

Sidekicks of Scripture: Barnabas 4/15/18 Rev. Luke Ham

This morning, we are continuing in our sermon series is entitled *The Sidekicks of Scripture*. In these sermons, we are taking a closer look at those Biblical men and women who often times played “second fiddle” to the main character of the story.... In this, it is my hope that we will discover just as much wisdom about how to live (and what mistakes to avoid) from these sidekicks as we do from the “stars of the show.”

Last week, we began the series by taking a closer look at Jesus’ disciple, Thomas....and while most of Christianity remembers and identifies Thomas with doubt...we discovered that he was also brutally honest and even in his doubt, chose to put his life on the line to stay together in community with the other disciples.

This morning, we will be taking a closer look at an early Christian leader that some of you may have never heard of before....a man who doesn’t get a lot of notoriety in the Bible, yet nonetheless, was one of the key figures whose actions allowed Christianity to flourish in the world...

We are first introduced to this man in Acts, Chapter 4. At this time, the Christian movement was growing by the thousands as Peter and the other disciples boldly preached about the resurrection of Jesus....and among these early believers there was a man named Joseph. Joseph was a Jewish man from Cyprus.... who upon joining the Christian movement, sold the land he owned and brought the money and laid it at the disciple’s feet.

And with his generosity, it seems that Joseph made a big impression on the Apostles, because they decided to give him a new name....Barnabas....which means ‘Son of Encouragement.’

And perhaps the greatest example of this encouragement in action takes place in the Scripture passage that Cindy read for us this morning.... when Barnabas spoke up for Saul of Tarsus.

As a reminder, Saul was originally a Jewish leader and fierce persecutor of those who followed Jesus. Everywhere he went, Saul caused trouble for the early believers.

He tried to arrest them, and on at least one occasion the scriptures tell us that he was glad when a Christian was martyred for his faith....

Saul's name brought fear to many hearts. But one fateful day, while he was on route to Damascus to arrest and imprison believers, the risen Christ met with him on the road, and as a result of that interaction. Saul....the man who was this violent persecutor became a Christian believer himself.

However, when Saul returned to Jerusalem and tried to join the Church, the believers were terrified of him...and rightfully so!

I mean...we can't blame them for their skepticism....Just imagine if you worst enemy...someone who tried to throw you in jail...someone who would be dancing on your grave if you died...all of the sudden came to you and said they wanted to be friends..... NO WAY!

Yet.....there was one person whose influence and voice could calm those perfectly rational fears.....Barnabas.

And because Barnabas spoke up.....Saul, who would later take the name Paul, became the greatest missionary that the Church has ever had.

Because Barnabas spoke up....we have most of the books of the New Testament which were written by Paul as letters to the early church.

Because Barnabas spoke up....Christianity flourished around the world thanks to the teachings and preaching of Paul....

So....what do we learn from this....what do we learn from this Sidekick of Scripture? We learn about the power of speaking up for others....we learn about the importance of using our position and influence...to include someone who others overlook or fear...

We learn what a difference being an encouraging follower of Jesus can make on the lives of others....on the church...and in the world...

I have to admit...some week's I struggle to come up with illustrations for my sermons...however there other weeks where a perfect illustration is handed to me like a wonderful gift...

This was one of those weeks...

On Wednesday evening....I witnessed something truly inspiring....

In our denomination, the United Methodist Church, when someone feels called by God to become a pastor, their local congregation needs to hold what we call a charge conference and vote to endorse the member who is feeling this call....it is the first step of a 5-7 year process that eventually...if all goes right...results in the ordination of this person as an Elder or Deacon...

In order for a charge conference to take...it needs to be lead by our conference superintendent.... However, in the event that the superintendent is unavailable to come in person....they assign an Ordained Minister from a nearby congregation to serve as the Presiding Elder in their place....

Well...I was the one who was asked to take that position as Pacific Grove United Methodist Church gathered together to decide whether or not to affirm the call of one of their members.

