

August 31, 2014
Church Planting
An Encouraging Word
Acts 11:19-26

Opening words: Last year, I began a project that will take several summers to complete. My goal is to preach through the Book of Acts. I have called this entire body of work *Church Planting*. I believe, the Book of Acts is vital to our future success. The Holy Spirit created the church originally and it will be the Holy Spirit who revives the church in the future. Last summer, we looked at the first eight chapters. This summer, we are looking at chapters nine through twelve. That means we are nearing the end of this summer's work.

Today's scripture reading is Acts 11:19-26. If you have been with us the last several weeks, then you may remember the storyline. The church is growing. God is no longer working just with the Jewish population. The Gentiles, non-Jews like us, are responding to the Good News. Those must have been exciting times, and everyone should have been happy. However, this is the church, so someone had to complain, because change has always been difficult. Last week, we looked at those critical voices and how Peter silenced them. This week, we learn the church continues to grow. It is no longer just a regional movement. The church had taken on an international flavor. Part of the Greek population in Antioch now believed. The church in Jerusalem responds by sending them some help and encouragement. Let me call this message *An Encouraging Word*.

Acts 11:19-26 Now those who had been scattered by the persecution that broke out when Stephen was killed traveled as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus and Antioch, spreading the word only among Jews.²⁰ Some of them, however, men from Cyprus and Cyrene, went to Antioch and began to speak to Greeks also, telling them the good news about the Lord Jesus.²¹ The Lord's hand was with them, and a great number of people believed and turned to the Lord.

²² News of this reached the church in Jerusalem, and they sent Barnabas to Antioch.

²³ When he arrived and saw what the grace of God had done, he was glad and encouraged them all to remain true to the Lord with all their hearts.²⁴ He was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and faith, and a great number of people were brought to the Lord.

²⁵ Then Barnabas went to Tarsus to look for Saul,²⁶ and when he found him, he brought him to Antioch. So 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.

His name was Arthur Wellesley (1769-1852), but he is remembered as the "The Duke of Wellington." He was one of the great figures in nineteenth century England because he defeated Napoleon at Waterloo. His subordinates knew him as a demanding man, who was not easy to please. He complimented no one.

Wellington, himself, realized that his methods left something to be desired. In his old age, a young lady asked him what, if anything, he would do differently if he had his life to live over again. Wellington thought for a moment, then replied. "I'd give more praise," he said.

Can anyone relate to that story? Do the people in your life consider you encouraging? Or are you more like Wellington, critical and demanding? Or maybe this is a better question: Are the people in your life happier when you come, or are they happier when you go? Our world seems to have a surplus of critical people and a shortage of encouragers. If you can agree with that statement, say, "**Amen!**" In the scripture lesson for today we find the significance of being an encourager. Let's look at the scripture lesson together.

Today, we find ourselves in the eleventh chapter of Acts. In the very first verse, the author reminds us of the significance of Stephen's death. His death was tragic at two levels. First, it was the loss of an innocent life. Stephen was full of potential. Second, it was significant because it signaled the beginning of Christian persecutions. Those were dark days in the history of the church. The church scattered for her own protection. It was a difficult time, but through the eyes of God, it was a good time. The Gospel was no longer just being heard by the residents of Jerusalem. The entire region, including the Gentiles, non-Jews like us, were hearing the Good News. In verse twenty we learn that the Gospel has now spread as far as Antioch, where the Greek portion of the population responded. Verse twenty-one says the Lord's hand was on them. A great number of people believed and turned to the Lord. When the believers in Jerusalem heard about these events, they responded by sending them help in the name of Barnabas. The next verse is vital for you to hear.

Barnabas went to help the church at Antioch with a single resource. There is no mention in the Bible that he brought a generous love offering. There is no mention in the Bible that he came with a box of old Sunday School supplies. Not a single word is mentioned about demographic research. He doesn't bring a covered dish for the next supper or a new agenda for the next meeting. The only thing that Barnabas brought to the new converts in Antioch was a word of encouragement. It doesn't seem like much, but it had real value. They were facing Christian persecution and they needed to hear that everything was going to be fine. They needed to be reminded that God was with them. They are no different from us. They needed a word of encouragement and so do we. Does anyone here need a word of encouragement? Why do people have such a hard time making the Good News, good news? You know it is true. You know it is particularly true within the life of the church.

I spend my days trying to encourage people; others spend their days discouraging people. Have you ever gone to a church meeting with a new idea for some kind of ministry? You are going to collect the children to take them to the zoo. You are going to feed the homeless.

You are going to organize a support group for people who are trying to survive some trauma. There are a million ideas because our world has so much need. You go with a sincere heart because you know this is what God wants you to do! The problem is, you are the only one who is excited. Instead of receiving encouragement, you are discouraged. They remind you of the expense of the program. They remind you the insurance isn't in place to protect the victims. They tell you of some church somewhere who did something like that in the past and it didn't work. Or they remind you of their personal experience at doing the same thing and it didn't work. (Maybe it didn't work for them because they are so negative?) The message they are trying to communicate to you is "why try?" When the meeting is over, you do one thing. You promise you will never try anything new again. You know it is true. We have a shortage of Barnabas's in our church. When was the last time you encouraged someone?

