

Barnabas: What's in a Name?
Sermon preached by Andy Kumpel
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Have you ever wished that you had a different name? There is something about our names that shape our personalities. Every now and then we meet someone whose name just doesn't match who they are. In college I had a good friend who fit this picture. He was one of the most Christ-centered people I've ever had the privilege of being around. He had strong character and charisma. If he had been in the army his soldiers would have wanted to follow him into battle. But he has a bit of a unfortunate name. His name is **Melvin Beversdorf**. When I first heard that name I conjured up a nerdy looking guy with not much personality. But that is just the opposite of who Melvin really is.

Our names do shape us though. I remember before we had our first child, who we named Hannah, my wife Cassie came home from work one day and she was very excited. She had learned that you can actually name your child anything that you want – first, middle and last name. Cassie was never thrilled by taking the last name Kumpel when we got married. Our name gets misspelled and mispronounced all the time. I still remember the enthusiasm in her voice when she announced, "We could name our baby anything that we want. We could name it Brett Favre or Santa Claus!"

Naming children has always been a serious endeavor. That's why it is significant when a person in the Bible has their name changed. It signals a transformation that they have experienced. Abram becomes Abraham in preparation to become the father of

many nations, Jacob becomes Israel after he wrestles with God, Saul becomes Paul as he is called to be an apostle of Jesus. Today as we continue our discipleship sermon series we are going to take a closer look at a man named Barnabas. He wasn't always called Barnabas, but his name was changed because it reflected the new character that he had in Christ. **Barnabas means "son of encouragement."**

So, what's in this name Barnabas? He's known as an encouraging guy, but why is he worthy of looking at as an example of discipleship? That is what we hope to discover today. As we seek to grow in becoming more like Christ, a good study of the earliest followers of Jesus fills out the picture of what it really means to be a disciple. Learning about the earliest disciples of Jesus does more than increase our knowledge of scripture, it helps us to know and love God – this is the highest goal that we can have as disciples of Jesus. But Barnabas is somewhat mysterious. He's not as world renowned as many of the other people in the Bible. We don't have old movies that give us a picture of Barnabas in the same way that we think of Moses. We don't even think of the great journeys that Barnabas made. He sort of fades into the background. But today I want us to get a vivid picture of this first century man. We don't know what he looked like (**silhouette of male bust with a question mark**), but we do know a lot about his character.

Barnabas is known for his generosity. This is how we first are introduced to Barnabas in Acts 4. **"Joseph, a levite from Cyprus, whom the apostles called Barnabas (which means Son of Encouragement), sold a field he owned and brought the money and put it at the apostles' feet."** Acts 4: 36-37 This is the

beginning of the transformation from Joseph to Barnabas. It all began with a radical shift in the way that Barnabas thought about his possessions. He desired to give first to the work of God, so he sold what he owned in recognition that it was not really his to begin with. Generosity starts by recognizing what we earn as wealth is not really ours as the Lord is the owner of all. As it says in the Old Testament, **“But remember the Lord your God, for it is he who gives you the ability to produce wealth...” Deuteronomy 8: 18**

Barnabas is known for his encouragement. The apostles called him the son of encouragement. The word encouragement literally means **“lifting of another’s spirits.”** Barnabas was the man who gave the apostle Paul his start in ministry. He introduced Paul to the other disciples when they were skeptical of Paul’s authenticity as a disciple. Shortly after this, Barnabas and Paul were sent to the church at Antioch. They served together there for a year. Barnabas and Paul traveled to many other churches to debate with people who were seeking God and to encourage Christians. Over their time together it became evident that Paul had prolific gifts for ministry. In fact as Barnabas and Paul started out their travels in the Book of Acts Barnabas is always listed first. However, as Paul’s gifts as a preacher and evangelist emerged Barnabas’ gift for encouragement allowed him to step aside and let Paul take the lead. Paul may have never become the successful missionary and prolific author of the majority of the New Testament if it weren’t for Barnabas’ encouraging words.

