

## Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church

(June 15, 2014)

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Sermon manuscript

### Sermon series: THE TIES THAT BIND

#### **Encouraging One Another - Part 1: The Soft Side**

Study #7

(Acts 4, 9; Hebrews 10:24-25; Romans 16:16)

**Introduction:** The Holy Spirit, with skin on...

On the night before Jesus was crucified, He spoke with His disciples about what life would be like in His absence.

Among other things, He told them to expect the arrival of another Helper, the Holy Spirit. And just as Jesus Himself had a multi-faceted ministry, so the ministries of the Holy Spirit would be multi-faceted and varied, too.

In the Bible, the Holy Spirit is sometimes described as a gentle Comforter. He is just exactly what we need when our world is crumbling or when we are in pain. At other times the Spirit is a hard Convictor of sin who pierces our consciences and drives us to repentance.

The Holy Spirit is a comforting presence when life is hard and He is a correcting presence when we are hard. There is a hard and a soft side to the Spirit of God and the Greek language refers to Him by a word that allows this breadth. The word is *parakletos*.

*Parakletos* literally means, “one who comes alongside” to help. That’s the Holy Spirit.

No matter the problem - sin or weakness, rebellion or brokenness, sadness or unjust anger - the Holy Spirit sidles up next to us and helps us with what we need.

Sometimes we need to be handled with gentleness; sometimes what we need is a swift dose of hard truth. The Holy Spirit delivers both exactly when we need it.

Interestingly enough, the same Greek word that describes the Holy Spirit is also used to describe how you and I are to be with each other. And for us as it is for the Holy Spirit, *parakletos* has a very wide range of meaning.

The most common translation of the word is *encouragement*.<sup>1</sup> So, the New Testament says that you and I are to *love, serve, forgive, and not be jealous of or boast to* one another. We are to *pray for, confess our sins to* and now, *encourage* one another.

Like the Holy Spirit with skin on (and I say that with some fear and trembling!), you and I are to come alongside each other and provide what is needed to promote growth in love and faithfulness.

We are to be sensitive to the moment, to the situation, and to the person we want to help. Sometimes we’ll give strong, but gentle comfort. Sometimes our help will take the form of rebuke and exhortation.

Whatever type of encouragement is needed, that is what we give. It is our loving effort to move others along to be and do all they can be and do for Jesus.

THAT’S what encouragement is all about. And THAT is what we’re going to be thinking about today and next Sunday as we consider the biblical command to “*encourage one another.*”

To investigate this matter of encouragement, we’ll start off by taking a look at a fascinating Bible character, a guy named Joseph.

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<sup>1</sup> Greek, *paraklesis*.

## An Encouraging Hero

### Getting to know Joseph of Cyprus

#### *Joseph's personal background*

Of course, there are several “Joseph’s” in Scripture. One Joseph was the favorite son of Jacob in the Old Testament. Another Joseph was the husband of Mary, the mother of Jesus.

Our Joseph for today lived during the first century and was part of the very early church.

This Joseph grew up on Cyprus, an island located in the far eastern portion of the Mediterranean Sea.<sup>2</sup> Cyprus was sometimes called the “Happy Isle” because of its ideal weather and natural beauty. It had tremendous natural resources and was considered a near paradise.<sup>3</sup> Joseph had the advantage of growing up in this idyllic natural setting.

Cyprus was also home to a very eclectic society that would have shaped and molded Joseph’s outlook on life. He enjoyed the political benefits of being a Roman citizen, the cultural benefits of the Greek language and culture, and the spiritual benefits of being a Jew.<sup>4</sup>

Joseph was a Jew. In fact, he could trace his lineage back to Levi, the priestly line. And he was also a man of means who owned property on Cyprus.<sup>5</sup>

By the time we meet Joseph in the Bible, he already goes by another name, a nickname. The book of Acts in the New Testament tells a couple of stories that help us see how he came to earn this nickname.

#### *Joseph's (likely) testimony*

Since Joseph was a devout Jew he would have normally traveled to Jerusalem to celebrate each of the three major festivals of the Jewish year as often as possible: Passover, Pentecost, and Tabernacles. There is every reason to believe that he was there, in Jerusalem, at Passover, the year Jesus was crucified.

