

SERMON: **“Making Room in Our Hearts for God’s Call.”** (Mark 3:13-19)

Rev. Geoffrey M. Ross, Sunday, January 22, 2012. St. James Presbyterian Church

Today marks the mid-way point of our Epiphany series entitled “Making Room in our Hearts” in which we are looking at how, as people of faith – as Christians – we are compelled to show our love for God by loving our neighbours, by loving one another: and how we are called to do this by living in community. So far we have heard how we are created in God’s image (the Trinity) to living in community, and about how Jesus commissioned us to become God’s community – His Body, the Church – in the world so that we can do what He did (WWJD?); “be-with” those who are in need of hope, love, joy, and the presence of God in their lives. We heard how this simple plan – the “Be-with” plan – was initiated by the creation of a small community – a small group – in which Jesus was able “be-with” His disciples as they, in turn, could “be-with” Him as they learned to love God by loving those that God wanted them to love – their neighbours. This is what Jesus did and through this small group the world was changed; and it’s what we as a community of faith – are called to do as well. The problem is not many of us think we are capable of changing the world.

The Acts 2 Church – as we have heard – put their faith into action by re-enacting Jesus’ “Be-with” plan: they *“devoted themselves”* to putting into practice what they knew; that in community – especially a community that has Christ as its center – lives can be saved; saved through love, saved because of love – our love for one another. They did this because they had learned by “being-with” Jesus that the Church – the community that is the Body of Christ in the world – is not supposed to be a place where we come once a week and sit in a service, although that’s many people do: it’s about transforming lives in and through community that “does life” together – and it’s about encouraging one another through that transformation. If the command from Jesus is for us to love one another, then the primary way that we are to do this is through our encouragement of – our support of and caring for, our building up and standing with – one another. Over and over again the leaders of the early Church called for those listening to *“encourage one another and build up each other”* because they knew that it was by encouraging one another that they would come to know God together. (1 Thess 5:11; 1 Peter 5:12; Titus 2:4) This brings us to the little known Barnabas.

We meet Barnabas for the first time in the fourth chapter of Acts. *“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.”* (Acts 4:36-37) Now what this tells us is that Joseph, while a Levite – one the twelve tribes of Israel (and an important one at that!) – was an outsider because he was from Cyprus: he was what was known as a “Hellenist” – more Greek than Jewish – and was considered impure. But Joseph/Barnabas had heard the call of God and responded whole heartedly; as evidenced by his immediately selling off his property and laying it at the Apostles’ feet basically encouraging them to do with it what

they will – in fact he becomes the first recorded giver to the Church! (He should be the patron saint of Stewardship campaigns!) After that the Apostles decide to give him a new name, Barnabas, “*son of Encouragement!*” And from then on, whenever he hears his name, he’s reminded of what he is called to do – encourage.

And that’s what he does; he encourages the community – the new comers, the fainthearted (1 Thess 5:14), and the wavering who might otherwise fall away from the community. And guess what? Because of his encouragement, the community grows. The next time we hear about Barnabas is in Acts 9 when he is called upon to reach out to a man named Saul, who has been persecuting the followers of Jesus: it was Barnabas who befriended Saul/Paul when none of the other Christians trusted him. He alone believed that by welcoming Saul into community his heart would be changed by God – he didn’t let Saul’s past keep him from focusing on Paul’s tomorrow. It was on Barnabas’ word that the Apostles took the chance on the person who would become the greatest evangelist of the Church. Barnabas disappears again until he’s called upon to witness to God’s work among the Gentiles in Antioch – the first major city outside of Israel where the early church took hold – something that was threatening to destroy the Church. In Acts 11 Barnabas is described as “*a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and of faith*” who encouraged the early Christians to “*remain faithful to the Lord with steadfast devotion.*”

The last time we hear of Barnabas in the Book of Acts he is sticking up for another evangelist named John Mark. By this time Barnabas and Paul are travelling around the Middle East building up and encouraging the many small Churches that have started up – and, like Jesus they travelled with ‘students;’ one of whom was Mark. In Acts 15 Barnabas and Paul disagree over Mark and they part company – Paul going on to Syria with Silas, Barnabas going to Cyprus with Mark – Mark, who scholars believe may have written the Gospel of Mark. Now, can you imagine a world without Barnabas? A Church without Barnabas’ encouragement – without his willingness to risk, reach out, to be-with those who might need to hear God’s whisper? There would be no Church because there wouldn’t have been a Paul to take the Good News beyond the confines of Jerusalem, and there might not have been a Bible if there had not been a Mark who wrote the first Gospel on which the Gospels of Matthew and Luke are based. Not bad for someone we rarely hear of – all because he made room in his heart for God’s call.

Today we celebrated Jack’s baptism – the welcoming into the community of faith of a new brother who has been joined into the “*one body and one Spirit, [and has been] called to the one hope of [our] calling, [of our faith in the] one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all.*”(Eph 4:4-5) – and we pray that he, like Barnabas – and the rest of us who have been claimed by God – live up to our commission to love God by loving – and encouraging – our neighbours by holding “*fast to the confession of our hope without wavering, [while considering] how to provoke one another to love and good deeds [by] encouraging one another.*” We have been created to live in community; we have been called to love one another; and commissioned to encourage each other to live lives worthy of the “*living*

hope” won for us by Jesus Christ – the question is will you make room in your heart for God’s call like Barnabas did? Who will you encourage? Will you change the world?

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts move us to respond to make room in our hearts for our neighbours – to love God by loving others. Amen