

# EVERYDAY HEROES: THE ENCOURAGER

November 12, 2017

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First Presbyterian Church of Marion, Iowa

Text: Acts 4:32-37; 9:26-31

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## SCRIPTURE

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Acts 4:32-37; 9:26-31

Now the whole group of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one claimed private ownership of any possessions, but everything they owned was held in common. With great power the apostles gave their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all. There was not a needy person among them, for as many as owned lands or houses sold them and brought the proceeds of what was sold. They laid it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to each as any had need. There was a Levite, a native of Cyprus, Joseph, to whom the apostles gave the name Barnabas (which means "son of encouragement"). He sold a field that belonged to him, then brought the money, and laid it at the apostles' feet.

When he (Saul) had come to Jerusalem, he attempted to join the disciples; and they were all afraid of him, for they did not believe that he was a disciple. But Barnabas took him, brought him to the apostles, and described for them how on the road he had seen the Lord, who had spoken to him, and how in Damascus he had spoken boldly in the name of Jesus. So he went in and out among them in Jerusalem, speaking boldly in the name of the Lord. He spoke and argued with the Hellenists; but they were attempting to kill him. When the believers learned of it, they brought him down to Caesarea and sent him off to Tarsus. Meanwhile the church throughout Judea, Galilee, and Samaria had peace and was built up. Living in the fear of the Lord and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit, it increased in numbers.

The Word of the Lord

Thanks be to God!

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## SERMON

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Just after World War II, in 1945 a Swedish runner set the world record for running the mile with the time of 4 minutes and 1.3 seconds. For years that record held, leading to a popular belief that human beings had reached their limit. It was thought that it was just physically impossible for anyone to run a mile in less than 4 minutes. A human body could not go any faster than that. But in 1954, Roger Bannister, a British medical student set about challenging those assumptions. He had been a top mile runner when he was an undergrad student at the University of Oxford, and had competed in the 1952 Olympics in Finland. After that he started researching the mechanics of running and used some new scientific methods in his training.

On May 6, 1954, there was a track and field meet at the Iffley Road Track in Oxford. That morning Bannister had begun his day by doing his rounds at a hospital in London. Before he left, he polished his racing spikes, rubbing graphite on them so that they would not pick up ash on the cinder track. He then took a mid-morning train from Paddington Station to Oxford. The conditions were far from ideal. It had been raining and it was windy with gusts sometimes hitting 25 miles an hour.

The mile race went off at 6:00 p.m., as scheduled before a crowd of around 3,000 people, as well as being broadcast live on BBC radio. As you probably know the event is four laps around a quarter mile track. Bannister was at 58 seconds after the first lap, 1:58 at the half mile. After the third lap he was at 3:01. He completed the last lap in just under 59 seconds. It was quiet for a few minutes after the race was over and then there was a public announcement: "Ladies and gentlemen, here is the result of event nine, the one mile: first, number forty-one, R.G. Bannister with a time that is a new meeting and track record, and which—subject to

ratification—will be a new... world record. The time was three...” And the roar of the crowd drowned out the announcement. Roger Bannister’s time was 3 minutes, 59.4 seconds. The four-minute mile had been broken. His record did not stand for long. Soon others would do the mile in less than 4 minutes. Today, the record for the mile is something like 3 minutes 43 seconds, 17 seconds faster than Bannister. But even so, it was a historical event. At the time many compared it to Edmund Hillary climbing Mt. Everest the year before; an achievement that was thought by many to be impossible.

However, while it was Roger Bannister who crossed the finish line and broke the record, it was actually a team effort. There were two other men, Chris Brasher and Chris Chataway, who ran in that race and were critical to Bannister’s success. They were his pacers. There was no intention of either of them winning the race or breaking the record. Their job was to keep Bannister up to top speed. Psychologically runners do better if they are focusing on trying to keep up with someone ahead, rather than just trying to run as fast as they can. For the first two laps Brasher was out in front, and when at the half mile he began to drop back, Chataway took up the lead. He was ahead until the last half of the last lap, when Bannister poured everything he could into his finishing kick, pulling out ahead and dashing across the finish line. He was the one who broke a barrier thought to be impenetrable, but he could not have done it without these others to help him.

