

Encouragement to Be Lights Like Barnabas

September 21, 2014

1st Presbyterian Church

Pittsford, New York

25th Sunday in Ordinary Time

15th Sunday of Pentecost

1ST IN SERIES

Encouragement to be Lights like Barnabas

Acts 4:23-37

Gen 1:3 (NIV) And God said, "Let there be light," and there was light.

Psalm 27:1 (NIV) The LORD is my light and my salvation— whom shall I fear?

The LORD is the stronghold of my life— of whom shall I be afraid?

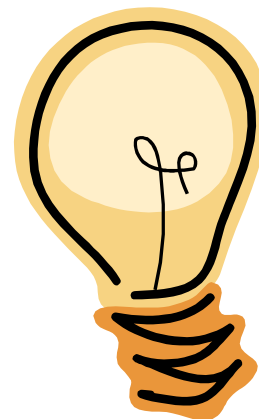
1 Jn 2:9-11 (Phi) Anyone who claims to be "in the light" and hates his brother is, in fact, still in complete darkness. The man who loves his brother lives in the light and has no reason to stumble. But the man who hates his brother is shut off from the light and gropes his way in the dark without knowing where he is going. For darkness has made him blind.

Exodus 16:2-15

Psalm 105:1-6, 37-45

Philippians 1:21-30

Matthew 20:1-16



Did you watch some of the special on The Roosevelts this week? Well, let us begin this morning with a quote from Theodore Roosevelt who said, "If you could kick the person in the pants responsible for most of your trouble, you wouldn't sit for a month." Now there is certainly more to the series than that, but I thought that this said something about the subject of encouragement as we embark on a series of Sundays looking generally at the theme, *Encouragement to Be Light*.

If Ken Burns and The Roosevelts is not your cup of tea, then perhaps you would prefer remembering Joan Rivers who said, "I hate housework! You make the beds, you do the dishes and six months later you have to start all over again." What encouragement!

William Arthur Ward said, "Flatter me, and I may not believe you. Criticize me, and I may not like you. Ignore me, and I may not forgive you. Encourage me, and I will not forget you."

When we say we are encouraging another person what does that really mean? Are we encouraging someone when we yell at them or tell them they are not going to amount to much in life? Yes, we may want to shock them into some sense of reality, but how effective is this approach, really? Is being critical a sign of our encouraging?

In the psychedelic sixties, people shared their lives and possessions in a communal living craze. Today we're self-sufficient, and we don't want to depend on anyone. But could it be that our souls are designed for sharing and that our hearts and minds need continual

encouragement to be kind, faithful, loving, and helpful?

"Tune in, turn on, drop out." So said Timothy Leary, Harvard professor, hippie guru and psychedelic pied piper. In response, kids danced to his tune and fled cities, fled colleges, fled convention and fled families to form an intentional network of relationships popularly called communes. Those youth pooled money and labor and dreams to purchase land and old farms in the Back-to-the-Land Movement. Then they moved in together and started over.

From Maine to Montana to the Sierra Nevadas, in gatherings of dozens or hundreds, collectives built of alternative visions of modern living were created from the youthful hopes and ideals of a counterculture. Communes, where every possession was held in common, were prevalent in the '60s and '70s. Hair was long, clothes were loud, streets were riotous, music was rock, feet were sandaled, and beards and beads were plentiful.

It's the end of civilization as we know it, their parents cried!

To which Bob Dylan, the high priest of the '60s countercultural reformation, intoned: "Come mothers and fathers/ Throughout the land/ And don't criticize/ What you can't understand/ Your sons and your daughters/ Are beyond your command/ Your old road is/ Rapidly agin'./ Please get out of the new one/ If you can't lend your hand/ For the times they are a-changin'."

It was the generation gap writ large.

It almost seems that in the book of Acts, chapter 4 we have the backdrop for this movement in the 60s. Here and in some other passages, the idea of a community pooling its resources and redistributing them so that none would be in need is not an idea that began with Marx and Engels. But before we act shocked at the New Testament community, recall for a

moment that in the Bible, this is not an idea that began in the book of Acts.

