have been blessed and the ways in which we can serve, think about your ability to be a Barnabas. It is something

that each and every one of us have in us. We can encourage because, like Barnabas, we have the Holy Spirit working in our hearts. He works daily in our hearts to kill that negativity of our sinful nature. We can encourage because, like Barnabas, we know what Christ has done for us. He has taken away our sins. He has given us the assurance of eternal salvation. He has given us every reason to be optimists. Because of what we know, we can offer encouragement in even the most difficult of situations. Through the way that we live, we can show the joy that the Gospel brings into life.

As you go out, look for every opportunity to speak words of encouragement to those who need it. The wonderful assurance is what we have at our fingertips. What you have to offer people is not just a pat on the back or an empty, "Things will be okay." You have the Word of God behind every word of encouragement that you have to offer. You have the assurances of God's promises to point to in every time of hardship. Use the gift that you have been given. Proclaim the encouraging Word that Christ offers the answer to every problem in life. Be filled with the Holy Spirit and let never failing encouragement of the Gospel radiate from your life as you use your gifts to be a Barnabas! Amen.