In the days leading up to Passover, Joseph might have even watched Jesus enter the city on Palm Sunday, might have seen Him cleanse the Temple, might have heard Him teaching in the Temple, and might have seen Him behaving as the Messiah/King.

However, on Friday of that week, Joseph would have seen, not a coronation, but a gruesome crucifixion. Then, on the Sunday morning following, he would have also been in Jerusalem when the world was turned upside down at the news of Jesus’ resurrection!

Joseph was a devout man who was in Jerusalem for Passover. As a wealthy man, following Passover, Joseph would have stayed in Jerusalem and not immediately returned to Cyprus. Those who had the means to do so would often remain in Jerusalem for the next fifty days, until the celebration of the next major holiday, Pentecost.

When the day of Pentecost rolled around, Joseph would have been preparing to go to the Temple to worship God. But, like thousands of other Jews on that particular Pentecost, Joseph would have seen and heard things he had never seen or heard before.

He would have witnessed the one hundred and twenty followers of Jesus speaking in languages they had never learned. He would have heard them speaking of God’s mighty deeds and talking about Jesus. And then he would have listened as Simon Peter preached the Gospel.

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<sup>2</sup> In his later life, Barnabas was banished to Cyprus and held in exile by the Romans for his outspoken testimony for the Lord. Tradition tells us that Barnabas was one of the “70” and says that he died a martyr’s death on Cyprus.

<sup>3</sup> Cyprus was a Roman province, famous for its copper mines and its shipbuilding industry.

<sup>4</sup> So, Joseph would have been pretty cosmopolitan in his worldview. He understood the secular world but was still firmly committed to his Jewish roots.

<sup>5</sup> The Old Testament prohibited Levites from owning property in the Holy Land, because their “inheritance” was to be the tithe collected from the other tribes (Numbers 18:23-24). However, since the property Joseph owned was likely in Cyprus, his land holdings didn’t violate Scripture.

This is conjecture, but Joseph appears so early in the record of Acts that I believe it is perfectly reasonable to believe that he was one of the three thousand Jews who were converted to faith in Jesus on the Day of Pentecost.

Within weeks of that Day of Pentecost, Joseph had already acquired the nickname by which we know him today, a name given to him by the apostles. It is a Hebrew-ism meaning “Son of Encouragement” or, as they would have said it, “Barnabas.”<sup>6</sup>

This Joseph/Barnabas was a very encouraging guy, and we find the first piece of encouragement out of Barnabas’ life in the fourth chapter of Acts.

### Evidences of Encouragement (from Acts)

*Generous sacrifice (Acts 4:32-37)*

The church of Jesus began in community. They shared everything. The author of Acts, Luke, tells us that -

***[Acts 4:34]...there was not a needy person among them, for all who were owners of land or houses would sell them and bring the proceeds of the sales, [35] and lay them at the apostles’ feet; and they would be distributed to each, as any had need.***

That’s a great picture of sacrificial, loving generosity - and Joseph was right in the middle of it.

Luke tells us that Joseph sold a tract of land that he owned (presumably on the island of Cyprus) and brought the money over to the apostles’ who then distributed it to those who had need.

It is in the telling of this story that Joseph is identified as “Barnabas” - the Son of Encouragement. (Acts 4:36-37)

So, who did Barnabas encourage by giving title to his land?

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<sup>6</sup> “*Bar-nabas*” - Hebrew for “Son of prophecy” but by the time of the New Testament the meaning of the name had changed to “son of encouragement / consolation / exhortation.”

Certainly...

- **The poor**

The poor would have seen Barnabas’ gift as the gift of God. They would have seen his generosity as affirming that, “Yes” they were all - rich and poor - one in Christ. They would have been comforted in the love of God.

- **The wealthy**

Those who, like Barnabas, had the means to do so would have been encouraged to follow suit and be as generous as Barnabas was.<sup>7</sup>

- **The church as a whole**

The whole church would have been encouraged to love the way Jesus told them to love by seeing it acted out before their very eyes in living color!

- **A watching community**

The non-believing in Jesus world would have been encouraged to believe that there was something supernatural going on that would prompt a rich man to give away his wealth to support the poor.

And the amazing thing is that Barnabas’ example of generosity is STILL encouraging us, two thousand years later.

And it is just as true today that when we who love and follow Jesus sacrifice to meet needs in His Name, others are encouraged to also follow and to also sacrifice. The work of God gets healthy when we follow Barnabas’ lead and encourage by our giving.