The ideal of the community whose leader is God, and whose resources are to be shared equally by all, is an idea that is expressed also in the Old Testament (especially in Deuteronomy 15). It is also found as early as the third millennium B.C. in the temple-run city-states of Sumeria. In these cities, all the grain was brought to the temple and redistributed to the people by the members of the priesthood. The idea is that God is the land-owner of all the earth, and so all the produce of the earth belongs to God. Food offerings are merely returning to God what is the best of the produce of God's fields and orchards and flocks.

Access to shared resources is the right of all God's people. In Deuteronomy 15:4, God commands that "There will however, be no one in need among you because the Lord is sure to bless you in the land that the Lord your God is giving you as a possession to occupy." As children of God, we inherit the earth and its bounty, no one of us more than any other. Thus it is only right that the community of faith assures that no one of God's children is denied his or her inheritance.

Old Testament law had mechanisms to assure that the poor would not be totally disinherited. The land given by divine lot to each of the tribes was not to be sold. This approach suggested that the poor would at least have a right to farm the land or glean off the land of others in a hard year. Specific laws mandating that the poor be allowed to glean in fields and orchards provided a safety net for the poor (Deuteronomy 24:19-22). Loans to the poor were to be made without asking for collateral (Exodus 22:25-27; Deuteronomy 24:10-15, 17-18).

There was also a tradition of "redemption" for those who fell into debt. One's nearest kin, called the go'el or "redeemer" had the social

responsibility to pay one's debts or buy one out of debt servitude so that dire poverty did not afflict a member of the family. The laws of Jubilee in Deuteronomy 15, however, mandate the remission of debts and the manumission of slaves every seven years just in case one did not manage to escape serious debt or debt servitude by appealing to one's kin.

The idea that everyone lives under God's protection and survives because of God's bounty was intended to place everyone on an even footing with regard to possessions and property. As with so many ideals, however, there is no certainty that this one was ever fully realized in ancient Israel.

In Luke's gospel, Jesus continually challenges his followers to sell what they have and share proceeds with the poor (12:33; 14:33; 18:22). This implies that the old covenant law and the laws of Jubilee were not being actively practiced in Israel at this time. If they were, theoretically, there would be no "poor." Divesting of one's property, however, also made one free to follow Christ and this freedom, as well as the benefit to the poor, was of the utmost importance to the disciples.

By the time of the early church, however, when stable communities of Christians were forming as permanent additions to major population centers, concern for the poor may have begun to take on more importance with regard to divestiture than the freedom to "leave all and follow."

It also seems clear that simple divestiture was not the goal. Our passage for today as well as Acts 2:44-45 describe the early Christians' divesting themselves of their belongings, stating that they "had all things in common" and that "they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds," but the proceeds were to go "to all, as any had need."

The divestiture was apparently voluntary as is illustrated by the two example stories - one

positive and one negative - which follow Acts 4:32-35. In Acts 4:36-37, Joseph, a Cypriot Levite, whom the apostles rename Barnabas (and who will become a major supporter of Paul later on, Acts 9:27; 11:22-30), sells some property and gives the money to the disciples. He doesn't sell everything he owns, nor is it suggested that he is required to. It is enough, apparently, that he sold his field and donated the proceeds. Barnabas will be a figure who emerges again throughout the Book of Acts. He didn't receive the new name and title, "Son of Encouragement" for nothing. What he did was to continually encourage others in their faithfulness as followers of Jesus. He encouraged them to be lights in a dark world.

As good as Barnabas was, we sometimes just choose the wrong approach. For instance successful Native American investment plans emphasize family, not individuals. This is the same strategy that seemed to be helpful in the book of Acts.

A blue-chip investment firm flailed and flopped recently when it flew a suit from the high-rise canyons of Boston to the mesas of the Navajo nation to explain to a group of Arizona Navajos why they should invest for old age.

Hoping to hook the 95 Navajos gathered, he started by asking how many had heard of Willard Scott. None had. The representative explained that Willard Scott was the former weatherman of the Today Show who often featured 100-year-olds on their birthdays.

