

Sunday, April 18, 2021

Balcony People

(Reimagining Church Series; Message 23)

(Marks of a Believer)

Acts 11:19-30

Review (Slide): We're back to our series on Reimagining Church...

August - focused on prayer and waiting...

September - focused on the presence and power of the Holy Spirit...

October - focused on the early church's Rule of Life: teaching, fellowship, breaking bread and prayer

November - focused on the Church's mission

January - focusing on Spirit-empowered leadership

February and April - focusing on the marks of a believer - a personal relationship with Jesus, being in community, a wall-break and bridge builder...

Scripture:

⁹Now 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. ²⁰Some 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. ²¹The Lord's hand was with them, and a great number of people believed and turned to the Lord. ²²News of this reached the church in Jerusalem, and they sent Barnabas to Antioch. ²³When 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. ²⁴He was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and faith, and a great number of people were brought to the Lord. ²⁵Then Barnabas went to Tarsus to look for Saul, ²⁶and 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. ²⁷During this time some prophets came down from Jerusalem to Antioch. ²⁸One of them, named Agabus, stood up and through the Spirit predicted that a severe famine would spread over the entire Roman world. (This happened during the reign of Claudius.) ²⁹The disciples, as each one was able, decided to provide help for the brothers and sisters living in

Judea. ³⁰ This they did, sending their gift to the elders by Barnabas and Saul.

Message:

How many of you have ever heard of Edward Kimball?

Edward was a Sunday school teacher at the Mount Vernon Congregational Church; the boys in his class were on the rowdy side, but he was committed to lead each one to Jesus. One young man was a particular challenge - so he went to the shoe store where he worked after school and personally shared the Gospel with him. He accepted Jesus. His name was Dwight L Moody.

Moody started preaching the gospel from town to town and was instrumental in Wilbur Chapman giving his life to Jesus and becoming an evangelist. One day, a professional ball player had the day off and went to hear Chapman, gave his life to Jesus, quit playing baseball and joined Chapman's staff. His name was Billy Sunday.

Chapman eventually became the pastor of a large church, so Billy Sunday started leading revivals. God used him to lead a man named Mordecai Ham to Jesus. It wasn't long before Mordecai Ham started holding tent meetings; one week he was in Charlotte, NC. Billy Graham was there and committed his life to Jesus. God used Billy Graham's revivals and ministry to bring millions of people to Jesus.

Anyone can count the seeds in an apple; only God can count the apples in a seed. Kimball never realized the role he played in God's kingdom until he got to heaven... but one faithful follower of Jesus can turn the world upside down.

Ever hear of Joseph Barnabas? Luke talks a lot about him in Acts; he is a **soul mate** of Edward Kimball. They both had a servant's **heart**; they were both encouragers; they were both bridge and kingdom **builders**; they are both **models** for us...

BARNABAS

We first meet Joseph Barnabas in Acts 4:36 - *"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."*

Joseph Barnabas came from good stock; he is a Levite; a temple worker. He was born in **Cyprus** - likely exiled by Herod to work in his copper mines... He's a **Hellenist** (a Greek-speaking Jew); Hebrew-speaking Jews looked down on

him. He had come “home” to Jerusalem; he had no doubt experienced the hostility and friction between the two Jewish factions Luke notes in **Acts 6**.

“Barnabas” is Joseph’s “nickname;” “Barnabas” means “son of **encouragement**,” nicknames are earned, so we can assume he fits the part. Barnabas is deeply committed to **Christ** and His **Church**; Luke notes his generosity.

We meet Barnabas a second time in Acts 9:26 shortly after Saul’s conversion. Saul goes to Jerusalem - headquarters of the new church - and “*he tries to join the disciples, but they were afraid of him, not believing he was really a disciple.*” Saul was the guy who was encouraging people to stone Stephen. Saul was the guy arresting and incarcerating any Christians he could find.

Barnabas came to Paul’s aid: “*Barnabas took him and brought him to the disciples. He told them how Saul on his journey had seen the Lord...and how in Damascus he had preached fearlessly in the name of Jesus.*” (**9:27**)

The Christians in Jerusalem still didn’t trust Saul; but they did trust Barnabas; they welcomed Saul based on Barnabas’ word.

Now, Barnabas shows up in Acts 11 right after the Cornelius story and Gentile controversy. Church membership in Syria-Antioch, the third largest city (after Rome and Alexandria) in the Roman Empire, has been literally exploding.

This formidable, cosmopolitan city was synonymous with immorality; known for its chariot racing, it was a center of gambling, debauchery, and pleasure seeking. Here is a further test of the Church’s willingness to change the paradigm, to impact the culture, to **embrace Gentiles** as well as Jews, to **engage** the whole **world**.

