

A Message Delivered at the J W U M C., - April 22, 2018

“The Encourager

Acts 4:32-37.

During the colonial era of this Country, wealthy ladies were proud of their wide-board oak floors. At least once a week, the servants would wet-rub and then dry-rub the floors to make them shine. It was a very simple task involving running a wet mop right along the grain of the wood and then with the dry mop shine them.

Sometimes, some careless servant would mop across the grain and there would be streaks across the grain, to the dissatisfaction of the lady of the house.. Whenever that happens, the lady would be heard to say to the servants, “You are rubbing the floor the wrong way.” Do you know that’s how we got the saying, "to rub someone the wrong way."

I don’t have to say it, but you know there are ways for us to “rub people the right way” also. It’s the most foolproof and guaranteed way. It works any time, any place, and practically, on anybody, and that is what we call, “encouragement”. Unfortunately, our human nature is such, we are more quick to tear down someone, than to build someone up, or to put down someone rather than raise up someone, or discourage someone rather than “encourage” them. Does that sound familiar to you?

It is said, for every word of encouragement, there’s probably ten words of discouragement that comes out of our mouth when dealing with people. As this old couplet goes:

Once I did something bad, that I heard for ever;

Twice I did something good, that I heard never!

Most of you here will remember the old classic song of the mid-west, written by one Dr. Brewster Higley in 1847. I am referring to “**The Home on the Range**”. Do you know that it even became the State song of Kansas. You know the song:

“O give me a home where the buffalo roam...”

Where the deer and the antelope play;

Where seldom is heard a discouraging word,

And the skies are not cloudy all day”.

Friends, it definitely doesn’t mean that if you go to Kansas today that you will hear only “encouraging” words. It does not mean that!

By the way, anyone remembers the verse? - It goes like this: “*How often at night...*”
(Everyone who knew it, joined in)

The truth of the matter is that, we all have our detractors; we all have our discouragers; and still, there are times that we all could use a word of encouragement.

We all get discouraged at certain times. I don't know of any place that we need it more than in our homes and in our churches. Don't ever underestimate the importance of the mutual support we gain from one another when we both give and receive encouragement.

Please stay with me, would you, as we look at the life of a man who, I believe, you would want to be friends with. He may have been the most popular Christian in the early church. His name was "Joseph".

In reading the Scripture passage for today, Betty read from the Book of Acts, and you would have heard the name "Joseph" mentioned. If you were to translate "Joseph" to its original meaning, it means the "Son of Encouragement". Therefore, the early Church called him "Barnabas", meaning "Encourager". The verse 36 of Acts 4, indicates that Barnabas was a Levite from the Island of Cyprus..." It seems, he had been residing in Antioch for a while. The first thing we hear of 'Ole Barney' is that "... *having land, he sold it, and brought the money and laid it at the feet of the apostles*' (v.37). Why did he do that? Because, in the early days when people heard the Word of God and converted to Christianity, they were persecuted, furthermore, they even lost their jobs. Which meant, the early Church was saddled with jobless new Christians. So, Barnabas, like the others who had wealth, chipped in to help the needy.

Please, don't get me wrong, this does not mean that you and I have to be rich, like Ole Barney, to be an "encourager" in the Church. No. Every one of us has some God- "gift" that could be used to encourage people.

Surely, the sick don't need your money—they need your word of comfort.. The lonely don't need your money—they just need a few minutes of your time. Those who are sad and depressed don't need your money—they just might need your touch. Discouraged people don't need your money—they need your word of hope. Am I making sense?

It was Mark Twain who once said, "I can live two months just on one good compliment." Sometimes, that's all some people need.

When Barnabas came to Antioch, says the Scripture, he saw "the grace of God at work there, and he was glad, so he encouraged all of them; that they with a heart of purpose, should continue with the Lord." (Acts. 11:23) A few chapters later, this same "Barnabas...strengthened the souls of the disciples; exhorting them to continue in their faith, by saying to them "*we must, through many tribulations, enter the Kingdom of God.*"' (Acts. 14:22). Because of Barnabas' ministry in Antioch,

the Spirit of God became so powerful, that many gentiles came to the knowledge of Jesus Christ. Soon Barnabas realized, that he couldn't handle the influx of new Christians into the Church, and that he needed some assistance.

While pondering on this, Barnabas remembered, that had met a young zealous Hebrew Scholar in Jerusalem, someone who had once persecuted the new Christians in Jerusalem. But many in the early Church in Jerusalem had not heard of the conversion of this man to Christianity, So, everytime, this man Saul of Tarsus tried to introduce himself to the Church in Jerusalem, because of the distrust of the man, they rejected him. However, Saul of Tarsus was a man of tremendous education, his knowledge of the Greek language, and the Hebrew Scriptures was outstanding . Barnabas was not concerned about any notoriety or his fame, or that he was a Jew persecuting Christianity. Barnabas was more concerned about the welfare of the Christians in Antioch. Further, he was willing to take the second place, if he were to succeed in getting Paul to Antioch. O'le Barney was convinced, Paul's scholarship and his eloquence would help the Christian in Antioch. Soon, the Church in Antioch saw the abounding grace of at work because of Paul, and the Church there grew by leaps and bounds. And, do you know something? It was in Antioch that these new converts were called "Christians" for the first time.

Are you still with me?

