

Sermon Notes – July 26, 2020

“What We All Need... Some Encouragement” (Acts 11:19-26)

I don't know about you, but one of the things that I've needed during this COVID-19 pandemic and all that's going on in our world is some encouragement. Sometimes, there have been a lot of things that have happened that have brought discouragement. One of the things that I need (and I think many other people need right now) is some encouragement.

When I was working at Stuart Congregational Church in Stuart, Florida, my pastor there taught me to do something, that I don't know if you've ever heard of, called a “kudos file”. He said, “Peggy, in ministry there's often times that you will make decisions and you will not please everybody. There are going to be difficult days and you're going to need to keep those notes of encouragement or letters that people have sent you - to thank you for something that you said or did that meant a lot to them - and I want you to put it in a file folder called a “kudos file”. Every time you are having a difficult day, I want you to pull that file and take out a note or a card and read it. Let it be an encouragement to you for that day.” I've always tried to do that and I have one kudos file at home and one at church. ***I want to encourage you today to form a kudos file;*** it's one of those where people have sent you a note or a card and they have written something to encourage you - to bring out the best in you - to comfort you - to give you confidence - or to give you the strength to carry on when you didn't think you could. That note has been there and it's meant a lot to you and it strengthened you. I want you to put that note in your own kudos file. ***I also want you to think today, as I talk in the sermon, about who are the people that have encouraged you along the way in life?*** Who is somebody that maybe encouraged you to go into the career or profession that you chose? Who is somebody that encouraged you as a teacher or coach in high school or college? Who is somebody in your family that is an encouragement? If that person is still living, I hope that you will pick up the phone this week and call them - or write them a note of appreciation and encouragement. ***And then, there's***

a third thing I want you to do. I want to ask you, who is the person, along your path, that you can encourage and strengthen? Maybe it's somebody in your family - maybe it's somebody in this church, in this community, in your job - but there is someone that you can walk alongside of and help them, strengthen them, affirm them, and encourage them with their gifts and abilities.

How many of you have ever heard of the name Barnabas? Many people have never heard of him, but his name is actually mentioned 24 times in the book of Acts. He is also mentioned in three different books of Paul's letters in the New Testament. Barnabas is not his real name. His real name was Joseph. And, Joseph was nicknamed Barnabas by the disciples, the early apostles. His name meant "son of encouragement." I would call him the first minister of encouragement. The same Greek word, paraclete, is used for "encouragement" and the "Holy Spirit" - it means "one who comes alongside to help."

We all need encouragement, don't we? Encouragement can give you the strength to carry on. It can be a source of hope and healing. It can lift our spirits. It can encourage us when we're really down and discouraged. We all need it. Many of you remember former President, Abraham Lincoln and reading about him in history - but, one of the things that you may not know is that when he was assassinated at Ford Theater - when they took him to the funeral home and they cleaned out the pockets of his coat and his pants, they found several things - the usual things, like an extra pair of glasses, a handkerchief, a pocket knife, and some loose change - but, the thing that stuck out in their minds was that he had eight newspaper clippings stuck in his coat pocket. They were tattered, like they had been read and used over and over. They read each of those - and come to find out, each of those clippings was a time that Abraham Lincoln had been applauded or affirmed by somebody - a news reporter, a congressman - for some action that he had taken as President. They were applauding, affirming, or encouraging his actions or his character. I tend to think that Abraham carried those because as any President or leader of any organization, country, or world, they are going to have difficult days. And on the days that he had made some difficult

decisions and people didn't like what he said or did, he pulled out one of those clippings to affirm him and encourage him - and to remember better days. I think each of us needs that kind of encouragement.

