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SECOND CHANCES

Barnabas?? Oh yeah, isn't he the guy that climbed a Sycamore tree in order to see Jesus? Wait that was Zacchaeus. Was he one of the 12 apostles? No that was Bartholomew. Barnabus. Hmm...oh wasn't he that the guy who was in jail with Jesus and the crowd wanted Pilate to release him instead of Jesus? Oh, yeah that was Barrabbas.

I know most of us can't recall ever having heard of Barnabas. Yet, there he is in full living color in Acts. Barnabas, which means "Son of Encouragement", was actually quite the influential figure. He started the church in Antioch and was, along with Paul, one of the major figures – if not the major figure in the beginning – of the movement to preach the gospel to the Gentiles. We first hear of Barnabas in chapter 4 of Acts when he sold some land, took the proceeds "and placed it at the apostles' feet and it was distributed to anyone as they had need." He was a Levite from Cyprus – and incidentally is credited with founding the Cypriot Church. But given all of this, there is something I find even more remarkable about Barnabas. Let's back it up a bit and come at this from the scripture we just read.

Most of the time, when you read these chapters in Acts (9-15) the big headlines are about Saul's conversion on the road to Damascus and the Mission trips – which we did not read this morning. And, no doubt, there is hardly a more compelling story than the Damascus Road experience. Paul became known for all time as one of the greatest leaders and theologians of the early Church. But we have to remember what he was like before his conversion. I mean...this was one violent dude; almost evil. At one point he is seen holding the garments of the stoners of Stephen. What a picture of a cold, calculating young man this story paints. In his pursuit and persecution of early Christians he was ruthless. He was the scourge of the early church. A less likely candidate to be an instrument of God you would be hard pressed to find.

I have always found the language in the opening verse of Acts chapter 9 to be bone chilling: “Saul, still breathing threats and murder” . . .breathing . . .threats and murder. That is as twisted as it gets in the Bible. Suddenly . . .Saul, like few others in the Bible has a one-on-one encounter with the risen Christ. And the intensity of the encounter is magnified by its lack of high drama. No burning bush . . .no parting of the Red Sea. Rather, inexplicable blindness . . .and then, just a voice. Just a voice, and a question: “Saul . . .why do you still persecute me?” And so Saul’s dark heart is profoundly, forever transformed in this unimaginable experience of the divine presence in an earthly existence.

The problem is that we know, from our viewpoint, that his heart was indeed changed forever. But what about all those people he had been so determined to put a stop to? Imagine the strength of his will – to have his powerful intellect and energy working for the all-out destruction of Christianity. He soon begins to preach and spread the very word he was doing his best to eradicate, the “message” he had relentlessly pursued to stamp out and punish those who tried to spread it. *We* know that was the beginning of an incredibly rich and faithful ministry. But in that moment, how could those around him possibly believe it? How could they be sure? Now, we find him preaching in Damascus when he decides to go to Jerusalem. *Excuse me?* Jerusalem?! Ground zero for the early church, the seat of the twelve apostles . . .and Saul goes there? No less than to see the apostles? Are you kidding me?! They were in constant danger for proclaiming their beliefs. Persecution and potential martyrdom was their lot. Many, I would dare say most people questioned the genuineness of Saul’s conversion. Mistrust was rampant and angst was running high—I mean off-the-chain baby.

Chapter 9, verse 26: “When Saul had come to Jerusalem, he attempted to join the disciples; and *they were all afraid of him*, for they did not believe that he was a disciple.”

Enter, the “Son of Encouragement”. Barnabas . . .filled with the Holy Spirit. He is the one to introduce Saul to the apostles. Barnabas – next to the apostles themselves – was one of the

most well known and influential leaders of the early Christian community – highly regarded by all. With this one gesture Barnabas was risking his entire reputation. And for what? For whom? For Saul – who, as far as apostles were concerned, might very well be nothing but a wolf in sheep’s clothing – just scheming and conniving enough to dream up the idea of saying he was converted in order to find a way into the inner circle in order to destroy it from within. I try to envisage the atmosphere of that first meeting when Barnabas, sponsoring Saul, brings him into the company of the apostles. With the exception of Holy Week I can hardly imagine a more intense, fearful, chaotic moment in the Bible.

Think for a moment of the extremes present here. Saul, ushered into the same room as the leaders of this upstart, counter-culture movement. In a real sense they were enemies. Saul, scourge of the faith, NOTORIOUS ENEMY NO 1. There could be no riskier, deadlier situation, no meeting more fraught with possible catastrophic consequences than Saul in the same room with the Apostles. All because one trusting soul, Barnabas, believed in Saul. Believed in the prompting of the Holy Spirit and lived that faith. Risking everything and, frankly, possibly the whole Christian church at that time. Your *head* should be *spinning* at the mere thought. This is tantamount to an Osama Bin Laden figure publicly renouncing terrorism, embracing the American Way, apple pie and the flag. *Who would believe THAT??!*

Unfortunately...we know nothing more of this meeting...other than the fact as an outcome Barnabas and Saul are commissioned for ministry to the Gentiles. I don’t know about you, but seems like A LOT was left out. But the point is made, and for me it is one that we must not overlook. That point is not Saul’s conversion – as miraculous and divinely inspired as it was – nor what will become an all-important ministry to the Gentile world. What puts a lump in my throat is the humanity and faith of Barnabas, living a Christ-like existence. Willing to risk everything for what and who he believed in. Barnabas trusted the Holy Spirit, relying on that faith he recognized the truth about Saul’s conversion and knew Saul needed to be given a chance. Through that belief a wonderful partnership in mission is begun, and history is made.