For instance...

God is honored and people are encouraged when your generosity allows Aaron and Lydia Farmer to go to the Far East to serve Christ, and allows Megan Head to go to Europe to do the same, and allows teens from our church to go to the Challenge Conference in July, and allows missionaries we support in various places to serve the Great Commission.

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<sup>7</sup> Sadly, Ananias and his wife, Sapphira, were only drawn to want the *reputation* of Barnabas, not to imitate his sacrificial generosity. Read their story in Acts 5.

Likewise, those who wonder where their next meal is coming from are encouraged when they stop off here during the week to pick up groceries for their families.

It is a strong encouragement to faith to see the faithfulness of those who sacrificially give to support what God is doing at our church year after year after year.

Barnabas may have been among the first Christians to bring encouragement through his generosity, but he certainly wasn't the last.

Sacrificial giving of any kind brings encouragement today, too. When you sacrificially give your money or your time or your comfort or your energy in Jesus' Name, you become a 2014 Barnabas - and God uses your encouraging generosity to bring encouragement to your world.

Barnabas shows us another side of encouragement a little later on in the book of Acts.

*Risky love (Acts 9)*

### Meet Saul, the persecutor

Two to three years after the birth of the church we are introduced to a man named Saul. Saul was a zealous, Jewish young man who was opposed to Christianity.

He was tasked with guarding the cloaks of those who were killing Stephen, the first Christian martyr. I've always pictured Saul nodding in approval as the rocks flew.

Following Stephen's death by stoning, the first-ever persecution against the church kicked into high gear, with this Saul leading the charge.

Luke tells us that Saul ***[8:3] ...began ravaging the church, entering house after house; and dragging off men and women, he would put them in prison.***

Saul even went to the High Priest in Jerusalem and got letters that allowed him to go as far north as Damascus to find Christians, arrest them, tie them up, and bring them back to Jerusalem to stand trial so that they could be either imprisoned or killed. (Acts 9:1-2)

### Meet Saul, the believer in Jesus!

However, a funny thing happened to Saul on the way to Damascus. Just outside the city limits, He was intercepted by the resurrected Jesus who appeared to him in a blinding vision. Saul was literally blinded and spent the next three days eating and drinking nothing, totally in the dark.

He was brought to saving faith in Christ when a Christian named Ananias, who lived in Damascus, came to him. At God's direction Ananias laid hands on Saul and prayed for him. Immediately, he was saved and regained his sight.

Just about immediately, Saul - the persecutor! - began to preach the Jesus He had been opposing there in Damascus.

After a short period of time Saul was forced to leave Damascus, persecuted for his new faith. Instinctively, he traveled south to where the Jesus movement had all started: Jerusalem.

He wanted to get to know the followers of Jesus in that city. And this is where the story gets good for us, today, who want to grow in the grace of encouragement.

### Would YOU want to meet Saul?

When he arrived in Jerusalem, the Christians - apostles and otherwise! - weren't exactly thrilled to see Saul. That's understandable. We get it.

Given his involvement in the stoning of Stephen and in the persecution of Christians, generally, what kind of a reception would YOU have given Saul? Their standoffishness makes some sense.

***[26] When he had come to Jerusalem, he was trying to associate with the disciples; but they were all afraid of him, not believing that he was a disciple.***

It hadn't been that long ago that Saul had done terrible damage to the church in Jerusalem, and the disciples there hadn't forgotten. They all figured that he was faking it.<sup>8</sup>

They suspected him of working undercover as an agent for the High Priest, pretending to be a Christian so that he could lure them into his confidence and THEN arrest, imprison, torture or even kill them.

Now, WE know that is not the case. WE know that Saul really was now a Christian. We know that he simply wanted to taste the same rich Christian fellowship in Jerusalem that he had enjoyed in Damascus.

WE know all that, but the Jerusalem believers didn't know that. Saul and the Jerusalem Christians are at an impasse.

Saul wants fellowship; the Jerusalem Christians want safety, and nobody will take a first step toward Saul. Well, not exactly nobody...

One man does step forward, and we've seen this guy before. It's Joseph of Cyprus, better known as Barnabas, the Son of Encouragement.

Enter Barnabas...