Barnabas was somebody who encouraged others. One of the first readings is in Acts, chapter 4, where the early disciples were meeting and the church was poor and they needed help. So, Barnabas sold a piece of property and he brought the money and gave it to the disciples and said, "Use this to help people in need and to feed the hungry." That was one of the ways that he did a kind act and encouraged the disciples to take care of the hungry, the homeless, and the helpless. In Acts, chapter 9, there was a time that Saul of Tarsus had been a persecutor of Christians. On the road to Damascus, he had a dramatic experience with Jesus Christ and became a follower. But, the early disciples did not want to accept Paul - he was a Roman - he was steeped in Judaism - and he had persecuted Christians for years. When he first became a Christian, nobody wanted to accept him - not the Romans and not the Jews, not even the disciples (Peter, James and John). In fact, when he tried to get in the church in Jerusalem, they wouldn't allow him. It was only a man named Barnabas who had deep respect in that church. He was a Jewish Levite - a temple associate - he was one who was steeped in the Christian faith and a deep follower of Christ. The disciples had deep respect for Barnabas - and because of that, they accepted Paul based on Barnabas' recommendation. He said, "Listen guys, this man is for real. He's had an experience with Jesus. Give him a chance. Listen to him, please." Out of deep respect for Barnabas, they gave Paul a chance. That's how Paul got into the church in Jerusalem - that's how he got his start going on missionary journeys. It was Barnabas that stood up for Paul, when no one else was willing to do so.

In Acts, chapter 11, that we read today, you'll notice that Barnabas went to the church at Antioch and he encouraged them. He encouraged them to continue with their faith in Jesus Christ. But, I want you to notice something else in that story, Barnabas was sent by the church in Jerusalem to encourage the disciples at Antioch - to help them grow in their faith. But, it was such a big job and there were so many

Greeks and Gentiles there that he didn't think he could do it by himself. So, he sent back to the church in Jerusalem, "Send me Paul" - and Paul was sent. Barnabas knew that Paul was steeped in Jewish traditions and the Christian faith - and he knew that Paul was a better teacher than him. ***I want you to know that Barnabas was willing to play second fiddle. He was willing to champion the underdog. He walked alongside Paul and encouraged him in the faith, in leadership, and to preach and teach. Barnabas was that person who pushed him forward.***

In Acts, chapter 15, it's after Paul and Barnabas have been on several missionary journeys, they wanted to go back and check on some of the churches that they had started in all these different areas. Barnabas said, "Let's take John Mark with us." John Mark was Barnabas' nephew - his sister's child. Paul said, "No. I'm not taking that guy. When we were on the first missionary journey, he left us half way through. He didn't even finish with us. He's too young - too immature." In essence, Paul was saying that he was not willing to take John Mark. Barnabas said, "Okay, then. I'll take him." I want you to know that there was a rift between Paul and Barnabas. Paul took Silas on one journey and Barnabas took John Mark with him. Now, years later, their friendship was reconciled - and Paul came to recognize John Mark as a great evangelist and he went on to become the one who wrote the gospel of Mark. ***Thank goodness Barnabas was willing to give John Mark a second chance. Have you ever had people who gave you a second chance?***

You see, Barnabas was willing to champion the underdog. He was willing to see beyond people's pasts and see their future and their potential. He was willing to bring out the best in them. He saw the gifts of leadership in Paul and he encouraged him to preach and teach. He was willing to share of his resources and help someone else. Barnabas was always looking to bring out the best in others - to bring out their strengths and their leadership - to encourage them. Don't we all need encouragement?

The writer of James, the half-brother of Jesus, said, "Out of the same mouth comes blessing and cursing. This should not be." With our mouth, we praise the Lord and we curse men who were made in God's

image. I think God wants us to use our mouths to praise people, bless people, encourage people and strengthen them. ***We never know the effect that our words and our actions can have on someone.***

Some of you remember Vince Lombardi, who used to be the coach for the Green Bay Packers. He had a player on his team named Jerry Kramer, many years ago. One day, Vince Lombardi was out practicing with the football team. He was having a bad day and the team was having a bad day -- their practice was not going well at all. Vince got in Jerry Kramer's face, punched his finger on his chest, and said, "You are a lousy football player. You don't tackle. You don't even block. You are so lazy, you're not even a good football player. In fact, I want you to go to the locker room and take a shower - right now." Jerry took off his helmet, walked into the locker room, sat down on the bench, and put his head between his hands. For 45 minutes, he sat there -- thinking, deflated, and feeling like he might as well quit this team. "The coach doesn't even think I have potential to be a football player. I might as well quit." All of a sudden, Vince Lombardi walked in and patted him on the back - and said, "You know, Kramer. I should've finished my story out there. You are a lousy football player - you're not blocking, you're not giving it 100%. But, the rest of the story is, that I know you can be a great football player - and I know that it's inside of you. And one day, you are going to be one of the greatest guardsmen in the NFL. Until that time, I am going to walk alongside you - until that great football player inside comes out and asserts himself." Jerry Kramer said when he heard those words, "I could've walked on cloud nine. I was willing to do anything that coach had said. His words gave me the inspiration I needed - the motivation to go on and be the football player that I became." *Words have a powerful effect, don't they?*

