The Barnabas Effect

Vienna Presbyterian Church
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Acts 11:19-30

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Someone asked the late conductor of the New York Philharmonic Orchestra, Leonard Bernstein, a question: “What is the most difficult instrument to play?” Without hesitation, he answered, “Second fiddle. I can find plenty of first violins but to find someone who plays second violin with as much enthusiasm, now that’s a challenge. If there is no one to play second violin, there is no harmony.”

The job of first violins is to play the melody or tune of a song. Harmony functions to support the melody. Harmony gives depth and texture to a song.

In the book of Acts, some Christians play first violin. They serve a critical leadership role. Peter and Paul are prime example of first-tier leaders.

There are plenty of second violin people in Acts. These second-tier leaders play an indispensable support role. We are now eleven chapters into Acts and the name of one second-tier leader keeps showing up. His birth name is Joseph. Every time Joseph shows up, good things happen.

We first meet Joseph in Acts 4. He participates in a relief effort with other believers in the Jerusalem church who sell their property and possessions to give to people in need (4:35). Joseph sells a field that belongs to him and gives the proceeds to the apostles. The apostles give him the nickname Barnabas meaning “son of encouragement.” His generosity encourages other believers to do likewise.

The second time we encounter Barnabas is in Acts 9, the story of Saul’s conversion (his Christian name is Paul).
Members of the Jerusalem church are suspect about Saul’s conversion. Maybe, in truth, he is a spy. Barnabas is the only one who stands up for Saul. He plays his encourager role well.

The third time Barnabas shows up is in today’s reading of Acts 11. A new church comes into being at Antioch, the third largest city of the Roman Empire. What is distinctive about this church is its multi-cultural dimension. It is comprised mainly of Gentile Christians in stark contrast to Jewish Christians in the Jerusalem church.

This Jerusalem church sends Barnabas to investigate. After all, these Gentile Christians are newbies to the faith. They have no religious background and undoubtedly, misconceptions about God. When Barnabas sees evidence of God’s grace in them, he rejoices. “He encourages them to remain true to the Lord with all their hearts” (11:23).

In verse 24, Luke describes Barnabas as “a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and faith.” He recruits Paul, living in Tarsus, some 120 miles away to join him in teaching these new disciples the essentials of the faith. Their investment pays off. We read about a coming famine in Jerusalem in verses 17-20. These Gentile Christians in Antioch pass the hat for poor Jewish Christians living in Jerusalem. Do you know how rare it is for Gentile Christians in the first century to send relief for Jewish Christians? Barnabas is the one who makes it happen.

In Acts 13, we read about Barnabas for a fourth time. The Antioch church commissions Barnabas and Saul for mission service. At the outset of the chapter, Luke ranks them in order of importance, Barnabas first and Saul second (13:2). Later in the chapter, Luke reverses the order, listing Paul first and Barnabas second (13:42). In other places in the
same chapter, Luke simply refers to “Paul and his companions” (13:13). Barnabas does not need to be first. He can play second fiddle.

Our final reference to Barnabas in Acts appears at the end of chapter 15. Paul and Barnabas almost come to blows on whether to take John Mark on their second missionary journey. Paul lobbies to leave John Mark behind since he bailed on them earlier (13:13), while Barnabas wants to give him a second chance. Despite their 15-year friendship, Barnabas does not back down from Paul. He stands up for John Mark in the same way he vouched for Paul earlier in Acts 9:27. They part company over it. Paul takes Silas to Asia Minor while Barnabas and John Mark set sail for Cyprus.

Our story has a happy ending. John Mark lives up to the hopes Barnabas has for him. Paul mentions John Mark by name in his second letter to Timothy as someone “helpful to his ministry” (4:11; Colossians 4:14).

Everywhere Barnabas shows up in Acts, he encourages: Acts 4, he encourages the 12 Apostles; Acts 9, he encourages Paul; Acts 11, he encourages believers in Antioch to remain true to the Lord; Acts 13, he encourages Paul to take the lead; Acts 15, he encourages John Mark by giving him a second chance. We need to be sons and daughters of encouragement.