***[27] But Barnabas took hold of him and brought him to the apostles and described to them how he had seen the Lord on the road, and that He had talked to him, and how at Damascus he had spoken out boldly in the name of Jesus.***

Now, how did Barnabas know what had happened in Damascus? The only way he could have known was by Saul's own testimony.

But everybody else was afraid of taking Saul's profession of faith at face value. Everybody except Barnabas. Barnabas believed him,<sup>9</sup> took him by the hand and became his sponsor.

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<sup>8</sup> Evidently, he hadn't come to them with any written commendation from the Christians in Damascus.

<sup>9</sup> This is one clear example of applying 1 Corinthians 13:7's exhortation, ***"love believes all things."***

In Alcoholics Anonymous circles, a *sponsor* is an alcoholic who is on the road to sobriety who comes alongside (like the Holy Spirit does for us) a newcomer to help him or her on that same road.

Sounds encouraging, doesn't it? Sounds like something any of us could use as we travel the road of following Jesus.

Well, Barnabas was never more truly a "Son of Encouragement" than right here when he sponsored Saul. He walked up to Saul, broke the ice, arms outstretched, and welcomed him in.

That's what encouragers do. They take risks. They love boldly. They reach out vulnerably.

A Vision for Encouragement...

Let's see if we can't understand Barnabas' thought process as he weighed the upsides and the downsides of welcoming Saul of Tarsus into Christian fellowship in Jerusalem.

Remember, Barnabas had been right there in Jerusalem when Stephen was stoned to death. He may have been watching. He might have seen Saul standing there guarding the cloaks. He knew how committed Saul had been to destroying the Christ-following movement.

I think that Barnabas understood that Saul might very well have been faking it. Further, he knew that if that was the case, his "right hand of fellowship" welcome to Saul would have meant his own imprisonment or death. It might have meant the deaths of other leaders of the Jerusalem church. Welcoming Saul was risky!

But he also knew that Saul might have been telling the truth. Saul might have recently become a Christian, might have been a brother in Christ, might have just been looking for Christian fellowship.

And to reject a brother in Christ, well, THAT was a risk Barnabas was not willing to take. His choice was a "no brainer." He took the risk and welcomed Saul with open arms.

An encourager sees a chance to nurture someone in the faith and takes it - hang the risk.

Barnabas' story is important because it lets us know that while the ministry of encouragement is not a safe ministry, it is sooo worthwhile.

After all, can any of us imagine the damage done to the cause of Christ if no one had invited Saul - soon to become the Apostle Paul - into the fellowship of the church? What if Saul had been locked out, never welcomed?

Encouragement is a ministry that requires deep, personal, relational investment. It requires a willingness to take risk. It involves sacrifice and sometimes danger. It is about a willingness to say what needs to be said and to do what needs to be done to come alongside someone in a crisis.

But who knows, it just might be that the encouragement you offer to someone who needs it might pay the kind of dividends Barnabas' encouragement did for Saul/Paul.

You might be encouraging someone today whom God will use powerfully tomorrow.

Now, you have noticed that our memory verse(s) for the month of June are Hebrews 10:24-25. These verses contain the words "**encouraging one another**" - and that's why I wanted us to reflect on, meditate on, and memorize them.

As we head down the homestretch today I want to highlight a couple of thoughts from these verses in Hebrews 10 as they relate to our diving, headfirst, into the encouragement pool.

### **YOU - An Encourager! (Hebrews 10:24-25)**

*[Hebrews 10:24] and let us consider how to stimulate one another to love and good deeds, [25] not forsaking our own assembling together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another; and all the more, as you see the day drawing near.*

### **Sanctified Creativity**

For a couple of reasons I especially like the way Eugene Peterson renders these verses in his version of the Bible, The Message.

He writes, "*Let's see how INVENTIVE we can be in encouraging love and helping out, not avoiding worshiping together as some do but SPURring (☺) each other on, especially as we see the big Day approaching.*"

We see that encouragement is going to take some work. It's going to take some getting to know each other.

A cowboy knows just how to use his spurs on a horse to get the horse to do what he wants the horse to do. It's not always a hard kick. Sometimes just a little pressure'll do the trick.

But he has to be a student of his horse. He has to know just what nudge his horse needs to get the desired performance.

