

**Indispensable Witnesses\*:  
You Need an Encourager – Barnabas  
Acts 11:19-26  
Second Sunday after Pentecost  
June 14, 2009  
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Omaha, Nebraska**

Last week we began our summer sermon series on “Indispensable Witnesses”—those relationships that nourish and support and guide our spiritual journeys. We call these people “Witnesses” because *with* is the word of relationship, and Witnesses travel *with* us in our journey, are in spiritual relationship *with* us.

If you are a little anal-retentive, like I am, it may be tempting, once we are done with the list of these Witnesses, to go down the list and make sure you have at least one of each. Jethro—check. Barnabas—check. Deborah—check. Rhoda—oops. No Rhoda in my life—gotta get me one of those.

This would be a mistake. You aren’t in the recruiting business. As Leonard Sweet, whose book is the basis for this sermon series says, “You don’t need to hunt down and trap each one of these Witnesses. Most often...like all good things in life [they won’t] come from the directions you expect them to.” (*Sweet, p. 25*) Rather we need to be prayerfully open and receptive to whom God may be sending into our lives. Writer Frederick Buechner puts it this way, “In his holy flirtation with the world, God occasionally drops a pocket handkerchief. These handkerchiefs are called saints.” (*Beyond Words: Daily Readings in the ABC’s of Faith, p. 352*) Witness is sort of another word for saint, in the New Testament understanding of the word. In the New Testament, saints aren’t extraordinarily holy; they are simply followers of Christ.

Today's pocket-handkerchief is Barnabas, because we all REALLY need an encourager

Last week, we talked about Jethro and how we all need a butt kicker. But where Jethros are tough and demanding and blunt, Barnabases offer gentle words. But they are truthful words. Barnabases don't flatter us; they tell the truth. But in doing so they help us claim the truth not just of our shortcomings, but of our strengths and abilities.

You rarely see encouragement listed as a spiritual gift. You see preaching and teaching and prayer and administration and wisdom and tongues and so on, but much more rarely encouragement. Too bad, because encouragement can be such an important and vital spiritual gift within the community of faith.

Clearly, it was Barnabas's gift. In fact, it was so clearly his gift that it became his name. We first meet Barnabas in the fourth chapter of Acts, which says of him, "*There was a Levite, a native of Cyprus, Joseph, to whom the apostles gave the name Barnabas (which means "son of encouragement").*"

Wow! Imagine your words of encouragement (which can also be translated "comfort") being so powerful, so moving, so strengthening, so, well, *encouraging*, that your friends name you Son or Daughter of Encouragement.

That was Barnabas. He isn't a prominent player in the book of Acts—we mainly know him because he traveled with the Apostle Paul who was one of the stars of the early church—but when you follow Barnabas' life, you see how, over and over, he played the role of encourager at vital times in the life of the young movement that came to be known as Christianity.

As we saw in today's scripture, Barnabas welcomed new converts with joy and encouraged the struggling young churches of the area.

After Saul the persecutor of Christians had his epiphany on the road to Damascus and in that instant became a follower of Jesus, the early Christians were understandably still suspicious of him. It was Barnabas who vouched for Saul—later known as Paul—and who went with him to accompany him and encourage him in his missionary journeys.

Later on, Barnabas had a serious disagreement with Paul and they parted ways. Barnabas wanted to take John Mark with them on one of their missionary journeys, but Paul was adamantly opposed. Earlier, Mark had deserted them at a crucial point in their travels, and Paul wanted no more to do with him. Barnabas, who was also John Mark's cousin, went after the young man, bucked him up, and insisted on giving him a second chance. Characteristically for each of the men, Paul was fixated on John Mark's defects; Barnabas was fixated on his possibilities.

And it was Barnabas, not Paul, who was eventually vindicated. In fact, Paul himself came to see this, because when he was in prison he asked for John Mark to come to him there. John Mark went on to become the presumed writer of the gospel of Mark, the very earliest of the gospels. And all because Barnabas offered to him the gift of encouragement.

