

UNCLE BARNABAS

Victoria Citadel - Dec. 30/07

Did you ever have a “hero”, a person you admired and wanted to be like? When I was a youngster my heroes were from the world of sports or the military or the radio character, “Sergeant King of the Northwest Mounted Police”. Perhaps for you it was a musician, a missionary, a political leader, a writer, a doctor, a teacher or a friend. And “heroes” become our “Role Models”. An interesting characteristic of being a human being is that we all have “role models”, both consciously and unconsciously. We are influenced by others. Believe it or not, each of us is a “role model” for others and we also influence others ... both positively or negatively.

Some of our greatest heroes come from the Bible. You might think of people like Moses, Daniel, David, Peter and Paul, but one of my favourites is ... “Uncle Barnabas”, who Major Glen Patrick introduced me to many years ago.

Well - Who was Uncle Barnabas? What did he do that was so important that we should remember him today? We, today, should thank God that there was an “Uncle Barnabas” in the early church. What has that to do we us?

As you know, after Jesus ascended into heaven, his followers pretty well remained in Jerusalem. What a church that must have been - for the apostles gathered there - Peter, John, James the Just , the brother of our Lord. What a congregation - made up of people who had walked and talked with Jesus, - who knew him intimately. One member of that congregation was Barnabas, a man that was trusted and loved. He wasn't one of the 12 apostles, - but obviously he was well known and well respected within that small group of believers in Jerusalem.

We all know that the early believers soon ran into trouble with the leaders of the Jewish faith and this resulted in active persecution. One of the great persecutors of the early church was a zealous Pharisee by the name of Saul of Tarsus. Saul was committed to destroying this false cult of Jesus believers. He was said to be present during the stoning to death of Stephen, the church's first martyr.

In fact, it was this terrible persecution that drove many believers to run for their lives and they moved to places like Antioch and Damascus - to be as far away from this terrible man Saul as they could.

But Saul was determined that none of these Jesus folk would escape. He headed off to Damascus and I am sure that everyone is familiar with the fantastic conversion of Saul on the road to Damascus. How he was struck down by a blazing light from heaven and Jesus spoke to him. Harold read to us this morning the story of the blinded Saul being led to Damascus and how the Lord spoke to Ananias and told him to go to Saul.

We don't know too much about Ananias, - but we know that he was one of the early believers. What a man of faith he must have been! God told him to go to this terrible man Saul; - the man who had come to hunt him down and destroy him, - and God told Ananias that he had something very special for Saul to do. Despite his fears, Ananias obeyed God and when he laid his hands on Saul, Saul's sight was restored.

We know that Saul, now called Paul, immediately began to preach that Jesus was the Messiah, the Son of God, the fulfilment of God's promise to man - the Saviour of the world. We know that other believers in Damascus still couldn't bring themselves to trust Paul or to accept him. We know that devote Jews plotted to kill him and that he was warned and escaped to Jerusalem.

Well you can imagine the welcome he got at the Jerusalem Church! How would you have received him? Well, we read in Acts, Chapter 9, – that they were suspicious. They didn't trust him. They were afraid of him. They rejected him. They shunned him. They didn't want him in their church! Except for Barnabas, who accepted Paul - who then stood up for Paul and called upon the Jerusalem Church to accept and welcome their brother in Christ. Barnabas put his reputation on the line as he vouched for Paul who he believed was a very different man from the old Saul that the others remembered. Barnabas saw something in Paul that others didn't and Barnabas encouraged Paul and he encouraged others to give Paul a second chance.

Now Acts tells us that the church had scattered during this persecution and had taken root in Phoenicia, Cyprus and Antioch. In Acts 10, we are told of the vision that Peter had that enabled him to accept Gentile believers. Up until then, the followers of Jesus were pretty well all Jews and Jews simply had no "truck" with Gentiles. They would not enter a Gentile home; they would not eat with Gentiles; and if they came into contact with them they went through ritual cleaning afterward. So accepting Gentiles was a very big deal!

