

I want to sing a little chorus for you this morning and I want you to join in when you think you know it:

Home, home on the range,  
Where the deer and the antelope play;  
Where seldom is heard a discouraging word  
And the skies are not cloudy all day.

I'm not sure that the words to this old chorus apply to the world in which we are living today. It seems to me that we hear more discouraging words than we do encouraging words.

In our instant news and comment society encouraging words are few and far between. Turn on CNN, FOXNews or MSNBC and you'll hear anything but encouraging words. Most of the time, you have two or more people casting malicious and accusatory words at one another in an attempt to disparage the other side.

Sadly, we don't live in the idyllic world of 1870's Kansas where seldom was heard a discouraging word. But as disciples of Jesus you and I are called to change the world! We are called to end the practice of discouraging words by invoking words of encouragement.

As Paul said to the Ephesians: "Do not use foul or abusive language. Let everything you say be good and helpful, so that your words will be an encouragement to those who hear them." 4:29 NLT

Let's take a moment to practice that. Would you turn to the person next to you and offer them a word of encouragement?

Doesn't that make you feel good?

As people called to be a blessing in the world we need to learn to bless others by practicing encouragement. Last week, we discussed the element of touch and its place in letting others know that they are accepted. The next two elements of the blessing spoken words and expressing high value are combined in this simple idea of encouragement.

There is one person in scripture that epitomizes the idea of encouragement. His name is Joseph (no, not the one with the techni-color dream coat); but everyone called him by his nickname, Barnabas. The name Barnabas literally means, son of Encouragement.

That leads me to ask you a question, "What do people think when they see you coming?" Do they think here comes someone who is a blessing to be around, or do they think 'No, not him! He is always so negative!'

If we are going to be a blessing to others we can learn three things from Barnabas.

1. An Encourager Freely Gives of Their Resources

Read Acts 4:32, 34-37

It is significant that our introduction to this man who would play a vital role in the early church comes at a time when disciples were moved to sell everything they had so that there were no unmet needs among their fellow disciples. I think Joseph (Barnabas) gets singled out, not because his gift was so large; but because his gift demonstrated his character.

People who give freely of their resources demonstrate that they are others focused. It is interesting to note that the story in the book of Acts which follows is about Ananias and Sapphira. You may remember them as the couple who brought the proceeds from the sale of a property to the disciples-just like Barnabas. But rather than giving freely of all the proceeds from the sale they sought to deceive the disciples by keeping back a portion for themselves. The result of their deception was that they dropped dead at the feet of the disciples.

Barnabas was different. His focus was on others and how his resources could benefit them. What benefit Barnabas enjoyed was the knowledge that his generosity made a tangible difference in the lives of others.

Barnabas did something tangible for others. Barnabas blessed others by meeting a need.

Someone in my life who did that was a woman in Juniata County named Naomi Steward. She gave substantial gifts to help our church start a Nursery school. Her gifts were an encouragement to push on and make our dream a reality!

You've done that in your gifts to Derry Street through the Easter Offering. Do you remember me telling you about how excited and encouraged the church staff was to her about your generosity? An encourager gives freely of their resources and brings hope and a blessing to others in need.

Barnabas demonstrated the meaning of Jesus statement from the Sermon on the Mount: Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also. (Matthew 6:21) Barnabas' heart was out there with others. He saw a need and he used what God had given him to bless others.

Think about how you can apply this in relationship to people you need to encourage. What resource, what treasure do you have to offer to others in their need? It could be:

time, finances, skills, knowledge... How can you meet the need in another person's life and so provide a blessing of encouragement to them?

## 2. An Encourager Accepts You Where You Are

Barnabas' real claim to fame comes in this next passage from Acts 9:26-31. Listen to what happens following the conversion of Saul- the man who would become Paul- the greatest missionary of the early church; but at this point was still viewed as the chief persecutor of the disciples.

Barnabas stepped in where no one else was willing to go. Saul, the man who had overseen the first Christian martyr was now back in Jerusalem claiming to have come over from the dark side. No one wanted anything to do with Saul- there was no grace coming from the disciples in the direction of Saul.

But Barnabas wasn't about to let the early church miss out on this man whose knowledge of scripture and zeal could be put to work for the early church. Barnabas let grace be his guide when he brought Saul into the inner circle of the apostles.

When no one else would accept Saul; Barnabas accepted this outsider and brought him inside the circle. Grace led Barnabas to accept Saul and as a result the church experienced a time of peace in which it was able to grow. None of that happens apart from Barnabas being willing to accept Saul where he was and lead him to where he needed to be.

Let me ask you to think about how you can encourage someone who is on the outside looking in. In many cases we can be the person who lives out grace when no one else does.

That leads us to the next point.

## 3. An Encourager Gives Others a Second Chance

Barnabas and Paul were a great team. Together they began the great missionary journeys which led to the spread of the early church. But as sometimes is the case, even the best of friends have disagreements about how to go about a task.

That was the case with Paul and Barnabas. In Acts 15 we read that Paul and Barnabas decided to return to the churches they had planted during their first missionary journey. It was a great plan, until Barnabas- the son of Encouragement- suggested taking along a young man named John Mark. That suggestion led to a sharp disagreement between Paul and Barnabas. You see John Mark had deserted them on their earlier journey. Paul wasn't about to take another chance on John Mark. So Paul chose to take Silas

and go in one direction while Barnabas gave John Mark a second chance and went off to the island of Cyprus.

You see an Encourager is always willing to give someone- even a failure- a second chance. The scripture is silent from this point on about the work of Barnabas and John Mark, instead focusing on the work of Paul and Silas.

But one reference later in the book of 2 Timothy reveals the rest of the story. When Paul was in prison in Rome he asked Timothy to bring John Mark to Rome. John Mark, a failure at one point in the eyes of Paul, but encouraged by the faithfulness of Barnabas later became someone that Paul would come to count on in his time of need.

What made the difference? I like to read between the lines and see the work of an encourager named Barnabas.

Encouragers are willing to extend grace and bless others with a second chance. I see that in the LAHMBs ministry. After talking with several of the young women and men last week I saw that we were giving them what very few others were willing to give them- a second chance. There were smiles all over the FLC because people who felt that no one would give them a second chance were being encouraged and blessed.

So what about you? How are you seeking to bless others by offering encouragement in a world that lacks encouragement?

May I offer a suggestion of one way to do that this week? Find a way to encourage the teachers and the support staff in our school district. As disciples of Jesus we need to be the encouragement that these folks need right now.

Imagine what will happen when we begin providing encouragement to others.

People will be resourced so that they can be encouraged to dream dreams and so that those dreams can be fulfilled.

People will know that they are accepted. The encouragement of being accepted tells someone that their life is of value and they have meaning and purpose. Those are the people who when blessed become a blessing to others.

And best of all, people will rise above their failures to become valuable in the lives of others. Think about it this way; the ripples of your encouragement will flow out time and time again into more lives. Those who know the blessing of a second chance tend to be people who pass that blessing of the second chance on to others.