

Essential Choices: Giving over Keeping

Acts 4:32-37; 11:27-30; 2 Corinthians 8 & 9

Connie has a wide range of reading interests. From children's books and youth fiction (for the sake of our grandchildren) all the way to classics and commentaries. She records the books she reads, with a brief summary and evaluation, on *Good Reads*, an online community of book lovers.

I am embarrassed to report *my* reading on Good Reads because the range of my reading for relaxation is so narrow. I like westerns, and books about Indians, because we used to live in the west, and worked with Navajos for a time—and because the good guys always win. I like legal thrillers by John Grisham and crime mysteries by Michael Connelly.

The mysteries are fun because the story moves in two directions at once. One storyline moves forward, as the detective finds and follows clues, and the other storyline moves backwards, as the detective traces the clues are back to the perpetrator.

My favorite books, though, are biographies, I have especially enjoyed biographies of Nelson Mandela, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, and Abraham Lincoln.

Biographies are captivating because they tell a story. As the story unfolds, we gain insights into the life of a remarkable person. We learn the *formative experiences* that shaped them, the *critical choices* that set the direction of their lives, the *practices and habits* that undergirded their strengths, and the *points of vulnerability* that led to mistakes and failures. And we see the cumulative impact of all of this in the outcomes of their life.

The message this morning is a *biblical biography*, told *backwards*, not to find what went wrong, but to find *what went right*—to discover what occurred, early on, to lay the foundation for greatness in the kingdom of God.

The full name of the book of Acts, is *The Acts of the Apostles*
 The story of what Jesus did, by the Holy Spirit,
 through the apostles in the early church.

The primary apostles in *Acts* are Peter and Paul.
 Woven between the longer stories of these two apostles
 are vignettes of other key persons in the early church:
 Stephen, Philip, Barnabas, Mark, James (the brother of Jesus),
 Silas, Timothy, Luke, Apollos, Priscilla and Aquila.
 Among these persons, we know the most about Barnabas
 who was also called an apostle (Acts 14:14).

How did Barnabas come to be included in the pantheon of biblical apostles?
 What *essential choice* did Barnabas make, early in his life,
 that allowed the Spirit to transform him from a disciple into an apostle?

This morning I'm going to tell
 the biblical biography of Barnabas backwards,

That *tongue-twister* being said,
 the end of the story—the climax—is . . .

➤ Barnabas as an **apostle**.

We read about this in Acts 13:1-3.
 the time Barnabas was first sent out as an apostle,
 which Paul describes as the *highest* of all gifts and roles in the Church.

Now in the church at Antioch there were prophets and teachers:
 Barnabas, Simeon called Niger, Lucius of Cyrene, Manaen (who had been
 brought up with Herod the tetrarch) and Saul. While they were
 worshiping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, "Set apart for me
 Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them." So after
 they had fasted and prayed, they placed their hands on them and sent
 them off.

As we read here, apostles were appointed by the Holy Spirit.
 They were known for their godly character.
 They had a burning desire to rescue lost people for Jesus.
 They went to places where few (or no) people had heard about Jesus.

They had a high tolerance for risk—*and for suffering*.
 They actively worked to duplicate themselves,
 to raise up other apostles, prophets, evangelists, teachers, and pastors.
 They were at the *vanguard* of the mission, given by Jesus,
 to make disciples of all the peoples of the world.

Barnabas was an apostle like this.
 He was not one of the original twelve,
 He didn't have a dramatic encounter with the risen Christ like Paul
 Yet he grew into his full potential in Christ.

And so can we.
 Like Barnabas,
we can become all that Jesus has gifted and appointed us to be,
 whatever that is, in his plan and design for us,
 when we make the same critical choices that Barnabas did.

Before Barnabas was an apostle,
 working backwards in the story, we see . . .

➤ Barnabas as a **pastor**.

We find this part of the story in Acts 11:19-26.

Now those who had been scattered by the persecution that broke out when Stephen was killed traveled as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus and Antioch, spreading the word only among Jews. Some of them, however, men from Cyprus and Cyrene, went to Antioch and began to speak to Greeks also, telling them the good news about the Lord Jesus. The Lord's hand was with them, and a great number of people believed and turned to the Lord. News of this reached the church in Jerusalem, and they sent Barnabas to Antioch. . .

In Jerusalem, Barnabas was known as an encourager, someone who could help new converts (e.g., Saul). Being from Cyprus, he would be able to identify with this mixed group. He had the character and the spiritual qualifications. So Barnabas was sent to pastor this emerging church.

When Barnabas arrived in Antioch, verse 23 . . .

and saw what the grace of God had done, he was glad and encouraged them all to remain true to the Lord with all their hearts. He was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and faith, and a great number of people were brought to the Lord.

Then Barnabas did something typical of an encourager, verse 25. . .

. . . Barnabas went to Tarsus to look for Saul, and when he found him, he brought him to Antioch. So for a whole year Barnabas and Saul met with the church and taught great numbers of people. The disciples were called Christians first at Antioch.

Because Barnabas had met Saul earlier, he knew this gospel firebrand had a brilliant mind and burning fervor. He must have realized that Saul's intellect and training surpassed his own, and that, in time, Saul would displace him as leader. But that didn't matter to Barnabas. His supreme concern was the cause of Christ.

Quietly, without any care about his own role or position, Barnabas pastored this emerging church, from the ground up, to be strong, grounded in the truth, devoted to prayer, and generous. And the result, after one year, was a robust, interracial church ready to be the launch pad for the worldwide spread of the Church.

Full engagement in a local church was a key step in Barnabas' development. And it is the same for us.