Inevitably more and more Gentiles joined the church at Antioch. In Acts, Chapter 11, we learn that word came to the Jerusalem Church that many Gentiles had been converted in Antioch - but that they were not following Jewish laws regarding eating and this alarmed the "traditional" Christians of the Jerusalem Church who sent the trusted and respected Barnabas to investigate.

Acts 11 tells us, that Barnabas quickly realized that God was behind the Church at Antioch and although it may be different from the Jerusalem Church, it was still of God. Barnabas immediately threw his support behind these believers. He stayed there and joined in

with them and taught them and worked side by side with them as one of them. He even went off to Tarsus to get Paul and brought him back to Antioch to help with the teaching and preaching. And the Church in Antioch grew!!!!

Do we hear similar stories today? Yes, within the Church today we have good people who are having difficulty accepting change. Most can accept the fact that other Christians attending other churches are Christian brothers and sisters who may happen to worship God a bit differently. That they can accept. But they have difficulty coping with change within their own church - change in music, change in dress, change in speech, change in prayer style - BUT not Barnabas. He recognized that the church in Antioch didn't have to be a carbon copy of the church in Jerusalem. Although the Antioch Christians were different from him in culture, race and religious practice, Barnabas immediately joined in with them. He adapted himself rather than trying to impose his style of worship on others and the result was that the church grew in a mighty way.

I shudder when I think of what could have happened if the Jerusalem church had sent someone very different than Barnabas to Antioch - you know, one of those righteous rules and regulations types.

Barnabas was a Jew. He practiced the Jewish faith. He observed the Jewish law and Jewish customs and rituals. I am sure he was very happy to do that because that had been a very great part of his life. It was part of his tradition! He came to Antioch and many of the members there were not Jews like him. They did not follow the Jewish law or observe Jewish customs or rituals. They ate meat that was forbidden to Jews. They were not circumcised. Their form of worship may have been different. Why they may have introduced contemporary music in their worship that might have been hard to take for a veteran believer like Barnabas.

Barnabas could have told them that they were all wrong; - that they must observe Jewish customs and rituals. If he had, they may have refused. If they refused to comply, Barnabas could have reported their heresy back to the Jerusalem Church, - and the church at Antioch might have been shut down. Some of the early Christians would have done that! Some Christians today would do that! But Barnabas realized that God was in what he saw in Antioch. And although it was different, Barnabas joined in wholeheartedly and accepted them. He worked with them. He taught them, - not to become Jews of his tradition, - but to become true believers in Jesus Christ within their own culture.

You know a few years ago the world witnessed an example of true caring and concern and encouragement for others. You may have seen the event on TV. At the Special Olympics, nine contestants, all physically or mentally challenged, assembled at the starting line for the 100-yard dash.

At the gun, they all started out with a relish to run the race to the finish and win. Then suddenly one boy tripped and fell on the asphalt, tumbled over a couple of times, and began to cry. The other eight hearing his cry, stopped and ran to him ...every one of them.

One girl with Down's Syndrome bent down and kissed him and said, "This will make it better." Then they helped him up and all nine linked arms and jogged together to the finish line.

Everyone in the stadium stood, and the cheering went on for several minutes.

People who were there are still telling the story. Why? Because deep down we know that there is more to life than winning for ourselves. What matters in this life is helping others win, even if it means stopping and picking someone up off the track.

Today, I would think that every Christian knows of Paul. But it seems too few know or appreciate Paul's true spiritual uncle, Barnabas. You see Barnabas was not a great preacher like Paul. I guess he didn't write too many letters like Paul did, - so too little is known of this great man. But we do know that he was held with great respect by the Jerusalem Church, and by Christians everywhere he went.

In Acts 13, we read that while at Antioch, the Holy Spirit spoke to the believers and told them that Barnabas and Paul were to take on a special travelling ministry. They immediately obeyed and they took a young fellow with them by the name of John Mark.