There's another way that we encourage people - and that's through our prayers. Dr. John Lloyd Ogilvie was a Chaplain for the US Senate many years ago. When he was a young man in his 30s, he was married and had small children. His wife was stricken with cancer. She had five major surgeries in one year. She went through radiation and chemotherapy. That same year, he lost some people in his work place

that were key people. He was also trying to take care of the kids and the house while his wife was sick. He said it was just one discouragement right after another. He said, "That was the most difficult year of my life. You know, I wouldn't have made it through that year if it hadn't been for the prayers of people and the notes that people sent me. In fact, not a week passed by, that I didn't receive a note, a letter, a phone call or somebody just passing by me saying, 'I'm thinking about you, Dr. Ogilvie. I'm praying for you.' **It was the prayers of people interceding for me and their notes of encouragement that got me through the most difficult year of my life.**"

In 1988 there was a Hollywood movie that came out, called "Stand and Deliver" -- that was about an excellent teacher who worked in a rough neighborhood - in a rough high school. In fact, many of the kids dropped out of school. They didn't respect authority. There were lots of problems in the school. But, Jamie Escalante went to teach in that school. In one of his classes, he had two boys named Johnny. One of the Johnny's was a good student - he loved school - he respected authority - he did his homework - he did well on his tests and his papers. But, the other Johnny was one who rebelled against authority - he didn't respect his teachers - he never did his homework - and he was failing in his classes. One night, Escalante went to one of the PTA meetings with parents. He met the parent of one of the Johnny's. He thought it was the mother of the good student - but, really, it was the Johnny with whom he was having trouble. He said to that mother, "I am so glad to have Johnny in my class. He is a good student and I just love having him in my class." The mother went home and told her son. The next day, Johnny came up to him and said, "Mr. Escalante, I would like to thank you for what you said to my mother last night. I've never had a teacher to like me or want me in their class. But, I'm going to be a good student and I'm going to make you proud of me." (Keep in mind, this was the rebellious student.) You know -- that student went on to start respecting teachers, doing his homework, and started passing. He succeeded in high school and went on to college - and got a career. He came back to thank Mr. Escalante for believing in him. *Sometimes our words of encouragement are what someone needs to believe in themselves - or to have the strength to carry*

on - to have just what they need to get them through that day. We all need it, don't we?

Victor Hugo who wrote the books, Les Misérables and The Hunchback of Notre Dame, once said, "Man lives by affirmation even more than he lives by bread." Mark Twain once said, "I can live two months on one good compliment." And, somebody said (I don't remember where I heard this quote), "Always write your criticisms in the dust, but write your compliments in marble." We need to remember those things that have encouraged us along the way. We all need encouragement to be built up and strengthened. So, again today, I want to ask you - who is somebody in your pathway (in your job, in school, in the church, in your neighborhood) that you can strengthen and encourage? Can you write a note of encouragement this week? Would you make a phone call? Would you do some kind act for them - to encourage them? Who is the person that encouraged you the most in life - and would you thank that person? And then I want to challenge you to have a "kudos file". I want you and I to be encouragers. How can we encourage others with our words, our actions, or our deeds?

Think about the life of Barnabas - he stood up - he was a champion for the underdog - he gave people a second chance. He helped others by seeing a need and encouraging the disciples to continue to help the homeless and the hungry. He was one who encouraged the church to continue in their faith. Maybe there's somebody who has given up on their faith - maybe you can be the encourager to help them and walk alongside them. Remember that I said the word "encouragement" and the word "Holy Spirit" comes from the same Greek word - that means "one who comes alongside to help". May we do that for somebody this week - this month. People need encouragement right now. Let's go do it! Amen.