

Preached by Dr. Syl Lorenzo Shannon
Bush Hill Presbyterian Church
Alexandria, Virginia
April 19, 2009: Second Sunday of Easter

Psalm 62:1–2, 5–8
John 20:19–31
Acts 4:32–35

ROCK: *An Encouragement*

Text: Joseph, whose nickname was "Barnabas" (which means "Son of Comfort" or "the disciple who encourages," a Levite born in Cyprus, sold a field that he owned, brought the money and made an offering of it to the apostles. (Acts 4:36–37)

The idea of a Rock being the sign of encouragement was born on Easter Sunday in front of the communion table at Bush Hill Presbyterian Church. Pat Futato allowed that "the stones (you see on the communion table) are taken from the closet for Easter Day and then thrown in a closet corner until the next Easter." I knew in that moment that I had to lift up the rock—the stone—as a worthy symbol.

Actually, it was done by the apostles in the first century when they tagged a man named Joseph and called him "Barnabas." This sermon will tell you a bit about the actions of Barnabas. This sermon will also lift up a "modern day Barnabas." This business of reaching out and helping others goes on during our day, too. There was a black general, Roscoe Cartwright, whose nickname was "Rock," and his last assignment was as Comptroller for Seventh Army in Europe. Every few weeks "Rock" Cartwright took it upon himself to call each and every African American officer stationed in Germany, Belgium, or France. (I think he probably called two or three officers each day and inquired about their work and their families, as Colonel Homer Pettit and I concluded). General Rock Cartwright was an encourager and a care giver of the first magnitude. Today the mentoring organization called ROCKS, INC. bears his name and gives scholarships to outstanding ROTC cadets each spring.

Walt Hollis of our congregation can bear witness to these facts about General Cartwright. I was the first chaplain of the ROCKS and conducted my first dual funeral for Rock and Gloria Cartwright on 9 December 1974. They were killed in a plane crash near Dulles on the Sunday evening after Thanksgiving 1974. The thing I want you to remember this morning is: when folks live a life of constant service and neighborly behavior—some body will pay attention and hopefully follow their example.

Remember that old cowboy song, *Home on the Range*? It sings of a place "*Where seldom is heard a discouraging word, and the skies are not cloudy all day.*" Well, where is that place? Lord knows there is no shortage of discouraging words in our lives today. All you have to do is check the daily news to get a whole passel of them. One man says that he won't even watch the nighttime news, because it's too much *bad* news right before going to sleep. He says that it is not that he doesn't care what's going on in the world, but that his energies are too low at that time of day to handle more bad news.

Discouraging words are draining. What's more, we would like to be able to offer some real encouragement to others. In fact, to do so is a real Christian ministry.

Barnabas

But where does encouragement come from? Often, it comes from other people. Think about the first-century Christians. According to our reading, "There was not a needy person among them." That's because those who owned property sold it and handed the proceeds to the apostles for distribution "to each as any had need." With that kind of news, those early Christians could sleep without a troubled mind.

If we read the next two verses beyond those assigned for today, we find the text I chose for today. Barnabas is one of those people who sold property and gave the money to the apostles for the good of others. He plays an important role in the book of Acts as a companion on Paul's first preaching tour; but we first meet him here as a believer who demonstrates the depth of his faith by giving his money away for the common good. In Acts, he is eventually overshadowed by Paul, but Barnabas was a believer long before Paul was on the scene. Barnabas was the person who brought the newly converted Paul to the larger church community (*Acts 11:25–26*). Barnabas actually was a nickname. The man's given name was Joseph. But the apostles called him Barnabas, because it meant "Son of Encouragement." What a great name. Barnabas must have had a real gift for encouraging people when they needed it. In fact, the passage for today tells us that Barnabas sold a field he owned and gave the money to the church to help those members who were in need.

Imagine someone in our day and time selling his property to help Bush Hill Presbyterian Church with the new Building Program. Imagine someone giving up their land to build a senior citizens retirement center. Just imagine a world where people actually put the needs of others ahead of the grasping and holding of more and more for self.

Sometime later, after the persecution of Christians caused many believers to leave their hometowns and settle elsewhere, the Christians started telling their new neighbors about Jesus, and some were converted. When the apostles in Jerusalem heard of this, they sent Barnabas to help, and the Bible points out that Barnabas *encouraged* these new converts to remain true to the Lord (*Acts 11:23*).

The ability to truly encourage other people is not a gift given to everyone. If it were, nobody would have bothered nicknaming Barnabas, because his ability would have been so common. No, he was noted as an encourager precisely because the gift is fairly uncommon. Nonetheless, all of us who claim the name of Christ Jesus can notch up our ability to encourage others. After all, contrary to popular pessimism, no news is not good news. *Good* news is good news, and if we who know the Good News of the Gospel and don't spread it around, who will? Well, how can we boost our **encourager quotient**? Glad you asked. Let's talk specifics:

Build people up: First, we can build people up. In Ephesians, Paul wrote, “Let no evil talk come out of your mouths, but only what is useful for building up, as there is need, so that your words may give grace to those who hear (*Ephesians 4:29*).” What good and solid advice! Say what is useful for building people up. It is easy to find things to tear people down, but God's word here tells to do just the opposite.

One of the things many congregations are very good at is building children up. Most of the time, when a child does something in church—such as sing a solo, or make a speech—adults are quick to lavish praise. Kids need that. In school, often, it is only the “stars,” those who excel in sports or music or academics, who get the praise. But in the church, we hand it out more freely. And that should be a model for how we deal with adults in the other areas of our life, too. A lot of people are carrying big loads on their shoulders—or have heavy hearts. A word of praise can be very encouraging.