This member is named Sherry and she has been working as the Children's coordinator at the Church for the past couple of years while her husband completed his Degree at the Navy Postgraduate school in Monterey.

Sherry did not grow up in the Methodist tradition....but rather in a Christian denomination that does not allow women to serve as Pastors. Because of this background, she had never in her life contemplated a Pastoral role in the Church...

However, the Pastor at Pacific Grove UMC had noticed that Sherry seemed to show the gifts and graces of being a pastor and invited her to preach last year on Mother's Day....

Sherry had obviously never preached before....but by the grace of God she agreed to do it....and by the time she had finished her sermon that Sunday....the congregation quickly recognized that this woman was something special...

Through the encouragement of the minister at PGUMC.... Shelly began to explore the process of becoming a Pastor...however...she quickly realized there would be a lot of obstacles in her way....

First, she realized that seminary takes 3 to 4 years of full-time study...and if you go part time it can take 5 or 6 years to complete....obviously this is a major issue if you have a military spouse whose job requires you to move around the country every couple of years...not to mention the three young children she is responsible for...

However, through the wise counsel of her pastor and others, Sherry was able to find a seminary....Wesley Theological Seminary in Washington D.C. that has a hybrid program where you can take many of your courses online....

But, upon discovering this seminary...she also discovered that seminary is not cheap....and to make matters worse it had appeared that the deadline to apply for merit-based financial aid had already passed by the time she found the school...

She called the seminary to confirm that she missed the deadline...which she did....but then the admissions officer encouraged her to apply anyways....and even though it was past the deadline...the seminary decided to give Sherry a scholarship...but the story doesn't end there...

Realizing that there are many other costs outside of tuition...such as books, travel, babysitters and academic fees...the members of Pacific

Grove UMC decided that they would rally their congregation and raise the money to cover any outstanding costs for Sherry and her family for her entire seminary schooling...no matter how many years they would need to help out...

Sherry didn't grow up at PGUMC....she has only been there for a couple of years....and next month her family is being assigned to Virginia....She may never step foot in California again.....Yet, that congregation embraced her as one of their own....affirmed her gifts...encouraged her to apply...and provided the resources necessary for her to live out the calling that God has placed on her heart..... That is what being in a community of faith is all about....

As I sat there on Wednesday night...hearing Sherry articulate her call before those gathered there....hearing about how the congregation had rallied behind her...and seeing her husband and three children stand by her side...my heart was deeply warmed... Along with Baptisms...Weddings...memorial services and New Believers joining the church....seeing someone affirmed in their calling for ministry is one of the most spirit-filled things you can ever experience in the Church...

And it gave me a moment to reflect on those who encouraged me along my journey....and I realized just how many different people....from my parents and grandparents...to bosses....and teachers...and coaches had taken a chance on me.....who had invested in me.....who encouraged me when I felt hopeless.

And I think if we are all honest with ourselves....we understand that none of us got where we are today on our own...but because someone else took a chance on us....because someone else gave us an undeserved opportunity...someone else gave us encouragement when we needed it most.

I began working in the Church when I was 22 years old.....and there were many times during that first year when I questioned if I was doing

the right thing.....when I questioned if I would be able to actually finish seminary...and become ordained...and be able to provide for my family....to pay for my student loans....

And even though I hadn't articulated my fears with anyone but God.... one of the most unexpected affirmations came when I needed it the most...an expected it the least.

It was a typical Sunday morning in worship...when in the middle of the service...totally out of the blue...with no warning at all...the Senior Pastor of Wayside United Methodist Church in Vallejo, CA....Dr. Fel Cao called me up to the front of the sanctuary.

I had been working at the church for a little over a year as the Youth Minister and Fel was in his few months of being appointed to that congregation....we were still in many ways....just beginning to get to know one another...

But Fel called me up to stand beside him in front of the congregation...put his arm around me and said....I don't want you to think of Luke as your youth pastor....I don't want you to think of Luke as an associate Pastor.....I don't want you to think of Luke as anything less than your full Pastor..... Luke and I are your co-pastors...the same authority and respect that you give to me....I call upon you to give to Luke....