Several months ago, I had lunch with a friend. He served the same church for decades. We ate lunch near his former church. Everyone in the restaurant knew him. Our waitress new him. At some point in the meal she came to check on us. She looked at him and said, "Do you remember me? I have visited your church." He smiled at her and read her name tag. He looked at her and said, "Of course, I remember you, Jennifer. You were the prettiest girl in the church!" (The truth is she wouldn't the prettiest girl at a kennel.) When he affirmed her, she began to smile and blushed. When we got to the cashier, she met us with a friend. The friend said, "Did she really go to your church?" He said, "Yes! She was the prettiest girl." The cashier looked at our waitress and said to us, "Doesn't she have pretty eyes?" She ran into the kitchen with a big smile on her face. When we got outside I said to him, "You didn't remember her, did you?" He said, "Not really! I think she came to church once. I made her feel better about herself. How can that be bad?" Don't tell me a kind word or a word of encouragement isn't important.

Today, I want to help you answer the question, are you an encourager or a discourager? I am going to do that by asking you three questions. How you answer those questions will reveal your basic nature. There has never been a time when the church didn't need encouragers. It was true in the first century church. That is why the church in Jerusalem sent Barnabas to Antioch. They just needed someone to say something affirming. It is true in our time. We have a surplus of discouragers. People who can ruin a happy occasion or crush any new idea. So if you are ready to answer the question, are you an encourager or a discourager?, say, "**Amen!**"

One of the greatest minds of the twentieth century belonged to Albert Einstein (1879-1955). He was a theoretical physicist, who developed the theory of relativity. He won the Nobel Prize for Physics in 1921. The world still recognizes him as a genius. However, his parents failed to see his potential. As a child, they thought he was mentally retarded because of his odd behavior and his difficulty in school. Today, he would have been diagnosed with Asperger's disease, a mild form of autism. Einstein reminds us of how important it is to look at the best in everyone.

This is question number one. **Do you see the best in others?** How easy it is to identify someone else's flaws. How difficult it is to recognize someone else's potential! It is your choice. Do you see the best in others and encourage it? Do you see the worst in others and promote it? Barnabas saw the best in others. What about you? Question number one is, **do you see the best in others?** If you answered that question for yourself, say, **"Amen!"**

Tucked away in the Old Testament is the Book of Jeremiah. It was named after the prophet of that name. He lived about 600 years before the birth of Christ and his name means the "the Lord throws." There is nothing light about the book. It is heavy in theology and it is wordy, covering fifty-two chapters. The most famous of his words comes from the twenty-ninth chapter. You have heard the words in the past. Jeremiah said, *"For I know the plans I have for you," declares the Lord, "plans to prosper you and not harm you, plans to give you hope and a future."* Those are affirming words. Basically, it means God has a plan for you! God has an agenda for your life. However, this is the problem. God's agenda and your agenda may not match.

This is question number two. **Are you open to God's agenda?** The agenda for the Jewish people was keeping God just for themselves. They liked being God's Chosen People and they didn't want to share. That is why they were shocked when the Gentiles began to respond to the Good News. Peter was open to God's agenda. He welcomed Cornelius and the others into the fold. The question is, how open are you to God's agenda? Encouragers are open to God's leading, discouragers want things their way. Question number two is, **are you open to God's agenda?** If you answered that question for yourself, say, **"Amen!"**

This is question number three. **How much are you willing to invest in others?** In the scripture lesson, we are told Barnabas didn't stay in Antioch. He traveled about 150 miles to Tarsus. It is while he is there that he meets and teams up with Saul. According to verse 26, he stayed for a year and taught a great number of new converts. There are many ways to invest in people. Only one way has to do with money. How much of your time have you invested in others? If you want to encourage someone, then spend some time with them. How much time have you spent praying for a sick or troubled loved one? If you want to encourage someone, then invest in them. Question number three is, **how much are you willing to invest in others?** If you answered that question for yourself, say, **"Amen!"**

During the fall of 2007, we celebrated the 40th anniversary of this church. The committee that organized that day did a wonderful job. The preacher for the event was our bishop, John Hopkins. It was great having him here, but some questioned if it was the right thing to do. They were afraid he would see how far this church had progressed and would ask me to move to fix another place. I said, we can't hide. Let us be the best church we can possibly be so he will let us continue. People heard those words and invited everyone to church for that day.

The sanctuary looked like Easter or Christmas Eve. I am comfortable saying the bishop was impressed. However, what I remember most about that morning was the bishop's kind and encouraging words about me. Do you remember what happened? When Bishop Hopkins got done talking about me, the entire congregation stood and applauded for me! That moment was a little embarrassing, but it changed my life. Your applause impressed the bishop. It changed the way he viewed this church and our partnership. I don't see the bishop often, but when I do, he reminds me of that moment. However, your applause changed me. I never considered moving again, because our relationship is so special. On those rare days when I get tired and discouraged, I remember your applause for me. I didn't deserve it, but I accepted it because you encouraged me. Does anyone here need a Barnabas? Does anyone here need an encouraging word? Ralph Waldo Emerson once wrote, "*Our chief want is someone who will inspire us to be what we know we could be.*" And all of God's people said, "**Amen!**"