Finding Encouragement

Psalm 133

Acts 3: 1-10, 4: 23-37

The scripture reading today grabbed me. It grabbed me at several levels. Let’s begin with the last couple of verses.

*There was a Levite, a native of Cyprus, Joseph, to whom the apostles gave the name Barnabas (which means “son of encouragement’).*

Have you ever received encouragement? Or given encouragement? What did that look like?

Encouragement is the substance we need to carry on. It is a form of hope and grace. The dictionary defines encouragement as the act of encouraging. Encourage is a verb. It is a word of action. To encourage is to:

* Inspire with courage, spirit or confidence
* To stimulate by assistance or approval
* To promote, advance or **foster**
* Hearten or give hope, urge on
* To spur on and stimulate
* To **foster** or provide help

Definitions help us gauge the meaning of words. Stories also help. Here is a time when I felt the wonder of encouragement:

I was 30 yrs old when I went to seminary to begin the task of becoming a Minister of Word and Sacrament. Vicki and I had been married for 8 years and we were parents of a 2 and a half yr old boy.. We moved from our home in Montreat, NC to an apt at Louisville Seminary. It was 2 efficiency apartments connected together to form a “two-bedroom” apt. Pretty cramped. We had set aside cash – but it disappeared more quickly than planned. I began second guessing this “call” business.

Went to the mailbox one day. There was a note postmarked from the town we had move from. The note was from a couple in the church. There were words of encouragement – Thank you Joel and Vicki for taking this risk. We want you to do well. And with the note was a check for $200. It was manna from heaven. Totally unexpected! But received with goodness and grace. An act of encouragement – not just with words but also in action.

Encouragement comes in unexpected ways. And it comes. Not all acts of encouragement are like this. A kind word, a smile, saying *thank you* or *well done* are all ways of encouraging another. It is so simple and basic. Encouragement is simple and real and honest. If we over reach it becomes fake – and you know it.

So, how have you been encouraged? How have you offered encouragement?

The stories from the Acts of the Apostles are full of stories of encouragement. Barnabas carries the name – the one who encourages.

Here are some ways to see encouragement in these stories of faith:

A man who is ill encounters Peter and John on their way to worship. He does what he always does and asks for money. There are folks in the world who make their living by begging. The disciples did not have any money to give so they offered him prayer and healing. It can make us a tad bit uncomfortable in our day and time. But that is what they had. And that is what they gave.

The result was the man who had not ever walked got up and walked. Not only walked but leaped. The Message translation renders the verse:

*The man went into the Temple with them, walking back and forth, dancing and praising God.*

Imagine dancing in the House of the Lord? The episode created quite a stir. But can you imagine what the man felt – looking forward to a new way of living. It was a small act of encouragement that changed his life. But it also meant he could no longer be a lame beggar. He would have to find a different way to make a living.

When you read the rest of chapter 3 and the first part of chapter 4 you find that the man got questioned by the religious authorities – is this really “fake news” that you are peddling?

Then Peter and John got called before the same authorities. They spent the night in jail and then were questioned. They were asked: *Who or what authorized you to do this?*

The Acts of the Apostles are full of sermons – and this is a chance for Peter to do just that. He shared the story of the resurrecting power of God in Christ. But the authorities would not have any of it. They ordered the disciples not to speak of any of this again. But Peter said: *we can’t keep quiet about God’s love and grace in the world.*

Peter and John were encouraged by having a chance to share what they had lived and seen.

Then they returned to the church community. They shared what had happened. They prayed, They were convicted of God’s work in the world. They continued to share it. And people noticed. They found encouragement in their community together.

They found the courage to come together and live in a different way. Acts 4: 32-35 describe a communal life where they were able to look after each other and share what they had. This communal model has been used by various groups of Christians at different points in time. Such behavior challenges us. New Testament scholar Greg Carey notes that the verb tense of this passage is the imperfect tense which describes not a completed action but one that is habitual or ongoing. Barnabas sold one field. Maybe there were others he did not sell. Yet that action was the act of inspiration for the whole community. He did it with honesty and transparency. It demonstrated courage and confidence.

