

Acts 11:19-26**Barnabas the Encourager (Building up the Church)****8/16/26**

One of my favorite books in the bible has always been Acts. There is so much in there that we can apply to our lives and communities. I think especially, as I spent time learning about how to do ministry well, I often looked to Acts for guidance. A lot of this stemmed from the summers that I spent in college doing an internship at a church over in the Tri Cities. This summer internship was called the Trainee Ministry and it was in those summers that I really felt my calling to ministry. College students would spend the whole summer doing ministry at the church, working together, studying scripture together, and doing life together. Trainees would live with families from the church so that they would have somewhere to live for free and to be more enveloped in the church community. I lived with my grandparents since they lived over there and attended that church. My second summer, we spent the whole summer studying one verse: Acts 2:42. "And they devoted themselves to the apostles teaching, to the breaking of bread, to fellowship and to prayer."

Ever since that summer, I have loved the idea of the community that the early church had. They kept it to the basics of studying scripture, spending time together, and praying. Constantly in the book of Acts we see where the church grew by hundreds and thousands just by people hearing the disciples teaching. The church grew because they could see how genuinely the disciples believed what they were saying. They were so encouraging and really spent the time to invest in the different communities that they went to.

One of these disciples was Barnabas. He often gets overlooked when talking about Acts because people tend to focus on Paul since he wrote a good chunk of the New Testament, or Peter who had been one of the original 12 disciples. But Paul might not have been able to have

the ministry he did a well without Barnabas. Barnabas was the one to stick up for Paul when he came back to Jerusalem after his encounter with Jesus on the road to Damascus. Everyone was skeptical because of how zealous he had been in his persecutions of Jesus followers, but Barnabas convinced them to give him a chance. Barnabas then took Paul under his wing to mentor and guide him.

In Acts, we see how Barnabas and Paul did a lot to help the church grow, but they weren't the only ones. Right before the passage we are going to look at today, Peter has a vision from God that helps to change the way that they viewed Gentiles. Jews avoided interacting with Gentiles because they were considered unclean, God sent Peter this vision to show him that nothing made by God is unclean. There had been tensions as Gentiles were coming to faith because the Jews did want to associate with them. But as the good news was spreading farther out from Jerusalem, they needed to find a way to come together. Our passage follows this story as the church continues to grow and expand.

So, we are going to pick up the story in Acts 11, starting with verse 19.

¹⁹ 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. ²⁰ 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. ²¹ The Lord's hand was with them, and a great number of people believed and turned to the Lord.

²² News of this reached the church in Jerusalem, and they sent Barnabas to Antioch. ²³ When he arrived 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. ²⁴ He was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and faith, and a great number of people were brought to the Lord.

²⁵ Then Barnabas went to Tarsus to look for Saul, ²⁶ 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 of the persecutions that were happening in Jerusalem, followers of Jesus scattered. It was becoming more dangerous for them to continue doing ministry in Jerusalem after Stephen was killed, so they spread out. This also means that they were living into what Jesus called the disciples to do in the Great Commission at the end of the Gospel of Matthew. He told them to spread the Good News to the ends of the earth. Since they had no concept of how large the earth really was, this was what they believed to be the ends of the earth. However, some were only spreading the word to other Jews. They were still having some trouble following what Peter had shared with them in the previous section, that no one is unclean and everyone has the right to hear about Jesus and follow him.

But in Antioch, they were sharing the good news with the Greeks. Antioch was a very diverse city. There were many cultures and religions there, which helped people be more open to hearing about this new movement. And so, the church started growing in Antioch. It says in verse 21 that "The Lord's hand was with them, and a great number of people believed and turned to the Lord."

The Spirit was moving in the people in Antioch. When word got back to the church in Jerusalem, they decided to send Barnabas to help out. But something important to pay attention to is that the church started growing before Barnabas arrived there. The church wasn't growing in Antioch because there was some incredible theologian or preacher there telling the people about Jesus. Regular, everyday people who were passionate about spreading the gospel were in Antioch. And it was because of their authentic joy and excitement about Jesus that led to the church growing.

This is not a very long passage, but there's a lot we can take from it. I think one of the things that is so special about the church in Antioch is the way it grew so organically. A blog post I saw from another church said that **"The story of the Antioch church reminds us that extraordinary things happen when ordinary believers step out in faith, guided by the Holy Spirit. It challenges us to look beyond our comfort zones, to embrace diversity, and to remain centered on Jesus Christ."**

It doesn't always have to be people who have studied theology or do ministry vocationally to bring people to faith. Anyone can tell people about the gospel. And special things

can happen when we listen to the nudge of the Holy Spirit to step outside of our comfort zones to share the gospel. That is one of the things about the summer internships I did that was special. The students were able to hear about Jesus from people with different perspectives than the youth pastor. People who they sometimes felt like they could relate to better or in different ways. Everyone thinks differently and learns in different ways, so having different voices and perspectives to listen to can be very helpful in ministry. In my years of being one of the interns and leading the program, I saw the ways that interns were able to relate to the students and have conversations about faith that the students might not have had before because of the unique ways they related to the different interns.

But what also helped this ministry be successful is that there were people mentoring and guiding the interns as we learned about ministry. And this is why the church in Jerusalem sent Barnabas. They wanted him to go and encourage the people in Antioch in their ministry. In Acts 4, it says that Barnabas' name is actually Joseph. But they call him Barnabas because it means "Son of Encouragement." Barnabas was known to be very encouraging.

In verse 23 it says, " When he arrived 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."

