

Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church

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Sermon manuscript

Paul and Barnabas, Friends and Partners Study #3

(Acts, 9, 11, 13-14, 15)

Sermon Series: Life-Changing Relationships

Nurturing relationships that help us follow Jesus.

Introduction: The gift of friendship...

Friendship is a valued gift at any time. During COVID-19 it is more precious than ever. We see less of our friends than we wish we did, and we are refreshed by our friends when we're with them - even if it is virtual!

Your friend listens to you, cares for you, hangs with you. He believes in you even after you fail. Very often, friends dream together and work toward fulfilling their dreams together.

I believe that it's God's plan that we in the church establish friendships that help us follow Jesus more closely.

And I hope that you're finding friendship here at Northwest, even during this challenging season of COVID-19 through a Care Group or a Men's or Women's study, or a Sunday morning ABF or through some other venue.

I think that friendship is so important that I'm going to track a biblical friendship for you this morning, to whet your appetite for friends with God in the middle.

This friendship was a beautiful, powerful, impactful one that God used to bring the blessing of Jesus to the world. And it was a

friendship that included challenges - as most do - that will provide some training to us in the fine art of "friending".

We're going to explore the relationship of Barnabas (whose nickname was "The Son of Encouragement") and Saul of Tarsus, who became the Apostle Paul.

A Beautiful Friendship

The Sponsor and the Newbie (Acts 9:23-30)

The newly converted Saul/Paul was instantly opposed (vv. 23-24)

Saul (and for simplicity's sake, I'll refer to him as "Paul" today) came to believe in Jesus after the Lord appeared to him while he was on his way to persecute Christians in the city of Damascus.

From the moment of conversion forward, Paul was a powerful Christian witness. The persecutor became the persecuted.

But now a Christian in Damascus, Paul was trapped. Those who opposed the Jesus movement want to kill Paul.

Paul was saved because the people he had gone to Damascus to arrest - the Christians - at great personal risk - helped him escape.

Saul/Paul left Damascus with a little help from his friends (v. 25)

[25] but his disciples¹ took him by night and let him down through an opening in the wall, lowering him in a large basket.

Paul was now free, delivered by his new Jesus-following friends. So, what will he do now that he is safe and sound outside the Damascus city wall?

¹ Isn't it amazing that these Damascus Christians are already being referred to as Paul's disciples?

We watch as he traveled from Damascus to the center of Christian activity in the first century: Jerusalem. And what kind of a reception do you figure he got there?

Barnabas extends a risky welcome in Jerusalem (vv. 26-27)

A nervous church (v. 26)

[26] When he came to Jerusalem, he was trying to associate with the disciples; but they were all afraid of him, not believing that he was a disciple.

That's not surprising because the last time the Christians in Jerusalem had seen Paul, he had had been dragging men and women out of their homes to stand trial before the Sanhedrin.

We get why they were stand-offish. They didn't trust him because they figured that he was working undercover for the High Priest, *pretending* to be a Christian, so he could lure them into his confidence - and then arrest them.

The stand-off between Paul and the Christians in Jerusalem was shattered when a hero showed up.

A courageous sponsor (v. 27)

[27] But Barnabas took hold of him and brought him to the apostles and described to them how he had seen the Lord on the road, and that He had talked to him, and how at Damascus he had spoken out boldly in the name of Jesus.

Barnabas has already appeared in the book of Acts as a generous and encouraging Christian. Here, as far as I can see, nobody told Barnabas to welcome Paul or to believe his story. He was under no obligation to do anything.

He simply chose to trust Paul's story, calculating that it would be better to risk being killed by Paul if he was faking it, then to risk refusing to help Paul if he wasn't.

There was never a time when Barnabas was more truly a "Son of Encouragement" than here, when he welcomed Paul into Christian fellowship.

If you have ever been welcomed by a "Barnabas" when you were just getting introduced at a new job, or walking into a class in a new school, or unpacking the moving van, you know what a meaningful service Barnabas provided to Paul in Jerusalem.

On the day that Barnabas became Paul's sponsor, the two men formed a tight bond of friendship with Jesus at the center.

That's the opening chapter of their friendship and the next chapter unfolds a bit later, when the scene shifts from Jerusalem to Antioch, a city in Syria.