And there is Barnabas - a Greek-speaking Jew from a Gentile country with the gift of building bridges and breaking walls: “*When Barnabas arrived, he saw evidence of the grace of God; he was glad and encouraged them all to remain true to the Lord with all their hearts.*” (**Acts 11:23**)

Luke says he is “*a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and faith*” (**11:24**). Barnabas does great work: “*A great number of people were brought to the Lord.*”

Barnabas goes to find Saul who has been in Tarsus for between four and six years, brings him back to **serve** in Antioch, and mentors him as together they teach a great number of people. After a year, their mission completed, they return to Jerusalem with John Mark.

Barnabas and Paul are probably best known for their missionary journeys.

Acts 13 is Paul's first **missionary** journey; note Barnabas leads, his name is mentioned first (as Paul matures, the roles and names will reverse). The church fasts and prays, commissions them, and sends them off together. They go first to Cyprus - Barnabas' homeland; he wants his family and friends to know about Jesus!

In **13:13**, John Mark, who had accompanied them, leaves Barnabas and Paul; in **15:36**, John Mark wants to **come back**. Barnabas says to Paul: "*Let's give him another chance...*" Paul disagrees: "It's not happening. He abandoned us before, remember. No **second** chance."

I imagine Barnabas saying, "Paul, that's not right; you got a second chance and look what you did; John Mark deserves a second chance as well - as does everyone." (In fact, Jesus said something about seventy times seven). But Paul is not buying it. They have a disagreement, an argument; they part ways (this first church "schism" is not Paul's finest moment; but God makes something good from it...)

Paul leaves on his next journey with Silas; **Barnabas** takes John Mark to mentor.

That's who Barnabas is; that's what **Barnabas** does; it's deeply written in his DNA. He can discern the Lord's leading, articulate His purposes, understand His ways; he makes those around him better; he enables the community to thrive; he's an encourager!

In **2 Timothy 4:11**, Paul writes Timothy in Ephesus - "*Only Luke is with me. Get (John) Mark and bring him with you because he is useful in my ministry.*" (**Paul** eventually came around to understand what **Barnabas** was doing and what the Church was essentially - a grace based, forgiving community).

BALCONY PEOPLE

Edward Kimball and Barnabas are "Balcony People"

A "balcony person" is someone who **cheers you on** as you run the race, who picks you up when you stumble and brushes you off; who accepts you as you are; who is willing to give you a second chance (and a third and fourth and fifth chance...)

A "balcony person" doesn't need to be on the ground floor, demand their way, be the **center of attention** or get the credit. They won't kick you when you're down; they'll defend you in front of your accusers; they'll stay when everyone else has walked away; they'll lift you up! They are the people who when they say they'll pray for you, they actually pray for you.

Everyone needs a few "**balcony** people" in their lives to help on the road of life and to encourage us to become a fully devoted follower of Jesus.

Our world is full of “**basement** people” and sadly, our churches have many of them too. “Basement people” drag us down; they only see the problems with people instead of their potential; they look for stuff to criticize and they seem to complain constantly; they require their own way and use people to advance their own agenda; they keep lists – never forgetting, never forgiving; they sap our energy. They lack grace.

We have all encountered “basement people” in our lives.

So before we continue, I have two questions for you: Who are the *balcony people* in your life? And to whom are **you** a *balcony person*?

We need daily doses of balcony talk on our journey through life; everyone needs a Barnabas – actually several. Identify them. Stay close to them. Pray for them. Take care of them. Thank them regularly...

Be a balcony person (not a basement person). As much as we need balcony people in our lives; people need our encouragement in their lives. Even though this worship center doesn't have a balcony; but we need people in our balcony supporting and encouraging us in our spiritual journey.

Our culture currently doesn't have much interest in “balcony people.” Emails, instant messaging, twitter, hash tagging etc., allows people to take shots at people with relative anonymity; we are a basement culture (and sinking fast). Our world desperately needs the Good News, grace and encouragement a “balcony person” offers.

So what exactly does a **Balcony Person, a son of encouragement, look like?** (The Greek for encouragement, i.e., son of encouragement, is “*parakaleo*” - it has numerous nuances) (Here are seven things...)

First, a balcony person sees the **grace** of **God** wherever they look. **Acts 11:23** - “*When he arrived and saw the evidence of the grace of God (i.e., his goodness poured out into a life), he was glad...*” This grace is often invisible. But a balcony person intentionally looks for God's presence, power, gifts, and blessings in you - God's good stuff - and rejoices.

Second, a balcony person believes you can **grow**, you can be transformed, you are not yet who you will be, you can be a fully devoted follower of Jesus. They focus on your potential. They don't hold your past, your ethnicity, your skin color, your failures, your education, your political leanings, or your economic situation against you. They firmly believe people can become new creations; that old things can (and do) pass away and that everything can - and does - become new. Barnabas says: “*Just look at Saul. Look what God has done with him!*”

Third, a balcony person provides **comfort** in the midst of crisis, storms, and failures. In **Luke 16**, Jesus tells a story of a rich man and Lazarus - a poor,

hungry man who has no food or money; his body is covered with sores that the dogs lick. He dies and is taken into heaven and Jesus says, "He is comforted" (Same word – *parakaleo!*). Regardless of your situation, they offer absolute acceptance, unconditional love; they refuse to give up on you; they refuse to walk away – even during the toughest of times, even if you've messed up!