How many of us would be ready to do what Barnabas did? Barnabas used to be the headline of the act, but he was willing to

take a backseat to Paul as he recognized Paul's gifts emerging. We often allow pride to get in the way of being an encouragement to others. Our cultural norms tell us that to be the best you have to beat the best. This leads to an environment of competition where encouraging others seems completely alien. But there is Barnabas encouraging Paul's gifts. This kind of supernatural encouragement can only come from one source – Jesus Christ. Jesus was the ultimate encourager and this is where Barnabas learned to encourage others. We too, can learn from Jesus' example.

Consider the power of encouragement in your own life. Can you think of someone who encouraged you early on in your faith? For Paul it was Barnabas, but many of us know an encourager. Who encouraged you? I want you to write their name down in the margin of your notes. Consider the impact that a simple well placed act of encouragement can have for the faith of someone who has questions about God or someone who is going through a difficult time. Now, here is the practical example that Barnabas gives us for discipleship. I want you to encourage someone else in their faith. Somewhere on your journey you were encouraged – now you can be an intentional encouragement to someone else. Let's not overcomplicate things. You can simply write an encouraging card with one of your favorite scripture verses included. Or maybe you can make an extra phone call to someone who needs to have their spirits lifted. You never know what God can do through an act of encouragement – you might be encouraging a future missionary the same way that Barnabas encouraged Paul.

The way that Barnabas allowed Paul to become the leader in their ministry together displays **his humility**. This is the characteristic of Barnabas that causes him to be a lesser known person from the Bible. But this too he learned from his relationship with Christ. Humility can be the most difficult area of our spiritual lives to continue to grow in because the opposite of humility is pride. There is a delicate balance when it comes to pride because there is a place for healthy pride. It is healthy for a father and mother to be proud of their children when they do well in school. However, pride has been called the father of all sins. It is our desire to place ourselves at the same level as God that causes us to disobey the Lord. As we continue in discipleship, we, like Barnabas, can grow in humility.

Barnabas was known for his grace. When Paul first came on the scene Barnabas was the only disciple who was willing to give him a chance. We can understand the hesitation of the other disciples. Paul was well known for his hatred for Christians. His charge was to kill them because of his fervent belief that they were changing the message of God's chosen people. **“Meanwhile, Saul was still breathing out murderous threats against the Lord's disciples.”** **Acts 9:1** For all the disciples knew Paul was a liar who was trying to get on the inside so he could sabotage their mission from God. But Barnabas extended grace to Paul and put his own reputation on the line. He gave Paul his first chance at a changed life. This is a trademark of a disciple of Jesus. Grace is at the center of the Gospel of Christ. We want to be known as people of grace. We want our

church to have experiences of this kind of everyday grace extending to people who are in need of a second chance with God.

Sometimes we are afraid of second chances though aren't we? Some might wonder if welcoming a recovering drug addict into our church is a good idea. What if they slip up and start using again? What if they are a danger to our children? These might be some of our fears. But that's not the kind of grace that God extends to us is it? God accepts us when we fall again and again. We want our church to be known as a place where people can come to receive God grace. Sometimes we might be unaccepting of others because of our own fears or our unwillingness to admit our own failures. We are all imperfect, fallen, yet redeemed when we receive Christ. The truth is that no matter what your past contains you can be a full participant in the church of Jesus Christ. God's grace doesn't just happen in a spiritual way, but it also happens when we embrace people who have different stories than we do.

That is why we have a recovery ministry that addresses all kinds of different needs that meets at our church every Friday night. That is why we support Next Chapter ministries that seeks to minister to people who have been affected by crime. Our church wants to look beyond our nearest horizon to see the grace of Christ extended to all people who are in need of a second chance. When you dream about what God is going to do at Autumn Ridge in the future I want those dreams to be colored by the grace of God that Barnabas exemplifies. This is what it means to be a disciple – to see with eyes of faith what might be possible because our God is bigger than what we can accomplish without his grace.

