Let's Be An Encouragement


INTRO:

Well, I bet you all have not often heard a sermon on Barnabas! The focus is usually on his famous colleague, Paul. But as we will find out, Barnabas' story has something very important to teach us about what God calls us to be as Christians. As many of you know, during the Intersession in January, our classmate, John's wife, Debra had to have some serious surgery, and I and many of us were taking the Hebrew/Greek Intersession classes. As soon as John shared about this, my friend Scott Clark, quickly organized a sign-up list for folks to sign up to assist John's family, by baby-sitting their children or providing meals for the family, as they went through this difficult time. Scott's deep concern and initiative in gathering help for the family was an inspiration to me, as I'm sure it was to others. And even more so, the outpouring of volunteers to help the family, in sacrificing precious time during these intense courses (especially Hebrew!) to baby-sit, provide meals, etc. was just amazing and heart-warming! What a witness! This community as a body of believers, truly reached out to John's family during a time when they needed it most, and if that isn't cause for encouragement, I don't know what would be!

Pages 1 & 3: (Trouble & Grace in the Bible)

Well, at the time when this story took place, the Sanhedrin had declared a great persecution against the Church at Jerusalem after the stoning of Stephen. After Stephen's long speech before the Sanhedrin, recounting the history of the Israelites and God, and
after he accused them of murdering Jesus, and proclaimed that he saw Heaven open up and Jesus at the right hand of God, the council gnashed their teeth and immediately started to stone Stephen. Then the Sanhedrin declared a severe persecution against the Jerusalem Church. Paul, who was then Saul, dragged Christians from house after house and threw them into prison. So Christians indeed had a great need for encouragement at this time! BUT some Greeks who were devout Christians still had courage to risk their lives and continue preaching the gospel, and many people continued to become Christians. They first went to Cyprus and then to Antioch. And the passage tells us that Barnabas came from Jerusalem to Antioch, and “full of the Holy Spirit and faith,” he exhorted them to continue in their faithfulness. So we could picture Barnabas as one of those guys that always had glow and smile on his face and had a positive word to say. So yes - Barnabas encouraged them. In Greek, the word is parekalei, which means encouraging or entreating; it’s in the imperfect form, which means that Barnabas, did not just encourage them once, but encouraged them more than once! So Barnabas could be thought of as an encourager, and because of this quality and his deep faith, he was chosen by the Holy Spirit to be the Apostle Paul’s co-worker in Missions to the Gentiles.

Pages 2 & 4 (Trouble & Grace in the world)

So how about us?

What do we do when someone comes to us and shares that they are deeply disturbed by the VT tragedy? (Virginia Tech)

Do we just hang our heads, shrivel up inside, and say, “Oh…” Or do we follow after Barnabas’ example and offer them our encouragement, based on our faith through Jesus Christ, in a powerful and loving God?
(Move out of pulpit)

For the one who comes to us in their pain about the horrific events of VT, we could reach out to them (extend arms w/palms facing up), offer them our presence and listen to them. (Drop arms) We could allow them the permission to vent out all of their emotions on us; the whole spectrum of emotions (make motion), from disbelief (fold hands, pause and change eye-contact) to frustration (pause) to anger to depression (long pause). Then we could offer whatever encouragement that the Spirit enables us to offer them.

And we could encourage them to also bring all of these emotions before their God, before the throne of grace. And we could encourage and pray for them to return to God, in their time, to receive God’s love and grace. (Move back to pulpit)

As Christians, and especially Asian Christians, we often have a problem with anger. We tend to think that there’s something wrong with feeling angry – but if we did NOT feel angry during a time such as this, in the aftermath of VT, there would be something wrong with us! Jesus is our best example that righteous anger, that is anger which is brought about by injustice or evil, is perfectly o.k. Jesus brushed off (move arm) all of the goods from the tables in the Temple. The Prophets brought their anger and doubts before God, or upbraided God, and we see Jeremiah doing this in Jer. 12. So let’s allow each other to feel anger and all of the other emotions about VT. (Pause)

And although we can have no real answers as to why something this hideous could happen, God teaches us through Scripture, such as in the book of Job, that there will be some things in this life, that we can have NO answer to. So our job is not to understand why something has happened, but to bear what has happened in an honorable way. (Move
out of out pulpit). So in order to continue walking faithfully with God through the rough waters, we need to **reach out to each other** (extend arms, pause), **pray for each other** (fold hands f/prayer, pause), **and support and love each other** (cross arms over chest, pause) **through such times**. (Move back to pulpit & pause)

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And what do we in *this denomination* do, when we receive news that some churches have actually decided to “defect” and are trying to take the church property with them? We might remind our Presbyterian brothers and sisters that no sound pastoral counselor or therapist in the world, would ever recommend divorce as the best solution to an unhappy marriage! So also, we can assure each other that “defecting” from the denomination is neither the Christian nor the wise solution to strained or unhappy relationships between churches and PCUSA. A truly Christian and appropriate response would be, just as in the case of an unhappy marriage, **exhorting** one another to love and forgive, to work toward understanding and **reconciliation**, after our models in Barnabas and our Lord, Jesus Christ! Amen?! (Pause)

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Although many of you don’t know this about me, when I was a child, I wasn’t always as outgoing as I am today... I can just see the heads shaking out there in disbelief! I was always a pretty open person, but I struggled a lot with low self-esteem, and not having enough self-confidence. But thankfully, my best friend, Helen and other close friends, used to keep saying to me, “Kitty, you are so smart, pretty and have such a good personality, etc. etc., but the only thing you lack is **self-confidence**! Now I don’t know how true any of those things were - they may have been more flattery than compliments,
but the point is that my biggest problem was not, lacking gifts, but lacking self-confidence. So these close friends prayed for me and kept encouraging me, over and over again through the years to have more confidence in myself! And for better or worse, the bold extrovert that you all know me as, stands before you today.

Thanks to these dear friends, today, I always try to encourage others or offer a positive outlook, no matter what sad or even heart-breaking news they bring me. Some people marvel at how I can be so positive, having gone through so much with Chronic Fatigue Syndrome, but I think that it's precisely because of the challenges that God brought me through, that I can be so encouraging . . . Because I have seen and tasted God's amazing grace and love on the other side of the trials! I have a long ways to go in becoming like Barnabas, but I do try.

And here at seminary we all need much encouragement, don't we, just to get through it?! And I thank God for all of the encouragement that I've received from my friend and preaching professor, Jana. She has coached me with her homiletics expertise and encouraged me repeatedly, as one from a church that wouldn't hear of a woman preacher, to discover and develop my preaching gifts. I've also received repeated encouragement from my bosses, Charles and Dan. And if it hadn't been for all of Charles' nagging – oops, I mean encouraging, I wouldn't feel as comfortable up here! I've also been encouraged by other faculty and staff here, such as James Noel, Eugene Park, Philip Wickeri, Marv Chaney, Bob & Polly Coote, and many others. (Pause) And of course – I've been SO encouraged in the last three years, by all of my dear friends here, with whom I've been through thick and thin. Thank you, all!
Conclusion:

So as we celebrate communion today, work through the aftermath of VT, finish up the semester, and always, let's remember Barnabas and by God's grace, be an encouragement. Amen.