Now...I of course couldn't see my own face during that little speech...but I am guessing if you ask my wife Stephanie to describe it, she will tell you it was a perfect mix of shock and confusion.

Because at no other time in my life...in school...or in a job...or in the church....had any of my teachers, or supervisors or bosses or pastors ever said anything remotely close to that....

I have no idea what was going through Pastor Fel's mind...why he decided to that....but it was an affirmation I will never forget.... And I

might very well not have ended up as a Pastor here at Church of the Wayfarer, if it wasn't for the encouragement, empowerment and trust that I was shown that day...

So....how do we honor the people that God puts in our lives to affirm and empower us...how do we thank those people who vouch for us or give us a second chance...?

By extending that same grace to someone else....by using our established place in the world to lift up someone who has been left behind or is just starting out....

Gregory of Nyssa was one of the early church fathers in the fourth century, and he painted a beautiful picture of this way of living.

This is what he writes: *"At horse races, the spectators intent on victory shout to their favorites in the contest. From the balcony they incite the rider to keener effort, urging the horses on while leaning forward and flailing the air with their outstretched hand instead of a whip."*

With that picture in mind, he says: *"I seem to be doing the same thing myself. Most valued friends, while you are competing admirably in a divine race, straining constantly for the prize of the heavenly calling, I exhort, urge, and encourage you vigorously."*

Gregory is basically saying, *"I'm up in the stands. I'm watching my friend run the race, and I'm cheering them on. This is your life. This is your race. God is with you, so don't stop. Keep running the race."*

It is important for each one of us to recognize the people who do that in our lives. It is important for us to recognize that we are called to do that for one another in this sanctuary...

In my humble opinion, the number one sign that a congregation is ineffective in carrying out its mission of showing God's light and love to

the world is when its members leave each Sunday discouraged... and the sad reality is that there are a lot of churches like this...

Congregations where people bicker endlessly about things that just don't matter that much....

Congregations where members begin to blame one another...or blame the pastor...or blame the music or blame the community when they see their attendance in worship decline each year...

Congregations where gossip about the wrongdoings of others spread like wildfire...

Those evils are perfectly natural....it is no shock that any group of people...whether in a church or in a secular organization fall victim to them...

But we are reminded through the example of Barnabas that we are not called to gossip....we are not called to blame....we are not called to condemn one another...but encourage one another...trust one another...forgive one another.... Love one another...

And that is why if you look through the New Testament.... you will find the word encourage.... over 100 times... many of those times written by Paul...

Paul emphasized the importance of Christians encouraging one another because Jesus appearing before him on the road to Damascus wasn't the only miracle that had happened in his life....but Barnabas believing in him...and speaking up for him....was just as much of a divine miracle and occurrence in Paul's life as well....

Being a minister....there certain theological questions that I always get asked...sometimes by church members...sometimes by friends...sometimes by random strangers I meet after they find out what I do for a living....

One of those questions is.... *“Why doesn’t there seem to be as many miracles today as there were in the Bible...”*

To be honest...I don’t think the answer has much to do with God...it has to do with us.... God gives each one of the ability to perform miracles all of the time....we just need to be willing to do them...

Because welcoming and embracing that person who has a radically different background or view of the world than you do....is just as much of a miracle as walking on water...

Offering forgiveness to someone who was once an enemy...who once persecuted you...and inviting them into your spiritual home is just as much of a miracle as turning water into wine....

Changing the life of a young person by giving them their first opportunity to make a name for themselves...or empowering them to take on a role of leadership even if they really haven’t earned it yet, is just as much of a miracle as healing someone who is sick....

My prayer for us is that we can be a community of Barnabas-es...that we can be as Gregory of Nyssa put it...Balcony people....cheering one another on....cheering on those who are outside the walls of this church...cheering on those people who seem so foreign to us....

May we bold enough to proclaim that through Christ...all are welcome to be part of a new movement and life where no amount of despair or opposition can keep us down because we are surrounded by those who will always lift us up....

Amen and Amen.