Teammates in Teaching, Giving (Acts 11:19-30)

Serving together (vv. 19-26)

The "mother church" in Jerusalem was hearing reports of great things going on at Antioch. So, they sent Barnabas (Mr. Encourager) to encourage this new church.

Barnabas did his best to encourage those who were a part of the Antioch church, but he quickly realized that he needed help if the church was going to thrive.

We can almost picture the thought processes swirling around in Barnabas' head.

"Let's see, the church needs somebody who can serve the Jews, but who can also serve the Gentiles; someone who has an encyclopedic knowledge of Scripture; someone who is courageous and skilled in argument; someone who loves Jesus..."

[25] And he left for Tarsus to look for Saul; [26] and when he had found him, he brought him to Antioch... - and they had the time of their lives.²

If Barnabas had been a perfect choice to go to Antioch to coach and to cheerlead, Paul was just as perfect a choice for Barnabas to bring along to help him establish these new converts in the faith.

[26]...And it came about that for an entire year they met with the church and taught considerable numbers.

They took these new Christians, invested in them, poured their lives into them.

And, sure enough, Paul and Barnabas were more effective together than they would have been separate.³ Their experience tells us that in Christian service, teamwork is a force multiplier.

We don't know all that they taught in Antioch. We don't have their syllabus and teaching notes. All we know is that they centered on Jesus. Everything came back to Him.

And we know that because of the nickname they earned: **[Acts 11:26]...and the disciples were first called Christians in Antioch⁴.**

That nickname was very likely NOT intended as a compliment. No, it was an insult,⁵ as in, *"That group over there - all they ever talk*

about is Christ! Just a bunch of Christ-freaks. Fanatics!" - and the Christians wore it like a badge of honor.

No longer were they primarily Romans or Greeks or Jews, slave or free, rich or poor, Republicans or Democrats or Libertarians or Asians or Europeans or Africans or Hispanics or Anglos.⁶

They are Christ-ones.

And there is more. With Paul and Barnabas still at Antioch, the church received a visit from a delegation of prophets from Jerusalem.

This group had traveled three hundred miles to bring a message from God to the Christ-ones of Antioch.

Giving together (vv. 27-30)

A man named Agabus was the spokesman for the group. He told Antioch that a great famine was coming to the whole world.⁷

Watch what the mostly Gentile church in Antioch did when they heard this news. They thought immediately of their poorer Jewish brothers and sisters living in Judea.

[29] And in the proportion that any of the disciples had means, each of them determined to send a contribution for the relief of the brethren living in Judea.

What better way could there possibly be to affirm the truth that they were one in Christ than to share their material resources with each other in time of distress?

And what better symbol of unity could there have been than for the Antioch church to send two of the church's brightest lights to take the gift?

⁶ The significance of the name is that the church is being further separated from Judaism in people's minds.

⁷ The words, *"all over the world"* are probably meant to refer to the Roman world, given the phrase about the reign of Claudius, verse 28.

² It is certainly possible that Barnabas, knowing of Saul's earliest commission (Acts 9) to go to the Gentiles, knew that for this reason he was the man for the job.

³ The whole of their service was greater than the sum of their individual efforts.

⁴ The Antiochians received a visit from Emperor Julian, who had a beard and nicknamed him, "The Goat." They were evidently good at nicknames. ☺

⁵ In the New Testament the word "Christian" occurs only three times. Here, and in Acts 26:28, where King Agrippa told Paul to stop witnessing or *"In a short time you will persuade me to become a Christian."*, showing how widespread the use of the name was after only a few short years; and in 1 Peter 4:16, *"but if anyone suffers as a Christian, let him not feel ashamed, but in that name let him glorify God."* The believers themselves preferred to self-name as "disciples" "saints" or "brethren."

[30] And this they did, sending it in charge of Barnabas and Saul to the elders.⁸

Chapter three of the friendship between Barnabas and Saul surfaces next. They're still at Antioch, but not for long because...

A Missionary Journey, Together (Acts 13-14)

First steps, missteps (13:1-13)

...during a time of prayer and fasting, some of the church leaders followed the leading of the Holy Spirit and, with the blessing of the whole church, sent Barnabas and Paul on a trip.

The purpose of the trip was to spread the Gospel to people who had never heard of Jesus.

The first steps on this journey were to the island of Cyprus where Paul and Barnabas and their young helper, John Mark, met with high adventure and good mission success.