"You know what?" the rep queried. "More people are living to be a hundred." No one reacted. On the reservation, people die younger than the general population. This pitch didn't even cross the plate. Undaunted, he persevered by telling them about health consciousness and New Year's resolutions to lose weight.

Again, there were blank stares. The Navajos don't make New Year's resolutions, don't have health clubs and aren't obsessed about weight.

And so it went. What does Athens have to do with Jerusalem? Clearly Boston had nothing to do with Gallup, New Mexico. The Bostonian wasn't able to cross the cultural divide in this low-income population where they don't even have Navajo words for "savings" or "retirement."

A local resident explained that for the Navajo, "Money is different. It's there to be spent. If you have some, you help your family." Later, the tribal offices set up their own investment team, led by a 24-year-old investment-savvy Navajo. This time, this team was able to get the pitch into the strike zone where the people could hit the ball. They emphasized family, and how saving can help others, not just the individual.

"We don't target only the participants, we target families." With unemployment as high as 70 percent on the reservation, the team hoped that by encouraging those who have jobs to save money they'll be better able to help their relatives in the long run. It isn't investing for selfish reasons. It's investing for the benefit of their wider family. Thus they had a smarter way to encourage one another.

Since then, there's been a 10 percent increase in the investment plan participation. In a culture that's truly family-based, taking a family approach works, savings grow, and in the long run, the family benefits.

Even Blue Blood Bostonian Brahmin investment firms get it.

Of course, not everyone can do this. Taking the short view is tough enough for most folks trying to make ends meet, pay mortgages, finance cars, fund orthodontics. The long, long view is an idea many folks never think of, let alone dream about. Investing for the long term is a hard sell to much of America. It's a hard sell for the church, too. But the early church gave it a shot.

They agreed to pool their resources. "No one claimed private ownership of any possessions, but everything they owned was held in common" (Acts 4:32). They sacrificed. They sold what they had, land or houses, and turned it over to the group - and as a result, no one lacked.

They worked together. They invested themselves with social capital. They created community. They took chances. They invested in each other and everybody's needs were met. "There was not a needy person among them" (4:34).

To much of the world it appears that we are in a period of prosperity. Some are convinced that scores can be evened, not by helping everyone to grow, but to try and make sure that everyone is in poverty. Actually we know that our world is filled with need. Some need money. Others need love. Some need hope. Others need joy. Some need solace. Others need prayer. All need God. That's the bear market news.

But we're a part of a bull market church. Needy people have a lot to give. The church is a mutual funding company eager to provide encouragement...

Lots of folks who come to church lack something, and often are seeking that something from us, from God.

- Need: Some lack companionship because they're widowed and lonely.

Investment: Invest yourself in a friendship with an elder and see what good can come from it for everybody.

- Need: Some come to church because they hurt inside.

Investment: Invest your ear time for their mouth time.

- Need: Some lack heat, or food, or school clothes, or money for the doctor.

Investment: Sink some money into mission.

•Need: Out-of-hand kids today need a helping hand.

Investment: Invest yourself in the Sunday school, youth programming, tutoring and mentoring.

The church is an investment club of sorts where our capital of encouragement is more than money. We invest our time, energy, talents, hopes, our lives because Jesus shared his.

This place isn't just for us. It's here because ancestors in faith built it, mind and heart, sweat and bones, calluses and funds. They invested in us long before we even were born. They provided the sanctuary, the Sunday school rooms, the parking lot, the bell, the organ, the choir robes, the pulpit, the carpet, the kitchen.

Jesus said, "Store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal" (Matthew 6:20). Invest yourself in the community; invest yourself in the people of God. Call it the Nazarene Investment Club.

Some of you are familiar with Nordstrom Department store. Nordstrom's is legendary in business circles as a leader in customer service, and this excellence is reflected in their rising profits.