John Mark appears to have been Barnabas's cousin or relative. His mother was a Jewish and his father a Greek living in Jerusalem. His mother was active in the Jerusalem Church and meetings were often held in her home. Mark could have been the youth in the Garden who ran away naked. Mark is reputed to have been a youth that Peter took a great interest in. Some believe he may have travelled with Peter and served as his interpreter.

After many adventures and trials, we learn that at John Mark left Paul and Barnabas in Perga and returned to Jerusalem. Barnabas and Paul continued on their journey.

After returning to Antioch and preaching there for a time, Barnabas and Paul decided to go back on the road. Once again, Barnabas wanted to take John Mark along, but Paul wouldn't have it. He didn't want a quitter around when things got tough!

Paul and Barnabas had a terrible argument over this and as a result went separate ways with Barnabas taking John Mark with him to Cyprus.

What happened to John Mark because of Barnabas's faith in him? - because Barnabas was big enough to give this young Christian a "Second Chance". God gives us all second chances after second chances, but so many Christians are reluctant to give other Christians who falter or fail - a second chance. But not Uncle Barnabas.

As a result of Barnabas's faith in John Mark, we know he grew in the faith and became an effective worker in the church. We also know that in time, - over a period of 10 years, Paul realized that he had been wrong and accepted John Mark as an important member of the church - for in 2 Timothy 4:11 Paul writes to Timothy "Bring Mark with you; he'll be my right hand-man."

This young man that Paul wanted to discard because of an early failure as a young, immature Christian was now being called Paul's "Right Hand Man". John Mark is believed to have written the gospel of Mark, - the earliest and shortest and simplest Gospel, - which many feel reflects "eyewitness" details, - his own and those of Peter. And he is believed to have been the founder of the church at Alexandria. All because of Uncle Barnabas, - who had faith in him; who gave him a second chance; and who encouraged him.

I'm a bit of a history buff and several years ago there was an interesting TV program. It featured history with an "IF" in it. What might have happened if Wellington had been defeated by Napoleon at Waterloo? What would have happened in the British had successfully put down the American Revolution? What would have happened if Wolfe had lost to Moncalm at the Battle of Quebec? What would have happened in World War II, if Britain had fallen and the Nazis conquered Britain?

We might ask the same kind of question. What might have happened if there had been no Uncle Barnabas - for Paul, for the Antioch Church, or for John Mark?

Without the faith and encouragement that Barnabas gave, Paul might never have been accepted by the Jerusalem Church and without that Church's three star seal of approval, how welcome would he be to other Christians? Without Paul, much of the Book of Acts would not have been written.

Without the faith and encouragement that Barnabas gave to the Gentile believers in Antioch, - the Antioch Church could have shrivelled up and died. The doors that were swung wide open for Gentile believers because of the acceptance of the Antioch Church may not have happened, - and non-Jews may have been discouraged from becoming Christians. Have you ever thought about it, - that we here today trace our roots to that Church in Antioch! If it had failed would we be here today? Would the Gospel of Jesus Christ have swept the world and changed our world forever as it did, - or would Christianity have been relegated to being just another small Jewish sect?

What if Barnabas had, like Paul, given up on John Mark, the young, immature quitter? There would have been no Mark's gospel. There would have been no church in Alexandria!

You see Barnabas's great contribution to the growth of God's kingdom was that he was open to God's leading and that he was a great encourager of others. You see Barnabas didn't have to be the top guy, the number 1 honcho, - like Paul or Peter. He was content to mentor others to become more high profile than himself. He didn't have to be recognized for doing this or that, - he got satisfaction from quietly encouraging others to do something. And because of the great encouragement of Uncle Barnabas, - the church grew and we today here in Victoria Citadel are part of God's family.

Some might say, - right, but that happened 2000 years ago. It sure doesn't happen too often in this "dog eat dog world" of today. That sure has not been my experience for I've heard of many "Uncle Barnabas's, - and I've had my own Uncle Barnabas's too.

Several years ago I taught a course at the University of Victoria for students who were preparing for the teaching profession. I asked them who they thought was the greatest "teacher" they ever heard of except for "Jesus". None of them could think of anyone. They didn't even mention my name!