Fourth, a balcony person has a better **vision** of you - as a follower of Jesus – than you have of yourself - a balcony view. In **Acts 11:23**, the word *encourage* is sometimes translated "exhort."

A balcony person isn't content to let you remain an ordinary person when you have the potential to make a difference in God's kingdom. They want you to taste the fullness and goodness of God they've experienced. They want you to go farther, fly higher, love deeper, trust God alone.

They won't let you get distracted; they won't let you quit; they won't let you settle for mediocrity; they have high expectations for you. The reality is - we long to meet their expectation - even if they set the bar high and it requires some blood, some sweat, and some tears.

This is the word Paul uses in **Romans 12:1** - "*I urge [lit. exhort, encouraged] you, in view of God's mercy to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God which is your spiritual service.*"

Fifth, a balcony person lives by the **inversion principle**. Dallas Willard says *balcony people* have this Biblical principle mastered: the first shall be last; the greatest shall be the least; you have to die (to self) to really live; only those who lose themselves for the sake of the kingdom will find themselves.

This principle means followers of Jesus are to be humble, focused on serving others, and able to set their agenda to the side. Henry Nouwen defines it as "**downward mobility**" (cf. Philippians 2); balcony people are not threatened by another's success; they enjoy playing a supportive role in God's Kingdom.

Sixth, a balcony person believes you are **worth** their **investment**. In **Acts 11:25**, Barnabas sets out for Tarsus to find Saul. When he finds him, he brings him back to Antioch. And he invests the entire next year in Saul.

They engage people together, teach people together; invest in others together. Barnabas senses Paul has potential – that God can and will use him. He takes him under his wing.

Finally, balcony people encourage us simply by **the way they live** their lives. They **think** differently - they think more about others than about themselves. They **speak** differently - they build people up instead of tearing them down. They **live** differently - they don't live for themselves; they live for Jesus, for his

kingdom, and for others; and in doing so, they are people of integrity. And they are willing to **risk everything** for the sake of Jesus...

In **Acts 15**, Barnabas goes back to Jerusalem to engage in the next round of building bridges for the sake of the Gentiles (and all those who are unlike them).

What would this world be like without Balcony People? What would the Church be like without people like Barnabas?

Barnabas plays a critical, indispensable, blessed, glorious, link in the growth of the early church; that's what balcony people do; it's what the church is called to be.

The church **desperately** needs balcony people, "*sons/daughters of encouragement*", because people can't survive without balcony people in their life. The question is, why isn't every follower of Jesus an "encourager."

THE BOTTOM LINE

Barnabas did a lousy job of career planning - intentionally. In its place he did some marvelous things, made a huge impact on the early church, but he forgot to position himself to get the credit; he was a balcony person.

Barnabas understood life was about more than just where you stand on the ladder. He knew that in climbing the steps to personal success, the steps keep getting smaller and smaller; and the higher one goes, the less meaningful it is.

As a balcony person, Barnabas reflects Jesus who came not to be **served** but to **serve**. For his efforts, Barnabas receives the title of "apostle!" (**Acts 14:14**). He's good with that - Barnabas understands it's all about remaining faithful (**11:23**).

They are labeled Christians: "*It was in Antioch the disciples were first called Christians*" (**Acts 11:26**).

The Church has been persecuted from the beginning; it's part of following Jesus. People in Antioch saw Christ in his disciples; so they labeled them Christians! (It was meant to be **derogatory**, contemptuous; but the disciples took it as a **compliment!**).

Understand, these believers are not talking or complaining about their church, their pastor, the worship service, their problems, or their aches and pains - all they're talking about is Jesus Christ - so there was nothing else to call them but "fanatics for Christ."

A few years ago, TIME interviewed twenty up and coming pastors in this country - only one even mentioned Jesus! We wonder why the church in North America is troubled.

We desperately need to rediscover the centrality of **Jesus Christ** in our **lives** and in His **Church**; we need to live into the **name** we've been given.

Churches that never struggle to understand what God is doing and willing are churches to avoid; because where the Spirit is blowing - God will surprise us; new ways of expression will result, and we'll have to learn to work together...

When the church becomes overwhelmingly comprised of Barnabas's who are diligently working at being the balcony people we can be, we'll grow together spiritually, bless one another, and find new ways to engage our community for Christ, and grow the His Kingdom!

Jesus continues to watch us from his balcony at his Father's right hand. Jesus longs for us to embrace the **grace** of his sacrifice, to be transformed into a **fully devoted** follower, and to live into his **vision** for his church. He considers us **worth** the **investment**; worth his life and his death.

We might be able count the lives we've encountered for Him, but we'll never know the lives we've impacted; we can count the **seeds** in an **apple**; but only God can count the **apples** in a **seed**.

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