They left Cyprus and sailed to the Asian mainland toward the region known as *Galatia* and discover that John Mark left Paul and Barnabas and went home to Jerusalem.

By leaving John Mark did two things.

ONE, he missed the joy of seeing God's amazing grace and life-changing power on the rest of the trip. TWO, he made the rest of the trip much harder for Paul and Barnabas.

When we catch up with Paul and Barnabas - Still stinging from the departure of John Mark? - they are heading into the dangerous territory of Galatia.

They spent about two years traveling just shy of a thousand miles on foot, spending significant time in four cities.

⁸ This is probably the gift that is mentioned in Galatians 2.

Taking Jesus on the road (vv. 13-15)

In Pisidian Antioch (Acts 13:13-52), a Roman colony in the rugged Taurus Mountains, they preached to the Jews until they were rejected and then turned to the Gentiles.

In Iconium (Acts 14:1-7), they reached out to both Jews and Gentiles and fled when a plot formed to mistreat and to stone them.

In the city of Lystra (Acts 14:8-19), God used them to perform a miracle of healing, which prompted the people there to worship them as gods! Of course, Paul and Barnabas directed them to worship God. But their opponents from the previous two cities came to Lystra to do what they hadn't done before, and they stoned Paul nearly to death.

Then, after Paul recovered a bit, he and Barnabas walked to the nearby city of Derbe and preached the Gospel there, too!⁹

With that mission completed, Paul and Barnabas returned to Antioch, and to the church that had sent them.

For some time, all was well in the church at Antioch. But there came trouble with the arrival of a new teaching.

Co-Testifiers to the Beautiful Gospel of Grace (Acts 15)

Trouble comes to Antioch... (v. 1)

[1] Some men came down from Judea and began teaching the brethren, "Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved."

This teaching that a man couldn't be saved unless he was circumcised¹⁰ was brand new.

⁹ Then, they retraced their steps, going back to Lystra (where Paul had been stoned) and Iconium and to Pisidian Antioch, strengthening the believers in each place and appointing elders to lead the fledgling churches.

¹⁰ To clarify...the focus of the discussion of circumcision was male circumcision. The Bible never mentions, encourages, or condones female circumcision.

And it was a very unsettling teaching to the Gentiles in the church because, if circumcision, a Jewish rite, was required of non-Jews, then the Christian faith was nothing more than a Jewish sect.

The full message of the men from Judea was, *“If you want to be a Christ-follower, you have to be a Moses-follower. If you want to be a Christian, you’ve got to be a Jew.”*

The men who brought this teaching came with some *gravitas*. After all, they hailed from Judea, where Christianity had started.

But, in coming to Antioch, they hadn’t come to a church of pushovers. Paul and Barnabas were there, and they had faced rock-throwing crowds in Lystra, and assassination attempts in Iconium.

After debate in Antioch, it was decided that what was needed was an All-Churches Council to discuss whether Christianity was something brand-new or just a branch of Judaism.

When this Council convened, the apostles and the church’s elders all present. Paul and Barnabas had been sent there, too, and their role was to report **[Acts 15:4] all that God had done with them** - especially among the Gentiles - during their journey through Galatia.

And, with their testimony, James, who was the half-brother of Jesus and had by this time become a leader in the Jerusalem church, concluded the proceedings by saying that following the way of Jesus did not require circumcision or any other Jewish elements.¹¹

With this breath of fresh air from the Council, Paul and Barnabas returned to Antioch and continued to serve there.

However, after some time, Paul got itchy feet. He was ready to hit the road again.

¹¹ As the Apostle Peter had said earlier in the proceedings, **[Acts 15:11] “But we believe that we are saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, in the same way as they also are.”**

A “Sharp Disagreement” (15:36-41)

Road Trip! (v. 36)

[36] After some days Paul said to Barnabas, “Let us return and visit the brethren in every city in which we proclaimed the word of the Lord, and see how they are.”

They had made good friends in Galatia and wanted to teach them more about life in Jesus. So, a second journey made a lot of sense. But a problem surfaced as they began to plan this second trip.

To TAKE or to NOT TAKE John Mark...

[37] Barnabas wanted to take John, called Mark, along with them also. [38] But Paul kept insisting that they should not take him along who had deserted them in Pamphylia and had not gone with them to the work.