In our local church we exercise and develop our gifts. We serve quietly, faithfully, and steadily, amid the inevitable bumps and scrapes, with or without any recognition—*as an essential step in whatever* God intends for us to be.

Barnabas was an apostle.

Before that, he was a pastor.

Moving backwards again, we see . . .

Barnabas as an **encourager**

For Barnabas, encouragement was his primary gifting.

In comparison to other gifts, encouragement is a modest one. Of the 20 gifts named in the NT, encouragement doesn't even make the lists. It is encompassed in the catch-all phrase: "Now there are varieties of gifts. . ." (1 Corinthians 12:4)

Yet throughout his life and ministry, Barnabas exercised this *modest* gift—with *great impact*.

His given name was Joseph (Acts 4:36). But the trait of encouragement was so evident in his life, that everyone called him Barnabas, which means "Son of Encouragement."

As an encourager, Barnabas was gifted to think the best, to see potential, to motivate; to support, and to develop people, to stir hope, confidence, and courage.

We see this trait in action, when Saul, the former persecutor came to Jerusalem and presented himself as a new convert in Acts 9:26-28.

When [Saul] he came to Jerusalem, he tried to join the disciples, but they were all afraid of him, not believing that he really was a disciple. But Barnabas took him and brought him to the apostles. He told them how Saul on his journey had seen the Lord and that the Lord had spoken to him, and how in Damascus he had preached fearlessly in the name of Jesus. So Saul stayed with them and moved about freely in Jerusalem, speaking boldly in the name of the Lord.

Whether or not he was afraid, Barnabas went to Saul, listened to his story, recognized it was authentic, took him to the apostles and advocated for this *raw, scary, new* convert.

Years later, Saul—by that time, the apostle Paul—seemed to have forgotten how close he came to being rejected apart from the intervention of Barnabas, Acts 15:36-39:

Some time later Paul said to Barnabas, "Let us go back and visit the believers in all the towns where we preached the word of the Lord and see how they are doing." Barnabas wanted to take John, also called Mark,

with them, but Paul did not think it wise to take him, because he had deserted them in Pamphylia and had not continued with them in the work. They had such a sharp disagreement that they parted company. Barnabas took Mark and sailed for Cyprus,

When Paul refused to take Mark along on a second trip Barnabas, the encourager, not only spoke up; he refused to back down. He insisted—to the point of sharp disagreement—that Mark be given a second chance.

The two apostles came up with a creative solution. Paul put together a new missionary team, without Mark— And Barnabas took Mark along on a second team to give Mark a chance to *grow into* his gift as an evangelist.

In his travels with Barnabas, as an experienced apostle and mentor, Mark was *reclaimed* as a *committed* and *capable* evangelist.

After that, Mark became an assistant to the apostle Peter. As Peter traveled from place to place, ([Acts 9:32](#)) the apostle told the stories of Jesus' life and teaching. Mark listened and remembered and, in time, wrote down the stories in the Gospel of Mark.

By his gift of encouragement, modest as it was, Barnabas had formative impact on the apostle Paul and the evangelist Mark, and in this way, contributed to the writing of a major portion of the NT—the Gospel of Mark and the letters of Paul.

Barnabas exemplified Jesus' words when he said: "Whoever is faithful in small matters will be faithful in large ones (Lk 16:10)

Whatever becomes of us,
whatever roles or responsibilities we may be asked to assume,
we want to always exercise the basic gifting the Spirit has given to us.

Finally, as we work backward in the story we get to the essential choice that shaped Barnabas to be an encourager, a pastor, and *ultimately* an apostle.

Before anything else, we see . . .

1. Barnabas as a **giver**.

In Acts 4:32-37 we read:

All the believers were one in heart and mind. No one claimed that any of their possessions was their own, but they shared everything they had. With great power the apostles continued to testify to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus. And God's grace was so powerfully at work in them all that there were no needy persons among them. For from time to time those who owned land or houses sold them, brought the money from the sales and put it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to anyone who had need. Joseph, a Levite from Cyprus, whom the apostles called Barnabas (which means "son of encouragement"), sold a field he owned and brought the money and put it at the apostles' feet.

The Bible does not tell us the *size* or *price* of the field, just that Barnabas sold it and gave the *full* price to assist anyone in need. The impression we get is that it was a notable gift, either because of Barnabas' *generosity* or *sacrifice*—and maybe *both*.

When we turn our resources over to Jesus,
for all of them to be used *as he directs*,
something *decisive* happens in our *heart* and *mind*.
There is a *seismic* shift in our *spirit*.

This internal shift is so significant *in our availability to be used by God* that the great reformer Martin Luther, said, 500 years ago:

"There are three conversions a person needs to experience:
The conversion of the *head*, the conversion of the *heart*,
and the conversion of the *pocketbook*."

More often than not,
the essential choice that determines the direction of our life
comes down to God or money.

Jesus said it bluntly,

No one can serve two masters. Either you will hate the one and love the other, or you will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and money.

The beginning of all-out witness and service for Jesus—
of full availability, without reservations—
begins we allow **Jesus** to *determine our use of money.*

We do not take this action out of *guilt.*

Or any sense of *obligation.*

Or even *sacrifice.*

*We make this choice with **joy***

because we are *relinquishing control* of our money for something better.

Jesus said in Matthew 13:44-46

“The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field. When a man found it, he hid it again, and then in his **joy** went and sold *all he had* and bought that field.

Again, [Jesus said] the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant looking for fine pearls. When he found one of great value, he went away and *sold everything he had* and bought it.”

Like Barnabas,

we can set our life on an all-out trajectory for Jesus,
when we change the way we spend our money—

when we make the *apostolic decision* for **giving over keeping.**

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July 19, 2020
Millersville BIC Church