It reminds me of a story about the devil having a yard sale. He is auctioning off some of the tools of his trade. The tools have steep price tags—jealousy, pride, lying and anger. Over to one side is a tool with a high price tag, higher than all the rest. The label of the tool is marked DISCOURAGEMENT.
When asked about it, the devil had this to say: “It’s more useful to me than any other tool. When I can’t bring down my victims with the rest of these tools, I use discouragement, because so few people realize that it belongs to me.”

I get discouraged. Don’t you? Sermons fall flat. People argue and complain. Dreams go up in smoke. Plans go down in flames. Discouragement is a tool the devil uses to bring us down.

I have three recommendations about what to do when we become discouraged. These recommendations constitute the “so what” moment in today’s sermon.

My first recommendation when discouraged is to redouble our efforts to seek after God. God rewards those who earnestly seek him. God says through Jeremiah, “You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart” (29:13).

Discouragement is not from God. Discouragement is a tool the devil uses to bring us down. Joshua 1:9: “Do not be afraid. Do not be discouraged, for the Lord our God is with you wherever you go.” We are never alone. God fights our battles with us.

My second suggestion is to identify people in your life that encourage you. Spend time with such people. Limit your availability with people who discourage you. Do not allow the Debbie Downers and Kevin Killjoys of the world to bring you down.

My third recommendation is to practice the biblical injunction to encourage one another.
Offering encouragement is fundamental to our Christian mission. We read in Hebrews, “Let us consider how we may spur one another on to love and good deeds, not giving up meeting together as some are in the habit of doing, but encouraging one another and all the more as you see the Day appearing” (10:24-25).

Encourage consists of the prefix “en,” which means “to put into,” added to the root word courage. Literally, encourage means to put courage into someone. We come together each week to put courage into each other to live for Christ.

It is easy to criticize and snipe at people who annoy us. Our first order of priority is to build each other up, not tear each other down. Paul’s letters repeatedly underscore the value of building each other up in the faith.

I am not talking about throwing off a casual compliment. Offering encouragement entails speaking truthful, helpful words. It is more than cheerleading. Sometimes, it can lead to confrontation and dispute.

John Watson was a 19th century Scottish author and theologian whose pen name was Ian MacLaren. He wrote, “Be kind, for everyone you meet is fighting a hard battle.”

People need encouragement. You may not think so Sunday morning when people look put-together. Yet underneath, there is so much pain and suffering.

We are talking All-In this fall. All-In for the person of Jesus, the body of Jesus and the work of Jesus. Barnabas was All-In. He was willing to go anywhere, give anything and help anyone. Do not underestimate the power of encouragement.
Larry Crabb is a well-known Christian psychologist, a popular conference and seminar leader. Early in his life, Larry struggled with stuttering. Sometimes, even speaking his first name Larry could be an ordeal.

It was customary in Larry’s childhood church for youth to participate in the communion service by leading the church in prayer. Feeling the pressure to participate, Larry marshalled up the courage one Sunday to pray aloud. He stuttered over words and prayed what he thought was a confusing, incoherent prayer. When he finished, he vowed never to speak or pray in public again.

After the service, Larry bolted for the door. An elder in the church stopped him on his way out. “Larry, there is one thing I want you to know. Whatever you do for the Lord, I am behind you one thousand percent.”

Larry looks back on it as a turning point in his life. Whenever Larry tells this story, even after all these years, he still chokes up. “These words were life to me. They had power. They reached deep into my being.”

Near the end of his first letter to the Thessalonians, Paul writes, “Therefore, encourage each other and build each other up” (5:11).

I’m giving you a homework assignment this week. Identify one or two people in your life to encourage. Speak an encouraging word. Write a note. Send a supportive email or text. It may be to a family member or friend, classmate or work colleague, teacher, coach or instructor. Do not underestimate the power of encouragement.