Barnabas wanted to take John Mark again, who just happened to be his cousin. But remember, on the first trip, John Mark abandoned them, and Paul wasn’t about to risk that happening again.

The disagreement between the two friends intensified, and their conversation might have looked something like this...

Separation (vv. 39b-41)

Terminal, heated separation

Paul: Barnabas, my brother, welcome to my house - and it’s great to see you. It’s been a while, hasn’t it? I’ve missed you. How have you been?

Barnabas: Paul, I’ve been doing well. And it is good to see you, too. You know, I have been thinking a lot lately about the times we’ve had serving Jesus together.

Paul: Oh, He has blessed us with some great times, hasn’t He? I remember all the way back to our first meeting in Jerusalem, when you

welcomed me into the fellowship. We've served Him together - and we've suffered together, too, haven't we? But it has all been worth it.

Barnabas: Yes, it has, Paul. On that trip through Galatia, there were some wild times, for sure. So, when I got your letter, I came to your house as quickly as I could. What's up?

Paul: Well, I've been thinking about taking another trip to tell more people about Jesus. Are you interested?

Barnabas: You bet, brother. Count me in! Just tell me where we're going and when you want to leave. In fact, if we can agree on departure dates, I'll head over to John Mark's house to let him know so he can clear his calendar to go with us again.

Paul: John Mark? You're not serious, are you? After what he did to us last time, you'd even consider taking him along?

Barnabas: Oh, come on, Paul. You're always so judgmental. You're far from perfect yourself and if memory serves, you've had plenty of failures, too. Just think where you would be if I hadn't welcomed you into the church at Jerusalem. You'd still be on the outside looking in!

Paul: Yeah, but Barnabas, he abandoned us. John Mark left us high and dry on that last trip. You've got to be out of your mind to want to invite him again.

Barnabas: Paul, this is how you always act. You're nothing but a hard-hearted, stiff-necked, uncaring legalist.

Paul: And you're so soft-headed you've lost your ability to think. Where's your judgment, Barnabas?

I'd have to question your character if you want John Mark on this upcoming trip you're thinking about taking. I will tell you this much. If you bring him, you can count me out. He's nothing but a loser. John Mark will never amount to anything.

Barnabas: He's coming. That's final.

Paul: Barnabas, I'm an apostle. He's not coming. Period.

Barnabas: Well, you authoritarian so-and-so! That's the last straw. I don't much care if I ever see you again. I'm finished with you.

Paul: Same goes for me.

And that's how the relationship between Paul and Barnabas ended. They never served Jesus together again. They never had anything to do with each other again.

The relationship that began with Barnabas' risky sponsorship of Paul in Jerusalem and that included years of sacrificial service, suffering, and fruitful ministry ended over a "**sharp disagreement**" about whether or not to take John Mark on a missions trip. How unbelievably sad.

Yes, maybe unbelievable. Maybe their conversation took a different turn.

Strategic, respectful separation

Paul: Barnabas, my brother, welcome to my house - and it's great to see you. It's been a while, hasn't it? I've missed you. How have you been?

Barnabas: Paul, I've been doing well. And it is good to see you, too. You know, I have been thinking a lot lately about the times we've had serving Jesus together.

Paul: Oh, He has blessed us with some great times, hasn't He? I remember all the way back to our first meeting in Jerusalem, when you welcomed me into the fellowship. We've served Him together - and we've suffered together, too, haven't we? But it has all been worth it.

Barnabas: Yes, it has, Paul. On that trip through Galatia, there were some wild times, for sure. So, when I got your letter, I came to your house as quickly as I could. What's up?

Paul: Well, I've been thinking about taking another trip to tell more people about Jesus. Are you interested?

Barnabas: You bet, brother. Count me in! Just tell me where we're going and when you want to leave. In fact, if we can agree on departure dates, I'll head over to John Mark's house to let him know so he can clear his calendar to go with us again.

Paul: John Mark, huh. You're considering approaching him after what he did on that last trip? I don't think that's such a good idea at all.

Barnabas: Paul, I figured you'd have some concerns. But I think the young man has potential. I'd like to give him another chance.

Paul: It doesn't seem wise to me to put such a weight on someone who has already failed. The mission is on the line and I'm just not willing to risk it.

Barnabas: But, Paul, I've seen real progress in him. So have some of the brothers back in Jerusalem. We all agree that John Mark has grown.