Not only do we all need a Barnabas in our lives, we probably need more than one. We receive encouragement in different ways and daily encounter different opportunities to offer encouragement to others.

There is the encouragement that comes from those anonymous Barnabases whose paths cross ours only for moment, but who in that instant offer much needed words or

gestures of support and encouragement. Our son Peter has gotten interested in triathlons, and last year we went to watch him compete in his first event. Of course, we cheered like crazy whenever we saw him, but we—and all the spectators—also cheered for all the other competitors. We especially cheered for those who lagged far behind, the ones bringing up the rear, the ones who looked so exhausted you worried that they couldn't go another step. "Hang in there," we would shriek. "You can do it!"

You may have run across this kind of Barnabas, even if you aren't an athlete! The salesperson who perks you up by saying something like, "I love you earrings" on a day when you feel awful. The person in the crowded airport lounge who sees how tired you are and says, "Here, take my seat." The cheerful waiter who goes out of their way to take care of you. These are not real relationships, of course, but sometimes that moment of kindness picks us up and keeps us going.

There are big brother or big sister Barnabases. They're the ones we turn to when everything is falling apart. We know they'll hold our hands, pat us on the back, and offer words of support and love. They tell us that we *will* get through this, and may offer gentle words of wisdom on what we need to do next. But mostly, they just encourage us through the dark times until we begin to see the light.

Then there are the Barnabases in our lives who support and encourage us with their prayers. Two weeks ago was a difficult time in ministry for Robyn and me, and it meant so much to us to know that many of you not only recognized the pain of that week for us, but also surrounded us and upheld us with your prayers. After it was over, someone asked me, "How did you do it?" and I replied simply, "Because of everyone's prayers."

In the most difficult times in my lives, I know that it is the prayers of others that have gotten me through. That is why I take so seriously the power and importance of prayer, and why we all need Barnabases who pray for us. And why we all need to *be* a Barnabas who prays for others.

We also need a Barnabas who laughs with us, and helps us to laugh at ourselves and at the rich absurdity of life.

The General Minister and President (GMP) of our denomination is a remarkable woman named Sharon Watkins. I was serving on the denomination's General Board four years ago when she was named to that extraordinarily challenging position. The morning after the Board had voted, several women ministers gathered with Sharon for an impromptu breakfast. To have a *woman*, as GMP was something many of us had wondered would happen in our lifetime. As we talked about the difficulties Sharon would face, we began to talk about how we could support her. One of the women said, "This is what I'm going to do. Once a month I'm going to send you the funniest card I can find. I figure there's nothing you're going to need more than a good laugh."

And that's true for all of us—there are times the encouragement that does our hearts the most good is just a good laugh.

These are a few ways that we can receive and give encouragement. What a difference encouragement offered at the right time can make! It's like the story Rod Cooper tells in "The Kiss of Encouragement." As a boy, painter Benjamin West loved to paint but his mother tended to view it as a waste of time. One day, alone at home, he pulled out all his paints and ending up making an enormous mess. He planned to get it all cleaned up before his mother came back, but he was so engrossed in painting that time

got away from him. When his mother came home early, he waited in trepidation for her to scold him for the mess all over her previously pristine kitchen. Instead, she picked up his painting and said, "My, what a beautiful painting of your sister." Then she gave him a kiss on the cheek and walked away. With that kiss, West says, he became a painter.

Each of us is trying to paint a beautiful picture with our lives, but sometimes we make an enormous mess instead. When we do, we all need the kiss of encouragement. That is our calling as people of God. We are all of us called to offer the kiss of encouragement, to be Barnabases, to be sons and daughters of encouragement. And this church, like every church, is called to be a community of encouragement and hope and comfort, to one another and to the world.

\*Sermon series based on 11 *Indispensable Relationships You Can't Be Without* by Leonard Sweet