Any Church would grow if people, when they come to the Church, see bridges going up and barriers come down. The Church ought to be able to tear down the barriers of racism, class and creeds and build up "bridges of acceptance". Friends, the Church is you and I, ought to be able to tear down barriers of prejudice and build bridges of love. That is what "encouragers" do. And, that's what O'le Barney and Paul did. Paul's scholarship, vision and foresight may have helped a great deal, but it was Barnabas' forethought, where he didn't ignored the "nudge" he felt to seek Paul's help in Antioch. Imagine, how much poor the Church would have been if not for the encouragement it received from Barnabas. However, we wouldn't have had the 14 great books of the New Testament we call, the Epistles if not for Paul. We wouldn't have had the basics of Christian Theology if not for Paul of Tarsus; the theology imbedded in the 14 epistles of Paul, which, even theologians of today, are wrestling to comprehend. Yes, the Church of Jesus Christ would have lost the greatest of all theologians and thinker if the "encourager" O'le Barney were not there.

Charles Schwab, the famous businessman once said this, "I have yet to find a man (or a woman), however exalted in their station, who did not put forth greater effort under a spirit of approval, rather than under a spirit of criticism."

High Schools in Sri Lanka, are mostly Government Schools. When a student gets to the 12th Grade, the Government requires the student to sit for a an All-Island public exam before students could graduate.. In addition to about 6 other subjects, every 12th. Grader is expected to pass all three compulsory or required subjects as well. I was very weak in one of those required subjects. As I expected, when the results were published, I had failed in that one required subject.

However, the Government gives one more chance for students who fail to sit for the failed subject in six months. More often than not, failed students would seek special help in order to do better in their failed subject the next time, of course at a cost. I had no such resources. I could only pray.

One day one of such teachers who gave special help to students, approached me and said that I should join with a few other failed students for a special class once a week in the evening. I said to him, "Sir, I have no money to pay you!" He said, "It doesn't matter, that has been already taken care of." "By whom, Sir?" I asked. He wouldn't tell. I followed the six-month special course, and thank God, I did pass that subject.

Now, I wanted to know who the donor was, the special tutor wouldn't tell. A friend of mine told me after a few months, that it was one "Mr. Sam." I knew him, but why would he do that for me, I asked myself. Next day, I went in search of him to the Lower School, and I was told that he had left school and no one knows where he went to. I failed in all my search, and finally, I gave up. a teacher in the lower cahas been paid already. You had better show up tomorrow. I have a few others too joining you." I was elated, but I wonder who this "donor" could be. To make the long story short, I did clear the "hurdle" successfully at the repeat exam.

But I still wanted to find out who this "donor" was. The teacher wouldn't tell me. Some months later, one of the teacher's friends let out the secret. That it was one "Mr. Sam" a lower grade teacher who had stepped in to help me out.

Next day, I went to the Lower Grade Dept. of the school to look for "Mr. Sam". And I was told, he had left at the end of the last term. And no one knew where he had gone.

Several years later, when I was on a holiday in Sri Lanka, on a Sunday, I went to a Methodist Church there. During the service, I spotted an old man whose were familiar to me. I said to myself, 'Well, there's Mr. Sam!'

Immediately following the Benediction, I ran out to the entrance of the that church, looking for him. From the look on my face, one of the ushers asked me, who I was looking for, and I said, "Mr. Sam". "Oh, you mean that old man who sits at the back of the Church in one of the last pew? He leaves church during the sing of the last hymn!"

I was so heart-broken! “Mr. Sam” who had lifted me up far beyond I could have ever imagined, alluded me again. How I wished, I could have thanked him. It was not to be...

(*“You Raise Me Up, so I can stand on Mountains...”* - was sung, as a solo, at this point)

My dear friends, have you ever tried to raise up someone to a height they would never have reached on their own? I believe, Christ would want you to be “Encourager” in a world of discourager and detractors. Christ would want to in ways that our lives, unbeknown to us, may bring glory and honor to Him.

Let me close with a true story:

There was a little boy whose dad died when he was five years old. This boy dropped out of school after the sixth grade. By the time he was 17 he had lost one job after another. He married at 18, had a baby at 19, and was separated from his wife at 20.

He became a railroad conductor, but he got fired. He joined the Army, but he got washed out. He became a farmer and lost his shirt. He applied to law school but got turned down. He became an insurance salesman and couldn't keep up with it.

Finally, he became a dishwasher and a cook in a two-bit restaurant. One thing he was able to do was to finally persuade his wife to come back to him and together they made a living cooking and washing dishes in this little restaurant. At 65 years of age he retired. He went to the mailbox and got his first Social Security check that had a grand total of \$105. This 65 year old man was so discouraged he decided to commit suicide.

Sitting under shady tree, he wrote out his last will and testament, determined to end his life. Somehow, his wife found out his scheme and confronted him, saying, "Let me tell you something you can do, you can cook better than anyone I've known. You're fabulous cook". “Is that true,” he asked. “Yes,” said the wife.

It gave him some incentive, that he went down to the local bank and borrowed \$87 dollars against his Social Security check. He went to the supermarket, bought some chicken and some boxes, fried them with a special recipe he had developed on his own, put them all in boxes and he went from door-to-door in Corbin, Kentucky selling his chicken.

It became so popular that he wanted to try to sell his preparation to restaurants. Guess what? He was turned down, not once but a total of, he says, 1,014 times. Then a man named John Y. Brown tasted the man's chicken, and said, “I'd like go into business with you." That man's name was Colonel Harlan Sanders, the founder of Kentucky Fried Chicken. The rest is history. But, what was the secret?

You know the secret: the same man, the same recipe, the same ability, the same chicken. The only difference was — the word of encouragement. If you want to rub people the right way, every chance you get brings a blessing; it breaks the barriers and build bridges. Amazing isn't it? Can you be one of them, - “An Encourager” to someone down and out? Amen.

A message delivered by the Rev. Dr. D. S. Dharmapalan of Sandwich, MA