Barnabas is known for his conviction. We don't always credit Barnabas as a man of conviction. He has instead become an icon of being a good friend of Paul as he is pictured on the cover of this **Children's Sunday school lesson** about friendship. While we have placed a great amount of focus on Barnabas as the great encourager, he was also a man of conviction. Barnabas served alongside Paul over years of ministry and travel together. However, the two disciples eventually parted ways. **"Barnabas wanted to take John, also called Mark, with them, but Paul did not think it wise to take him because he had deserted them in Pamphylia and had not continued with them in the work. They had such a sharp disagreement that they parted company." Acts 15: 37-39**

Barnabas demonstrates his conviction to extend grace to John Mark in the same way that he had to Paul years earlier. It may have been easier to reconcile with Paul, but Barnabas shows us that his conviction to God's grace was more important. Even though Paul had emerged as the leading missionary to the Gentiles, Barnabas was willing to put their friendship on the line to stick with John Mark who had struggled with faithfulness, but in the end he proved to be a dedicated servant. In fact, after Barnabas' death while Paul is in prison and had been deserted by many of his other supporters, he called for John Mark. **"Get Mark and bring him with you, because he is helpful to me in my ministry." 2 Timothy 4:11** If had not been for Barnabas' conviction and encouragement years earlier Mark may have strayed from his calling to serve God.

Barnabas is known for his inclusiveness. We've already seen how Barnabas built a bridge with Paul and the other disciples.

We've heard how he mended a broken relationship between Paul and John Mark. Barnabas' encouragement of others seems to only be limited by his imagination of what God can do. But I wonder how we do with this value of discipleship. How are we at including others on the journey of spiritual transformation? Honestly I struggle with this component in my own life. Whether we want to call it sharing our faith with others, or just being willing to open up our own spiritual lives to be honest with a few people; I think we generally struggle to include people the way that Jesus did.

When Cassie and I moved to Rochester almost 8 years ago we settled in a nice little northwest neighborhood and quickly closed ourselves off from all of our neighbors. We were just too busy, we had so much going on at church, I was in school, Cassie worked long hours at the clinic, we had a lot of good excuses. But God placed it on our hearts to change that. So a couple of years ago when we moved to a new house we decided that we were going to get to know our neighbors in this new neighborhood. And we've done ok. We know the names of our neighbors and we know some of their kids and we say hello when we are out mowing the lawn or shoveling snow. But we've struggled to move beyond that to actually include these neighbors in our lives. I suppose that spiritual conversations happen in other spheres of influence for us. I'm not suggesting that being a disciple of Jesus means that we go knocking on our neighbors doors to ask them if they are going to heaven when they die. But as we look at how Jesus lived with the people around him it is clear that he included many different kinds of people in his spiritual influence. As we learn from Barnabas' ability to encourage each

person who came across his path I'm challenged to examine my own level of engagement with the people who are nearest to my everyday life. I struggle to do this with my neighbors, perhaps you are great with your neighbors but have a hard time in your workplace. Barnabas shows us what it is like to be a bridge builder to those around us.

Early in this sermon I explained how we have a cloudy picture of Barnabas. His name doesn't conjure up an iconic image like when we think of Jesus, Moses, or Noah. But these character traits that come from following Jesus give us a picture of Barnabas as the great encourager, so I want to give you a real life modern day visual of how we might think of Barnabas. For those of you visiting our church, this is our Barnabas. Our Senior Pastor John Steer. He is the picture of encouragement. If you are down and out, just spend a few minutes with John and he will have your sights set on Christ again. So here is my plan: next weekend when John returns from India, I want you to be an encouragement to him by greeting him as Barnabas. If you are feeling humorous you might even call him Pastor Barney!

The story of Christianity through the centuries is one of passing the torch of transformation. Peter passed the Gospel to Barnabas who encouraged Paul. Paul passed it on to many others. Becoming a disciple of Jesus means that we pass what God has imparted to us on to others. There are three significant facets to Barnabas' life that we can learn to grow in this area of becoming a multiplying disciple of Jesus. In Acts 13 we find the first facet. **While they were worshipping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, "Set apart**

for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.” Acts 13:2

We must first **realize our calling by the Holy Spirit**. It is interesting to note that this is the only place in the entire New Testament where we see a direct quote from the Holy Spirit. In other places the Holy Spirit speaks through individuals. Bible scholars speculate that the Holy Spirit also spoke here through one of the believers during this time of worship, but Luke the author of Acts does not tell us who. The words used by the Holy Spirit to describe the calling of Barnabas and Saul are the significant details of this passage. The phrase “set apart” carries the same idea of making something holy. As disciples we are set apart to do God’s work. But I wonder if we always fully comprehend this calling. It reminds me a lot of people who have served in some branch of the military. In order to help individuals who join the military become a part of the greater unit they go through basic training. This is when they are stripped of their own identity and built back up with a new understanding of their place within the unit. If you’ve ever spent time with a military veteran, then you understand that their military service is a part of their very being – it has been ingrained in their identity.