Well, I told them that I thought of Annie Sullivan Macy as an example of a great teacher. Again I encountered the blank looks. No one had ever heard of Annie Sullivan Macy. So I asked had anyone heard of Helen Keller. - At last some of these people who had spent four years in university recognized someone, although they weren't too sure who she was either.

Well we know that Helen Keller was born blind, deaf and mute. Her family didn't know what to do so they just allowed her to grow up like an animal, - totally undisciplined and totally untrained. She would throw her food around the room and eat it with her hands or lap it up in her face from a bowl. She would hit others without cause.

One day the family hired a young woman to "teach" Helen Keller. That woman was Annie Sullivan Macy. It was not by her "technical skill" or "scientific methods" that Helen Keller was transformed from an animal to a human being, - but through Annie's love, compassion, patience and encouragement.

You see Annie Sullivan Macy, like Barnabas, saw something in this poor child that no one else did. And as a result of her efforts, Helen Keller learned to read Braille. She learned to speak and she wrote wonderful inspirational poetry, some of which you will find on greeting cards today.

Yes Annie Sullivan Macy was a great teacher, - but her greatest contribution to Helen Keller was her continuing encouragement for Helen to learn and to grow.

When we lived in Australia, we visited the great War Memorial Museum at Canberra. And there in a place of honour sat a battered, bullet scared old phonograph. You know the ones that you used to have to wind up to play. That was the phonograph of a Salvation Army Officer, Brigadier Arthur McIlveen, who is known to all Australian school boys as "The Padre of The Rats of Tobruk. You see during the terrible siege of Tobruk in World War II, McIlveen would creep or dash from one fox hole to another that guarded the Tobruk perimeter from Rommel's famed Africa Corps.

Once in the foxhole, McIlveen would crank up his phonograph and play a bit of music to cheer up the troops. And then after a few short words of encouragement he would be off to the next foxhole.

No one can ever remember a sermon McIlveen ever preacher from a pulpit. But hundreds remember his warm smile and cheery greeting as he leaped into their foxhole under fire - simply to be there with them, to pray with them, and to encourage them.

Just a few weeks ago we had a seniors rally here in this sanctuary and our special guest was Captain Les Borrows from Kelowna. Les told us that it wasn't the sermons or the music that kept him attending the Salvation Army at the old Vancouver Temple, but it was the extended hand accompanied by a big smile of a chap who said "Welcome mate, Its good to see you here"!

Encouragement comes in many forms. Some times it comes in words, some times in actions, always it is a reflection of our attitude.

You know Ghandi that great leader of India once said - "I would have become a Christian, if it hadn't been for the Christians I've met". If only he had met an Uncle Barnabas; - an encourager, rather than a "turn off". What might India be today, if Ghandi had been a Christian?

I am reminded of the story of an American tourist visiting a mountain village in Bolivia. The tourist was concerned when she saw a little girl carrying a young boy and her back. When the child got closer the concerned tourist said to the girl...

"Oh, my dear that boy is far too heavy a burden for you to be carrying like that". to which the little girl responded "He's not heavy, He's my brother".

That was the attitude of Uncle Barnabas when he rose to defend Paul with the Jerusalem Church, - "He's not heavy, He's my brother."

That was the attitude of Uncle Barnabas, when as a traditional Jewish Christian from the "Home" church, was sent to investigate the Jerusalem Church's concerns about the Gentile believers within the Church at Antioch. They were not a burden to Barnabas, - they were not heavy, - they were his brothers and sisters in Christ.

That was the attitude of Uncle Barnabas with John Mark. - He wasn't too heavy, he was his brother.

It is that attitude that we desperately need in our church today - it is the attitude that God wants to see in each and every one of us, - that others are not too heavy, but that they are our brothers and sisters in Christ. We can make a tremendous contribution to the lives and spiritual growth of others by simply being a genuine encourager.

There may be many things we can't do, but the one thing we all can do is to encourage others. Am I an Uncle Barnabas to others?
Are you?

Let Us Pray.