Barnabas wasn't sent to take over the ministry, but to be a support, to encourage them as they followed the calling that God placed on their hearts. Not only did Barnabas encourage the people in Antioch, but he realized this would be a great opportunity for Saul to grow in his leadership and went to Tarsus to bring him back to Antioch.

Barnabas showed great leadership skills in his ministry and the way that he mentored and encouraged people. He didn't go for just a week to check in with the church in Antioch. It says that Barnabas and Saul met with the church for a year, to teach and encourage them as they grew. They invested in the community and took the time to really get to know the people there and know how to best support them. This is why missionaries go and live in the communities they are serving for a while. And why it's important to partner with established ministries and missionaries when doing short term mission trips. Ministry is all about relationships and it's important to take the time to truly invest in the community and the relationships. That's the best way to know how to help, by spending time in the community.

Barnabas is the kind of leader who invests in others, who brings them alongside him as he goes about his ministry so they can learn and grow. How many of you have had a mentor like this? It can be hard to find people who are naturally gifted at this kind of mentorship, like Barnabas. A lot of the time we end up having to figure things out on our own instead of having someone invest in our growth and to help us learn.

When I was going through the process to become an ordained pastor in our denomination, the last thing they wanted me to do was a yearlong mentored ministry internship. Basically, I needed to go to a church that was not my home church, to work for a year and be mentored by the pastor there who had gone through training to become a mentor. While I had been doing ministry for many years, I did not get much of that true Barnabas style mentorship over the years. So, like Saul, I went to a new city, and for me a new state and new coast because I ended up in Delaware. And for a year I did ministry at a new church. I worked with the students at that church, to help build

them up in their faith. And I was mentored by the pastor there. We met weekly to talk about ministry, I preached once a month and received feedback from him. I participated in other aspects of pastoral ministry that I hadn't had much experience with yet, but the whole time, the pastor walked alongside me and helped me to grow as a leader and pastor.

I'm telling you these parts of my story because I want you to see how much the events of Acts can still apply to our lives as followers of Jesus today. The early church set such a great foundation for us to follow in spreading the gospel, building up the church, and building up leaders. I hadn't spent much time studying Barnabas before this sermon, but after really diving in and learning more about him, I wish that we spent more time learning about Barnabas because there is so much to learn from him. Especially when we are working on growing as leaders.

It says in verse 24 that "He was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and faith." Barnabas wasn't just a gifted leader, but he was a good man and was filled with the spirit. Unfortunately, we have seen many leaders over the years who let the power get to them and ultimately were not good leaders because of it. But Barnabas was a good man and used his position of power to lift people up and encourage them, because he relied on the guidance of the Holy Spirit. And the church grew even more after he arrived in Antioch. The thing to remember, which this passage makes clear, is that we cannot do this on our own. Before Barnabas shows up, it says that the Lord's hand was with the people in Antioch, and Barnabas was full of the Holy Spirit. God was with them the whole time they were spreading the gospel in Antioch. It was through God's strength and power that the church grew in Antioch. It wasn't because of the people who were

there. This is what we need to remember and why some leaders end up failing. **God empowers us to guide people toward him. It is not through our own strength that we do any of this and if we try to do it on our own, we will burn out or fail.**

The early church grew so rapidly because everyone depended on God and relied on the empowering of the Spirit to share the gospel. They spent time studying scripture, praying, being in fellowship, and breaking bread together. The early church was all about being in community together and growing in their faith. Their lives were centered around God. They spent so much time studying scripture and in prayer that they were probably very in tune with God's voice. It's like when you spend a lot of time around one person and you start thinking and speaking the same way.

What would happen in our lives if we spent that kind of time with God? We fill our time with so much superfluous stuff. What would happen if we took away even half the time that we spent playing games on our phones, or binge-watching tv shows, or doom scrolling social media, or whatever it is that takes up all your time? If we used that time to read scripture, pray, or volunteer in a ministry? How much closer to God would we be? If our minds were full of God instead of everything else?

How can we be like Barnabas and be full of the Spirit? Guiding people toward God, mentoring new believers or new leaders. Maybe that sounds intimidating to you. That's ok. Maybe you are looking for someone to mentor you, to help you grow in your faith. We talk about the discipleship pathways here at Rose Hill and how there are different ministries for different parts of the discipleship pathway. A great, low-stakes

ministry to be involved in that can help us to grow closer to God by being in community and spending time in scripture is joining a micro group. Micro groups are small groups of 3-4 people, and you read and discuss scripture together. I was in a micro group last year and all of us agreed that it was so great to have that accountability to spend time in scripture. It never felt like someone needed to have all the correct answers. We just talked about what we noticed in the passage, things that stood out to us, or how it reminded us of different parts of scripture. There is something special about discussing scripture with others. It brings people together. There are different perspectives and no matter how many times you may have read a book in the Bible, there is always something new to glean, something new to learn about God.

It's no accident that the times that I have been in community with others, spending time in scripture together have been the times that I have felt closest to God. God is a communal God. He made us to be in community. We are not meant to do this whole faith thing on our own. This is why we have churches and small groups. To grow closer to God together. This is why the church in Jerusalem sent Barnabas to Antioch. To build connections with them and support them as they were growing. Because we are not in this on our own. So, if you haven't been in a micro group yet, I encourage you to join one this fall. Find a ministry to get involved with, where you can help others grow in their faith, or find someone who can mentor you as you grow in your faith. It's easy to just walk in the doors at 10am for worship and then walk right out the doors when service is done. But I would encourage each of you to find ways to be connected. To help the church grow, the way the people in Antioch and Barnabas did.