For five weeks now we have been focusing on everyday heroes of the Bible. We have looked at some heroes of the Old Testament like Jethro, Rahab and Deborah. For the last two weeks we were in the Gospels with Andrew, the brother of Simon Peter, and Zacchaeus, the little man who climbed a tree to see Jesus. This week we are looking at someone in the early church, an everyday hero who emerged from those who were caught up in the days following Pentecost, when the disciples were just beginning to share the good news of the power of the Resurrected Christ. Our everyday hero for this week is a lot like the pacers, Brasher and Chataway, who ran with Roger Bannister. He is not one who broke any records, who did anything extraordinary himself. Yet, without him others would not have done what they did; without him certain things would never have happened. He is first mentioned in our text for this morning describing a time when the church was beginning to flourish. It says that “the whole group of those who believed were of one heart and soul... With great power the apostles gave their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was with them all.” And if you read the whole fourth chapter of Acts you will see that God was indeed doing some incredible things. The disciples who were cowering in fear the day Jesus was crucified had been transformed into an unstoppable force that would change the course of history.

But what was perhaps even more remarkable, given human nature, was the community that had developed around this band of believers. The text says, “No one claimed private ownership of any possessions, but everything they owned was held in common... (and) there was not a needy person among them, for as many as owned lands or houses sold them and brought the proceeds of what was sold. They laid it at the apostles’ feet, and it was distributed to each as any had need.” For a while anyway, they did their best to live out the vision Jesus had given them of God’s Beloved Community. Everyone was looking out for each other. There was a deliberate effort to eliminate the haves and the have-nots. Possessions were shared. No one was in need. Everyone contributed to the common good.

Now by the sixth chapter of Acts problems start to arise and need to be addressed, but for a while anyway things were going very well, and in the middle of all this one particular individual stood out. He was originally from the island of Cyprus, although he was a Jew, of the priestly tribe of Levi. His name was Joseph and we are not exactly sure what he did to deserve it, but he was given a nickname by the apostles, that is by the original disciples who were with Jesus. They called him Barnabas, which is from the Hebrew words “Son of Encouragement.” All the other references to him found in the Bible use this nickname. The only thing we are told specifically is that he owned some real estate, probably something that had been in his family for

generations. He sold this land and brought the proceeds to the apostles for them to distribute as they saw fit. But clearly there must have been many other things he did in many subtle but important ways, to earn his nickname. I imagine that he was the first to show up at worship and the last to leave, that he was able to anticipate what was needed and respond before anyone said anything, and was the kind of guy that just made everyone feel at ease whenever he showed up.

Now if this was the only place that Barnabas was mentioned, that would be a story in and of itself. But we get a deeper insight into his character five chapters later in the ninth chapter of Acts. It was probably now five or six years since the day of Pentecost and a lot has happened. The religious/political powers in Jerusalem have not been pleased with this renegade bunch of followers of a rabbi from Galilee. They have tried to break them up, by imprisoning some and executing others. One of their top enforcement officers was a man named Saul, who for a while was very efficient at cracking down on these misguided upstarts. But things had become really crazy for suddenly this Saul had become a turncoat. He was now the most outspoken defender of this Jesus of Nazareth. How that all came about is a familiar story to most of us, Saul's dramatic encounter with the Risen Christ on the road to Damascus.

Saul returns to Jerusalem and wants to join up with the believers and be a part of the early church community. Not surprising, they were very skeptical about his intentions. I mean, this was the guy who had been arresting them a few months before. It was a little like a grand wizard of the Ku Klux Klan wanting to carry a sign in a Black Lives Matter rally. You can't blame them for being suspicious and not exactly welcoming him with open arms. However, somehow some way Barnabas, the Son of Encouragement had gotten to know Saul. Barnabas believed in him and knew that he was now different. So he was the one who brought Saul to the leaders of the church, urging them to accept and trust this new believer. The rest, as they say, is history. Saul is accepted and welcomed by the church and immediately starts proclaiming the good news of Jesus throughout the city of Jerusalem. Barnabas has been the model here in this church for welcoming new members into this congregation. We don't have a membership class, but if someone is interested in joining this church we assign them a Barnabas, or a "Barnie" as we call them to encourage them, help them feel welcome and a part of our congregation.