Given a chance. Our entire history revolves around women and men of all ages, races, ethnic backgrounds, heights, hair color, (some with hair – ok don't go there) and language – being given a chance. A chance to contribute; a chance to express a new thought, a different idea from a different perspective. Don't we all benefit through this amazing, grace-filled act of being given a chance? Is there a time in your life you can remember you were given a chance and it changed the course of your life? I just told a friend recently of one such case in mine. It was in high school and it may be why I do now what I do. I was called on at the last minute to step in and conduct a concert for a teacher who was ill. Looking back on it now, I'm amazed that the head of the department gave this kid—I was a sophomore or a junior I think—this opportunity. Of course, at the time, I was too stupid to know that “sure, I can do it” was fraught with...let's see how did I phrase it earlier: “... possible catastrophic consequences.” Where would any of us be without those first chances, without the trust of someone else believing in us and our innate ability?

Back to our story: Saul, named Paul, embraced by the followers, set out with Barnabas on their mission trips. During one of these trips the very well regarded John Mark (possibly Barnabas' cousin) becomes a part of their team. Then in Pamphylia, for reasons we do not know, John Mark departs company with Barnabas and Paul and returns to Jerusalem. Barnabas and Paul continue to have considerable success in winning converts to the faith.

As their ministry gains momentum, a controversy arises over the circumcision of Gentiles. Like good Methodists, they establish a task force to review the issue. Representatives are dispatched to Jerusalem where the matter is to be discussed and decided. Barnabas and Paul go back to Jerusalem as well to defend the Gentile converts against the charge that they must be circumcised. Once the council is concluded a letter is sent to the church at Antioch and those who deliver the letter are also accompanied by “our beloved Barnabas and Paul”. (Notice that the Big B is still getting top billing.) After a few days in Antioch Barnabas suggests that the two of them revisit every city where they proclaimed the word (in chapters 13-14 incidentally); Paul agrees. Except – Barnabas wants to take John Mark with them. And Paul seriously balks at the idea.

Paul says, “Nope. Not John Mark.” John Mark left them way back in Pamphylia. This disagreement between Barnabas and Paul becomes so irreconcilable, the two actually part company. I feel a loss here of what I imagine was a wonderful friendship. I suppose a silver lining is that instead of having one mission to the Gentiles, we now have two. However, for me there is deep, meaningful, and enduring message in this turn of events.

Barnabas, our “Son of Encouragement” says, “Ok, the kid screwed up. But he has paid his debt – let’s give him a second chance.” Nothing doing for Paul.

Paul – you remember Paul when he was Saul right? The guy who needed not a *second* chance but an initial chance – needed to be believed in and trusted in the first place way, way back... oh...4 chapters ago? Of ANYONE in the whole movement at that time who should have felt for John Mark and taken him under his wing it was Paul. Nope. Not gonna do it.

Barnabas, yet again, risks everything (his reputation, his standing, his influence) for another, and this time it is for the Michael Vick of Acts. We all know that story! Brilliant college player with a big, bright professional career ahead of him. But he let too much of it go to his head and fell in with the wrong crowd. Ok, the kid screwed up, he paid a debt. Was anyone in pro-football, the newspapers, the Monday morning commentators, and the call-in listeners willing to give this guy a chance? One guy was. Indianapolis Colts coach Tony Dungy. This guy is a modern day Barnabas showing this young kid who screwed up the path back. He helped him restore his dignity and regain his reputation, which is exactly what Barnabas did for John Mark. Sure, Andy Reid gave Vick a job...and so he has some Barnabas qualities, too, but it was Dungy who put Vick on the right path.

So Paul takes Silas and heads off to Asia Minor and Barnabas, the “Son of Encouragement” once again opens his heart and at the prompting of the Spirit offers forgiveness and

acceptance to another – to John Mark. This is the deep and enduring message in Acts 9-15 for me: The inexorable graciousness, compassion, and humanity of Barnabas.

He was not the scholar that Paul was. He may not have been a great writer or orator or theologian. But in his understated way, he embodied the very presence of the Risen Christ who compels us to forgive not once or twice or seven times but seventy times seven.

This is what I think Christ is asking of us by way of Barnabas this morning. Give our sisters and our brothers a chance. A second chance. And then another. And what if they don't come through? What will happen to us? Giving second chances is very risky for sure. I am reminded of the axiom "No good deed goes unpunished." But, this is what it's all about. How many of our sisters and brothers just need encouragement; a second chance; a word of grace.

The humanity and depth of empathy and love Barnabas had for others is hard to fathom from the few passages that we have about him, but I like to consider him as gracious, kind and deeply feeling. Slow to anger, rare to chide; supportive, understanding and filled with the spirit. He was the one standing with Paul when few, maybe no one would have anything to do with him; Barnabas was "For Paul" when so many others were against him. Despite the persecution Barnabas was risking he was still willing to be there for Paul. And now he stands for John Mark. He risked his reputation twice. He even risked his standing as a prominent leader by sponsoring and supporting and traveling with Paul – who eclipses him in what... "fame". (Granted, he didn't know he was risking this.) He risked his standing again in the community by taking with him John Mark who had failed them in Pamphylia.

Barnabas stood for Paul when no one else would, and he stood for John Mark when Paul would not. For me, Barnabas was the human face of God. What greater thing can we have than someone who believes in us, stands for us, loves us – no matter what. I confess, I may be more like Paul in this story than I would care to admit; when I really want in my heart to be like Barnabas. I have been blessed to know people in my life that meet these sort-of

Barnabas criteria for me. And the impact on my life they have had is incalculable, inestimable.

I have many favorite bible passages. But I think if I had to distill to a few words the entire Bible; my entire faith; my entire trust and hope it would be to this passage in the 8th chapter of Romans. It was penned by the eloquent apostle Paul. But it was lived by the Son of Encouragement, Barnabas:

If God is for us, who can be against us?

Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword?

No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.