Paul: Just the same, Barnabas, I can't go there. I understand your desire to help people out - you've sure helped me out a lot. But if you insist on taking John Mark, count me out.

Barnabas: Paul, I'm really sorry to hear that. I'll miss serving with you.

Barnabas: Say, haven't I seen you spending a lot of time with that young man, Silas? It looks like he's been growing as a disciple. What would you think about taking him along on a Gospel trip?

Paul: Oh, he is a fine young man, for us. But, no, Barnabas, adding Silas doesn't change things for me. If John Mark is going, I won't be a part of it.

Barnabas: I know that. But I'm suggesting, as much as I love you, that you and I split up for this one. I'm comfortable taking John Mark traveling even if you aren't. So, what if you and Silas take your own trip?

Paul: That's a thought. We could actually double the impact of the ministry. I'd sure miss traveling with you, brother. But your idea is intriguing.

Barnabas: We've had great times together serving Jesus in the past. And, God willing, we will again in the future. But I'll pray for you and Silas' trip and I'll ask that you pray for me and for John Mark.

Paul: I promise to pray, my brother. Whether we get to serve together is in God's hands, but I'll never stop praying for you.

Barnabas: Nor I for you.

So, which was it? How did their conversation go? Honestly, I don't know. It might have gone either way.

All we have in the Bible is this: **[39a] And there occurred such a sharp disagreement that they separated from one another...**

As evidence that the first, heated conversation is what happened, someone might point out that we never hear about Paul and Barnabas serving together again.

But...there's a lot that the New Testament doesn't include.

For instance, Simon Peter isn't mentioned in the book of Acts after the Jerusalem Council of Acts 15. That doesn't mean that Peter didn't keep on serving Jesus.

And, in support of the second conversation, we note that Paul mentioned Barnabas as a fellow worker for the Gospel in a letter written *after* the "John Mark" incident. (1 Corinthians 9:6)

I think we're left with enough wiggle room to wonder, "*How might two mature men, both devoted followers of Jesus, with a history of friendship and partnership in the Gospel, have managed genuine conflict and a 'sharp disagreement'?*"

Frankly, I think the second conversation is much more likely. As we conclude, I'll point out how I see the conflict between Paul and Barnabas speaking to you and me, today.

Conclusion:

For one thing, their conflict tells us that we'll likely have conflict, too. It happens. Christians disagree on ministry strategy, on child-rearing methods, schooling options for kids, politics, and some of the finer points of theology.

Don't be surprised when you have conflict with a brother or a sister in Christ. You're a person of conviction? Great. Other people will have other convictions. If you're working together, this may very well result in conflict.

For another thing, notice that God used the solution that Paul and Barnabas came up with to deal with the conflict to great benefit. They separated, forming two teams instead of one.

[Acts 15:39]...Barnabas took Mark with him and sailed away to Cyprus.

They served the Lord, together, Barnabas mentoring Mark.

Over time, Mark developed into a solid disciple, to the point that Paul asked that Mark help him in his final imprisonment in Rome. (2 Timothy 4:11) And, of course, Mark did give us the second Gospel in our New Testaments.¹²

Paul, for his part, took Silas on the Second Missionary Journey. ***[40] But Paul chose Silas and left, being committed by the brethren to the grace of the Lord.***

So, there were definite Gospel wins from the intentional separation of Paul and Barnabas. If God used their conflict, He can use conflict that you and I get into, as well.

¹² Paul also recognized Mark in Colossians 4:10, Philemon 2, and Peter mentions him in 1 Peter 5:13.

Finally, when conflict comes (as it almost inevitably will), we must learn to manage it in ways that honor God.

I hold out hope that Paul and Barnabas handled their conflict with grace. I think it likely that they listened to each other, respected each other, loved each other, and prayed for each other.¹³

I think it is more probable that the Son of Encouragement sought the way of peace and that the author of 1 Corinthians 13 pursued love.

When we have "***sharp disagreements***" with each other, may God give us grace to do the same.

Loving each other through conflict is worth it for the sake of the mission, and for a testimony to a watching world.

¹³ I've checked several works on Acts this week and haven't found anyone who insisted that the "break" was hostile or permanent. Commentaries on Acts from I. Howard Marshall, F. F. Bruce, Darrell L. Bock, Everett Harrison.