Again, it would be a great story if it ended here, but Saul, soon known as Paul, he and Barnabas become a team that launches the first missionary campaign deliberately taking the gospel to non-Jewish people. Paul breaks all kinds of records as arguably the most important theologian, evangelist and writer of Christ's church. Paul shatters all kinds of barriers, but he could not have done it without Barnabas running with him, just like Brasher and Chataway ran with Bannister setting the pace.

Encouragement is so very important. It is part of what makes us human. It lifts us up beyond the day to day routine that can grind us down. We see this in all sorts of ways. One great example has been happening right here in Iowa over the last two months, and has attracted national attention. I am referring to the new tradition at the Hawkeye football games when at the end of the first quarter everyone in Kinnick waves at the young patients in the Children's Hospital that is overlooking the stadium. Last week, even the Ohio State team, including Head Coach Meyer, all joined in the wave. The Buckeyes later posted a video of the team waving on their Twitter site with the caption "Bigger than the game," which I think was pretty classy given the way the game turned out.

But the stories have been very moving about the way this encouragement has affected the little kids who have been patients in the Children's Hospital, and their parents as well. They are kids like 4 year-old Wyatt who has a rare immunity disease that makes it difficult for him to go out in public, or 6 year-old Will who had a heart transplant in August, but has been in the hospital for 295 days. These children and their families feel very isolated and one day is just like the next with rounds of medication, therapy, tests and examinations. These games have been something for them to look forward with eager anticipation. There are stories of kids who are getting better and ready to be discharged, but they want to stay until Saturday so they can see the wave one more time. This small act of encouragement is making a huge difference in the lives of little ones who need it so badly.

Now a week ago, I said it had been one of those weeks, referring to the attack in Manhattan when eight people were killed by a deranged man driving a truck. As I was saying those words, down in Sutherland Springs, TX unspeakable horror was unfolding as a gunman entered a church and slaughtered 26 individuals ranging in age from 18 months to 72 years old. So it has once again been one of those weeks. But in some way every week is one of those weeks. Even if nothing horrible happens in the news, when we come here on a Sunday morning, someone has their own struggle, their own obstacle they are trying to get over, their own barrier they are trying to break through. We come to this place week after week in need of encouragement.

As I thought about this I had a picture come to me. In the letter to the Hebrews it says, "Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses... let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us." What if the church is a little like that observation floor up in the Children's Hospital down in Iowa City? Maybe we are kind of like those little kids struggling with all kinds of complications throughout the week. When we come to church on Sunday morning, when we bow our heads and pray "Thy Kingdom come," the entire host of heaven, that cloud of witnesses, all the angels, all the saints, and all our loved ones who have gone before us, they all turn and wave at us. We can't hear them, but they all are saying, "Hang in there! We are rooting for you! We know it's tough, but don't give up! You can do it! We know you can!" I pray that some of those folks down in Sutherland Springs who are struggling with such a terrible loss are somehow able to get just a little of that encouragement this morning. And if it has been a difficult week for you, I pray the same for you. On the Ohio State Twitter feed they had the caption "Bigger than the game..." What we do here in this place, week after week is part of something more. It is much bigger than anything we can see or hear or touch. It is much more than songs and sermons, more than programs and prayers, more than budgets and building, more than anything we do or say or try to accomplish. It is more than the 175 years our congregation has been in existence. It is more than we can understand and comprehend. What we do here is part of God's ongoing work in the world to lift up the downtrodden, to strengthen the weak, to give hope to the hopeless, to shine light in the darkness. What we are doing here is not about maintaining an organization or a beautiful building. What we are doing here is all about being channels of God's love, mercy and grace, and encouraging one another when we need it so badly.

So in just a minute here we will ask you to bring up your pledge card for next year and put it in one of these baskets. I say it every year, and I will say it once again. This is not a financial matter but a spiritual matter. God does not need our money, but we need to give. We need to support what is going on here, because we want to be a part of something that is bigger than anything we can imagine. There will be times when we all will need support and reassurance, but there are many more times when we can be Barnabas, when we can be sons and daughters of encouragement. May we be generous and faithful uplifted by God's grace.

Next week I hope you will be back as we wrap up our series on the everyday heroes with the story of Philemon, a story of reconciliation. In the meantime, may God's comfort and peace be with us all. In the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, Amen.