

Barnabas: They Gave Him a New Name

[Acts 4:32-37, 9:26-30](#)

Unsung Heroes and Heroines of the Faith

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How do you size up the newcomers who cross your path from time to time? What criteria do you use when a recent college graduate joins your firm, or a Somalian refugee moves in next door, or your daughter brings home a guy wearing a tank top and covered with tattoos? Of course, when girl meets boy, your assessment doesn't amount to much even if you are their father or mother. But when it comes to others isn't it true we measure people by the class they belong to, the family they come from, and the profession they pursue? Admit it now: aren't you more likely to admire a judge than a janitor, and a doctor than a ditch digger? So if you shook hands with Joseph after worship you'd be impressed to learn that he was a Levite, because that put him at the very top of the Hebrew pecking order. Israel's priests were all drawn from the tribe of Levi, and the priests were the ruling elite, the upper echelon, the aristocracy of their day. But as we will see in a minute, it's not his membership in the Jerusalem 500 that earns Joseph a place in the Bible.

Again, we told that Joseph was a native of Cyprus, and Cyprus was a major center of Judaism, surpassed only by Jerusalem and Alexandria. So when people learned that he hailed from Cyprus their reaction was "Oh, Cyprus. He must be a man of merit. Let's ask him to join the Chamber of Commerce; let's elect him an elder in the church." But again, as we shall see, it wasn't his birth place that got him a place in the Bible.

No, the true measure of a person is not what they bring with them from birth or society or academe; the true measure of a person is what they do with what they bring with them. And the nicknames we give people often offer the best clue to their true measure. Joseph picked up the nickname Barnabas, which means, Son of Encouragement. And for a couple of very good reasons. First, because he recognized the potential in Paul. When Paul first arrived in Jerusalem he was packing a bad reputation. For months he had rounded up Christians and slapped them in jail. He was present when Stephen was stoned to death. He didn't throw any stones, but he signaled his approval by holding the coats of those who did. So when Paul showed up in the membership class at the First Presbyterian Church of Jerusalem, the apostles were deeply suspicious. They thought he was trying to infiltrate their ranks so he could imprison and kill even more of them. But Barnabas saw something in Paul that the others didn't see. Barnabas saw a forgiven sinner and a potential apostle. He knew Paul's story, how he had been on his way to Damascus to arrest Christians when he was struck to the ground by a blinding light from heaven. He knew Paul had been addressed by the very Jesus Paul had been persecuting. He knew Paul had been baptized in Damascus and had already begun preaching the good news of Jesus Christ. So Barnabas didn't hold Paul's past against him. To Barnabas there was only one issue: had Jesus Christ forgiven Paul? And if Christ had forgiven and accepted Paul, then there was no issue. So, says Acts 9:27, "Barnabas took him, brought him to the apostles, and described for them how on the road he had seen the Lord." And from that moment on Paul was accepted as a brother in Christ, because Barnabas has recognized his potential.

When I moved from another denomination into the Presbyterian Church (USA) I wasn't toting an unsavory reputation, but I was an outsider, an alien, an unknown, so I was willing to jump through whatever hoops the Presbyterian hierarchy might hold up in front of me. I'll never forget my first interview with the synod executive in Los Angeles. He sat behind a huge oak desk, fixed me with a steely eye, and proceeded to lay down a long list of conditions. One was that I should not expect to have a church of my own right away. Even though I was at that moment the pastor of a five hundred member church, I should plan on coming into the Presbyterian Church as an assistant pastor somewhere. Then, when I had served an apprenticeship for five or six years, I might be entrusted with a congregation of my own. The associate executive sat in on that interview, and when the two of us left the executive's office he turned to me and said, "Forget almost everything you heard in there. You have the education and the experience to go wherever God calls you in this denomination." And, in fact, not many months later I was called to serve as pastor of the Whitworth Community Presbyterian Church, a congregation of 750 members on the campus of Whitworth College in Spokane, Washington. Thank God for that associate synod executive. His name was Bob Hermanson, but to me he was Barnabas, Son of Encouragement, because he saw in me some potential that his boss did not.

Sometimes our attitude toward strangers is not so much antipathy as apathy. We don't see the newcomer, we don't recognize the outsider, we don't extend the right hand of fellowship to people we don't know. If Barnabas were here this morning, he would be the first to speak to a person who signed in as a visitor on the friendship register, and the last to leave Stone Hall after making sure that no one was left standing alone. Won't you make sure that Barnabas is here? Won't you be Barnabas to those who are looking for a gesture of encouragement?

Second, Barnabas earned his nickname because he responded to the plight of the poor. When he saw people going hungry he sold a piece of property he wasn't using and gave the proceeds to the One Great Hour of Sharing offering at his church. But why would he do such a rash thing? Why this reckless selling of his assets without even checking to see whether the market was up or down? I can only guess that Barnabas cared so deeply and sacrificially for others because Jesus cared so deeply and sacrificially about him. Jesus had satisfied his hunger for forgiveness, and now he could do no other than respond to the hunger that gnawed at people's bellies and shriveled their souls.

My pet name for Jesus is The Great Encourager. Jesus does not condone our faults and failures, but neither does he make us stew in our guilt. Instead he repeatedly forgives and just as repeatedly spurs us to get back on our feet and go at it again. Jesus is the Great Encourager, and Joseph gets nicknamed Barnabas, "The Son of Encouragement" because he's a living reflection of Jesus.

A few years ago fourteen hundred Chicagoans met in the grand ballroom of a downtown hotel to honor the mother of the year. It was

someone no one had ever heard of, Mrs. Dominic Savino, an immigrant from Italy, a housewife, and very poor. But Mrs. Savino had neighbors on Erie Street who were worse off than she. She had four children, many of them had eight or more. She was 49, many of them were in their 60s and 70s. She was healthy, many of them were sick. She was full of energy, many of them were worn out. She had a devoted husband, they had abusive husbands or no husbands at all. So she appointed herself the unofficial social worker of Erie Street. She visited the sick, collected money from the comparatively poor and gave it to the desperately poor. She did housework for the bedridden, cooked for the motherless, and spread smiles the length and breadth of Erie Street. When they asked why she worked so hard for others when she had her own family to care for, she replied, "You gotta live till you die, so you live good."

You may not live on Erie Street like Mrs. Savino, but the hungry are only a few miles away. You may not have property you can sell like Barnabas, but you have assets, and here is my challenge. This year's One Great Hour of Sharing offering will be received on Palm Sunday, April 4. That's eight weeks from now, but when the time comes let's be prepared to give as generously as we can, and not just the leftover change in our pockets. And here's my suggestion: every time you go out to eat between now and April 4 put away an equal amount of money for One Great Hour. If you spend \$20 in a restaurant, set aside \$20 to feed a hungry family. That may mean missing out on a movie, or postponing a new spring outfit, or staying home on President's Holiday. But hunger never takes a holiday. Hunger stalks and maims and kills every day of the year.

So let's take our cue from Barnabas, and give as we have never given before. Let's adopt Mrs. Dominic Savino as our exemplar. Her grammar may be faulty but her challenge is compelling: "You gotta live till you die. So live good!"