When I was remembering Gloria and Rock Cartwright to a junior officer the other day, I said you know Gloria would declare to military wives ... “Stand by your man!” and she modeled this demeanor day in and day out. Rock saw the good in every officer. He chastised in private and praised in public. What if all leaders knew how to build up? Next time a good word about someone passes you by, why not latch onto it and pass it along to that individual? What if Christians were known as people who surprise others with good news?

Pray for people: Another form Christian encouragement can take is prayer. There are people who contact others periodically just to say, “*I'm praying for you.*” The only agenda in these calls is encouragement. These conversations are rarely longer than three minutes. But the lift they give can last for days. You can pray for people and let them know you are doing so. To pray for others means we have to think about who needs our prayers. As a result, we end up thinking about others maybe more than we would do if we didn't pray. So prayer helps us to see those in need.

Several years ago, Lloyd John Ogilvie, the then newly appointed U.S. Senate Chaplain, wrote that the previous year had been the most difficult one of his life. His wife had undergone five major surgeries, radiation treatment and chemotherapy. Several key staff teammates moved on to other assignments, which added pressure and uncertainty to Chaplain Ogilvie's work. Problems which he could have tackled with gusto under normal circumstances seemed to loom in all directions. Discouragement lurked around every corner. Prayer was no longer a contemplative luxury, but the only way to survive.

He adds:

My own intercessions were multiplied by the prayers of others. Friendships were deepened as I was forced to allow people to assure me with words I had preached for years. No day went by without a conversation, letter or phone call giving me love and hope. The greatest discovery is that I can have joy when I don't feel like it.

[see David Walls, *Finding God in the Dark* (Victor Books, 1993)]

State the vision: We forget sometimes, in the midst of discouragement why we've made certain choices and decisions. "Why did I ever decide to become a teacher?" "Why didn't I stay single?" "Why did I ever agree to teach a Sunday school class?" "Why did we decide on this Building Campaign when the economy is in such lousy shape?" "Why didn't I take that job which promised more money?" And so forth. Sometimes it helps to be reminded of the view of life we had when we committed ourselves to the directions we have chosen.

I said to some of friends some years ago that we need not close Boggs Academy, the last surviving Presbyterian boarding school controlled by African Americans. If everyone who ever studied there would just contribute \$5 per month the school could function. A lack of faith or maybe a lack of leadership keep this from coming to the end I sought. There will be those like Barnabas who will sell something they value to ensure a larger value—the new building for a new era. However, what a statement of faith and direction it is if every family simply gave \$5 per month for the Building Fund. State the vision—and keep on stating the vision until more and more people see it.

I can imagine the apostle Paul, after being flogged and run out of yet another town saying, "What made me think I could make them understand about Jesus?" and Barnabas gently reminding him about the time Paul saw the Lord in a vision on the road to Damascus. The writer to the Hebrews says, "Let us consider how to provoke one another to love and good deeds (*Hebrews 10:24*)." Sometimes we just need someone to tell us again about the meaning of following Christ. Or as my grandmother use to say: "*I can show you better than I can tell you.*" And believe me, she would be one of those who gave \$5 per Sunday for the Building Fund and \$5 per Sunday for the Todee Mission. She may not have it in her widow's mite, but one of her five children or fourteen grandchildren would not let her show up on Sunday without her portion.

Offer direct words of encouragement: Wilfred Reynolds, a Christian writer from Illinois, tells of being in the public library one day when he was disturbed by a woman at a nearby table who was talking to herself in loud tones and gesturing freely. She did not appear to be focused on anything in particular, but her tone became more and more strident. Clearly, the woman was not in touch with reality. Eventually the woman got up and left, making little chopping motions with her hands, as though giving a speech.

It happened that while all this was taking place, a young man came in, sat down at the same table with Reynolds and saw what was going on. This young man had a physical handicap—probably cerebral palsy—which contorted his facial features and made him walk with difficulty.

After the ranting woman left, there was an awkward moment that seemed to invite comment. Reynolds turned to the young man and said, "I imagine people like that have a lot of loneliness. It is likely they need human companionship an awful lot, but probably drive it away. It is a vicious circle."

At that moment, seeing the physical difficulties of the young man, it dawned on Reynolds that it was insensitive to address those remarks to this particular person. But the young man responded:

Everybody has their problems. But every time you stand up under a hard experience, you're a little tougher and better able to handle the other things down the road. The trouble is, lots of people give up too easily. They give up and get buried under it, and they expect someone else to solve their problems for them. If God wants anything for people, God wants them to keep on going. I think that's where God's inspiration comes in, in knowing that God wants you to keep trying ... no matter what.

Reynolds writes that he didn't know how the young man knew he [Reynolds] needed to be encouraged just then, but somehow he did ("The Fabric Within," *Friends Journal*, March 15, 1982).

Apparently this man—living every moment, every minute, with a body that would not serve him very well and that made him the object of pity—had learned something that made him a Barnabas, a son of encouragement.

With the ups and downs life brings, there are times when all of us can best fulfill Christ's call to love our neighbor by being a Barnabas to them—offering the encouraging word. And there are other times when we are the ones who need to hear that word. For those of you who may be in that position today, let me be a Barnabas for you.

Pick up your rock—twirl it around in your hands. Remember: the Rock that is God shelters and steadies us. It is God, and God alone, on which we are meant to build the foundation of our lives, as well as our churches. Place your rock on the dressing table, or the breakfast table or maybe your desk at work. Look to the rock and remember. Say with the psalmist: "He [God] alone is my rock and my salvation, my fortress, I shall never be shaken (*Psalm 62:2*)."

Don't give up. Don't you give up.

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