And he'll use his spurs differently on different horses, too.<sup>10</sup>

The author of Hebrews (Nope, we don't know who write the book) urges us to work hard to know each other so well, so intimately, that we will know what is needed to produce the effect of love and faithfulness.<sup>11</sup>

This is a call to a good and holy shrewdness, a sanctified creativity.

Different people and different settings require different spurs. We have to be sensitive to the moment. We have to be willing to personalize and customize our interactions.

Cookie cutter formulas won't win the day. To be an encourager who really encourages will mean that you bring your most prayerful, most loving, most inventive self to bear on your friend's life, for Jesus' sake.

So, we think and we pray, and then we act. We set our spurs in our friend's flanks at just the right time and in just the right way to "**provoke**" them (I love the old King James version here) to love and good deeds.

<sup>10</sup> Kathy and I have recently read the book, Seabiscuit, by Laura Hillenbrand. She explains how each horse must be studied carefully so that a jockey will know how to manage the horse in the middle of a race to get the horse's best performance.

<sup>11</sup> Greek, *κατανοεω* - "to direct one's whole mind to an object" (from TDNT, Volume IV, p. 973).

## The Ministry of Provocation

*[Hebrews 10:24] and let us consider how to stimulate/provoke one another to love and good deeds...*

The sense of these words is that we are to incite each other, not to violence, but to good works. We are to egg each other on, not to a temper tantrum, but to faith. We are to be thorns in each other's side to provoke, not pain, but love.<sup>12</sup>

Think of Gregg Popovich punching Kawhi Leonard in the chest midway through the Spurs 3<sup>rd</sup> game in the NBA Finals. He was provoking Kawhi to score and good defense.

You pray. You think hard. You mull and meditate. You take into consideration all that you know of your friend. THEN you act. THEN you speak - and the power of God is unleashed to bring your friend to maturity.

And one more thought about encouragement.

This may be the only time that I have ever spoken much about a little phrase that pops up repeatedly in the New Testament.

But it bears directly on the theme of encouragement, so I'm going to talk about it now. It would make for an easy memory verse. Here it is from Romans.

### Sealed with a Kiss

*[Romans 16:16] Greet one another with a holy kiss...*<sup>13</sup>

No, I'm not going to stand up here this morning and advocate congregational kissing. Not that there would be anything necessarily wrong with it.

Lots of cultures around the world do exchange kisses when they greet, and that's great. I've been greeted with kisses in South America and Europe, and you likely have in certain settings, too, including here in San Antonio.

But personally, I'm of a mind that the exact form of the greeting doesn't matter as much as the intent of warmth and welcome.

A firm handshake accompanied by a smile or a hug (abrazo) can fulfill the same function as "*the kiss of holiness*."

So why, in wrapping up a letter like Romans, would Paul specifically mention the importance of warm greetings?

It's because a greeting sets the tone for everything that follows. The way we say "hello" (and how we say "good-bye", too) matters.

Can you imagine offering someone your hand in greeting and having it refused? Or imagine greeting someone with a warm word and having it met with less than a warm word, or with nothing?

What are the chances that following that lack of connection there will be any meaningful conversation, any life-giving discussion, any encouragement? Right. Slim to none.

If we greet insincerely, we invite insincere interaction. If we greet someone with stony silence, we'll get nothing back, in return.

I believe that everything we read in the Bible merits our attention. It is the written Word of God to us. And, if not *precisely*, then *in principle*, we heed its instructions.

So when we find an instruction repeated five times in the letters of Paul and Peter, surely we must take it seriously.

Whether you are extroverted or introverted, shy or outgoing, greet warmly. By word or by touch or by both, let the person you are greeting know that you are glad to see them, that they are welcomed in your presence.

<sup>12</sup> Check out Acts 17:16 where Paul was "provoked" (same Greek word as here for "stimulate" in his spirit by the idolatry in Athens. Also, see 1 Corinthians 13:5 where we are told that love "*is not provoked*" - again, same word as here. A great example of a word being used in different ways in different contexts.

<sup>13</sup> See also 1 Cor. 16:20; 2 Cor. 13:12; 1 Thess. 5:26; 1 Pet. 5:14.

Because when you do, you pave the way for the rich ministry of encouragement.

**Conclusion:**

It is the purpose and plan of God that you and I should be as creative as possible and should work as hard as we can, to Spurs ( 😊 ) each other on to love and good deeds. To whom will you give the powerful gift of encouragement today? This week?