From this portion of scripture, we can find encouragement

* From those who share with us
* From sharing of our own time, energy substance
* From sharing good news
* From saying what we believe
* From realizing that when we have received a great gift we are called upon to change

Almost a year ago Jay Dickey died in Pine Bluff Arkansas. He had served as a congressman form the northwest portion of Arkansas from 1993 to 2001. While serving on the House Appropriations Committee in 1996 Dickey questioned Dr. Mark Rosenberg of the Center for Disease Control and Prevention (the CDC).

Rosenberg was seeking an appropriation to research gun violence and how to prevent it. Dickey was a stalwart defender of the National Rifle Association and thought that the effort was about gun control not violence prevention. They clashed in a hearing. Dickey thought that any research would result in an attack on guns. The result was the “Dickey Amendment” to the appropriations bill that in effect barred the CDC from conducting research on gun violence. Jay Dickey won the political battle.

A couple of weeks after the encounter Rosenberg had to go back to Capitol Hill. This time it was to visit some of Dickey’s staff and review some data. Dr. Rosenberg was told by his superiors at the CDC not to discuss anything with the congressman, just the staff. But then as he prepared to leave one of the staff said to the doctor – t*he Congressman wants to see you.* So he went into the office. Congressman Dickey asked Rosenberg to sit down. The congressman intended to use the time to get to know his “opponent.” Dickey shared in an interview in 2015 that one of the lessons he had learned from being a trial lawyer in Arkansas was “. . .not letting divisions exist.” [[1]](#endnote-1)

They talked about their children. For some reason they stayed in contact. They didn’t talk about guns or violence – at first. Over time they became – well, friends. Then they began to talk about violence and guns. By the time of the Aurora shooting at a movie theater in 2012, Dickey knew that something had to change in the approach to research. And Rosenberg knew that research could not be simplistic or reductionist.[[2]](#endnote-2)

Why share this story in a sermon about encouragement?

First, the issue of gun violence is all over the place. Church leadership is talking about it – here at PHPC and at every other church. Churches are thought to be “safe places”- that is this space is referred to as a “sanctuary” – so we need to think about what that means.

Second, just to mention the issue of legal rights and constitutional protections allows people to go to all sorts of different places in their minds.

Third, we proclaim in this church that we are followers of a Risen Lord. What was accepted as the end in his death became a new beginning in new life. We speak of resurrection of the dead, but there is also a resurrection of the living. If the power of resurrection can raise Jesus from the dead to life, it can also raise us from places of dead ends to new ways of living now.

The man who had been lame since birth was given a new life to be able to walk. But as he did he could no longer be the lame beggar. Encouragement is not just a word to say “keep on,” encouragement is also a challenge to do things differently.

Peter and John had to share their faith. By saying what they believed and gathering with the community in faith they were encouraged and enabled to continue their testimony.

Barnabas took seriously his commitment to the church community. He was recognized for his support which encourage all there.

We can see in the interactions of others – even around divisive issues – the power of the God who offers new life not just for a time in the future, but a time now.

May you find the encouragement you need for your life and circumstances now – and always.

Dr. Joel L. Alvis, Jr.

Pleasant Hill Presbyterian Church

Duluth, GA

April 8, 2018

1. “[Their 1996 Clash Shaped the Gun Debate . . . Now They Want to Reshape It,”](https://www.washingtonpost.com/business/economy/their-1996-clash-shaped-the-gun-debate-for-years-now-they-want-to-reshape-it/2015/12/30/707bfed6-a8e5-11e5-bff5-905b92f5f94b_story.html?utm_term=.b61df7805487) Washington Post, December 15, 2015 [accessed 4-6-2018] [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. “[Opinion: Time for Collaboration on Gun Research](https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/time-for-collaboration-on-gun-research/2015/12/25/f989cd1a-a819-11e5-bff5-905b92f5f94b_story.html?utm_term=.b9dd91778f54),” Washington Post, December 25, 2015 [Accessed April 6-2018]. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)