Being a disciple of Jesus certainly carries with it much more personal freedom than the basic training that our service men and women go through. But the idea of a calling that changes your very identity is quite similar. The name “Christian” became a significant calling during the ministry of Barnabas and Saul. **“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.” Acts 11: 26 Today the name “Christian” no longer necessarily carries with it the significance of the calling of the Holy Spirit. Many people who identify as Christians today have not had their identities transformed by the power of the Holy Spirit. In the same way that a military veteran identifies with the uniform, disciples of Jesus must identify with the calling of the Holy Spirit. The church should be as recognized by the fruit of the Holy Spirit as the US military is recognized around the world by the stars and stripes of the US flag. So, let me ask you, what does the calling of the Holy Spirit mean to you? Take a moment today to write a few phrases that come to mind when you think of being set apart for God’s work. God’s kingdom is moving forward and we are looking for good workers. If you are ready to renew your calling of the Holy Spirit or maybe start a new path of discipleship I want to hear from you. Send me an email this week. Our pastors are excited to help you refine the calling of discipleship.

The second facet of becoming a multiplying disciple like Barnabas is to **speak the message of grace boldly**. Boldness is one characteristic of Jesus’ life and ministry that was seen regularly in the early church. The Jewish synagogue was a place of great spiritual debate. When the early Christians went there to preach they were often met with confrontational Jewish leaders. This was the case in Iconium, **“But the Jews who refused to believe stirred up the Gentiles and poisoned their minds against the brothers.”**

Acts 14: 2 Paul and Barnabas were not discouraged by the adversaries, but were instead motivated. **“So Paul and Barnabas spent considerable time there, speaking boldly for the Lord...”**

Acts 14: 3 A disciple of Jesus looks for opportunities to boldly express the grace of Christ. Francis of Assisi said, “**Preach the gospel at all times and when necessary use words.**”

In this situation Paul and Barnabas do use words to proclaim the Gospel. It’s important to note what boldness means in this context. The two disciples are not foolhardy. There was a plot to stone them, “**But they found out about it and fled...**” **Acts 14: 6** In some circles of the Christian Church a thought has invaded that says to be a disciple of Jesus one must suffer and be put into dangerous places for the sake of the Gospel. Notice that this wasn’t the time for Paul and Barnabas to suffer. Even though they spoke boldly they were led by the Holy Spirit to flee. Sometimes speaking boldly into the life of a friend is all that God calls us to do. It is important to remember that God is the one who changes hearts. He calls us to be faithful wherever he has put us.

The third facet of multiplying discipleship that we learn from Barnabas is to **extend grace wherever possible by giving second chances**. We might want to think of Barnabas as the patron saint of second chances. His high esteem within the leadership of the early disciples allowed him the privilege to extend grace to Paul and later to John Mark. Think about how difficult it is to offer a second chance to someone when you’ve been burned. You fear being hurt again. Most of us put up a shell of protection in this situation. Giving a second chance may be the farthest thing from our minds. But think about Jesus – he modeled the second chance with so many of society’s outcasts. To grow in the ways of Christ we will become motivated to find opportunities for grace to take shape in real ways.

Earlier I asked you to write a name in the margin of your notes. I want you to consider sending a note of encouragement to that person who once encouraged you. But maybe you have received a second chance or want to extend grace to someone who needs a second chance. Maybe the note you write this week will be crafted a little differently because you've experienced God's grace in a significant way. Barnabas challenges us to become an agent of grace wherever we are.

Last week we had glimpse into the life of Peter and this week we've peered into the life of Barnabas. Over the coming weeks of this discipleship series we will look to other followers of Jesus. The goal is not to become exactly like Barnabas or Peter or Paul, but to consider the very realistic ways how we too can be transformed as Jesus' disciples. Discipleship is more than acknowledgement of a set of beliefs. Discipleship is a movement of the heart, soul, mind, and all our strength to know God, love God, and lead others to do the same.

Let's pray.