Betsy Sanders, an executive with Nordstrom department stores, tells of a meeting that occurred one time between executives of Nordstrom and J. C. Penney. J. C. Penney's executives were eager to learn Nordstrom's secrets for success. Imagine their surprise when a Nordstrom executive pointed them to a business book written over 100 years before by . . . guess who? J. C. Penney himself. Nordstrom had taken Penney's recipe for success and followed it faithfully. The J. C. Penney executives surely did some serious

soul-searching after that meeting, because it couldn't have been clearer that they had not been living up to their founder's beliefs.¹

When you think about our founder's beliefs and whether we have lived up to them, you don't know whether to laugh or to cry. We care about needy people because Christ once cared for us when we were needy. And our task is to find other needy souls and to show them the love of Jesus Christ. This is what our founder intended for us to be.

Bruce Watson writes, "Four years ago, I was sitting in my cab in front of a Philadelphia hotel, thinking and praying. This particular week, business had been extremely slow. I was wondering where I was going to get \$60 to pay for the daily rent of my cab.

I could lose the cab - and my livelihood - if I didn't come up with the money immediately.

Just then, a young woman got into my cab and said, "I know it will cost \$25 for this ride, but I can only afford to pay you \$15. I work for a charity, and that's all they gave me for cab fare." I thought about it for a minute. I am probably going to lose my cab anyway. Why not help someone else have a good day? I agreed to do it.

At her destination, the woman paid her \$15 fare, then reached into her purse and laid a \$100 bill next to me on the seat!

"The \$15 fare was the charity's money," she explained. "This is my own money. God told me you needed it." With that, she was gone.

Through tears of joy, I thanked God for supplying my daily needs.² She had provided

¹ Vince D'Acchiolo in *The Transparent Leader* by Dwight L. Johnson (Eugene, OR: Harvest House, 2001), pp. 99-100.

² Bruce Watson, "I Needed Cash," *Christianity Online*, October 6, 1998, www.christianity.net

encouragement for one she did not know and God asks us to provide encouragement, especially for the ones we know. We do it as we invest in kindness, generosity of spirit, gentleness, hope, and help.

As we encourage one another, we make this world a brighter place, because we have become aware that "Anyone who claims to be "in the light" and hates his brother is, in fact, still in complete darkness. The man who loves his brother lives in the light."

After the renowned rock guitarist Stevie Ray Vaughn was killed in a helicopter crash in the summer of 1990, his family requested that "Amazing Grace" be sung at his funeral service. Reflecting Vaughn's standing in the music community, Bonnie Raitt, Stevie Wonder, and Jackson Browne were honored to lead those gathered in singing the hymn. The crowd knew the words to at least the first verse, but stopped singing, and heard that trio's a cappella concluding rendition of "Amazing Grace."

Dr. Barry Bailey, the officiant of the service, commented on the power of watching and listening to this performance. Bailey was especially touched by the poignancy of Stevie Wonder's singing "I once was blind but now I see." The hymn rang true even for the blind performer, Bailey insists, because the song speaks of the universal blindness of our hearts and our spirits, not our individual eyes. "Amazing grace" means we can never receive grace by the right belief or by our own goodness - it is amazing because it is free and undeserved and available to all.³

St. Vincent de Paul ran an orphanage in Paris during the first half of the seventeenth century. One winter day he opened the front gate to find

an abandoned infant lying in the snow. He brought the bundled baby back into the warmth of the room where he was meeting with a number of wealthy women who helped support the orphanage. Naturally, St. Vincent asked them what he should do with the tiny, frail creature. One of the women suggested that perhaps God intended for the baby to die, as a punishment for the sins of the mother. Appalled at this attitude, St. Vincent angrily retorted, "When God wants dying done for sin, he sends his own Son to do it!" This is grace, mysterious, inexplicable, but touching and overwhelming. It is worth devoting the whole of our lives to a response to this grace.⁴

³ Dr. Barry Bailey, "Being Like Your God."

⁴ Taken from Richard P. C. Hanson, *The Attractiveness of God: Essays in Christian Doctrine* (Richmond, Virginia: John Knox Press, 1973), 146.

