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Barnabas: First in Assists

Heather Zempel

When I turned six years old, my dad granted me my biggest birthday wish and put a basketball goal in the backyard. He put a regulation, men's basketball into my hands and I proceeded to shoot. Now my goal was to try to hit the basket from the garage, which was completely on the other side of the yard. And so for me power was the most important variable. Now, over time I got really good at hitting the shots, but my form was absolutely terrible. So fast forward 30 years and my friend Emily decided she was going to teach me how to shoot a basketball properly. She was the second ranked point guard of the sophomore class nationally. So I figured she would be a good coach. So she takes me out and after enduring endless rounds of ridicule and insult about my form and what is your wrist doing and what are your fingertips doing and your shot is so ugly. I finally shot back with well, why were you not number one ranked? And she responded, well, I was number one in assists.

If you've got your Bible with you this weekend turn over to Acts chapter four. If you are here this weekend and you are new to church or coming back to church, you got tricked into coming to church we're glad you're here. And we pray that this weekend is an opportunity for you to connect with God, connect with others, and just enter into his goodness and faithfulness and love. This weekend we're in a sermon series called 'Unsung'. It's about people in the story of God who were number one in assists. It's the people who propel the story of God forward because of their quiet lives of devotion in prayer and obedience and faithfulness. They're the people who live with this deep conviction that history belongs to the intercessors in the prayer closets on their knees. The people who believe that change happens on the path of a long obedience in the same direction, the people that believe faithfulness, changes generations.

And so this weekend we're gonna dive into the story of one of those unsung heroes. In the book of Acts, Acts was written by a man named Luke and his story, he actually wrote a Gospel that is after his name Luke. And then Acts picks up the story after the resurrection of Jesus and tells us about the early church, the first followers of Jesus, those first days of Christianity exploding onto the scene. And in Acts four verse 32 we read this.

³² "All the believers were one in heart and mind. No one claimed that any of their possessions was their own, but they shared everything they had. ³³ With great power the apostles continued to testify to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus. And God's grace was so powerfully at work in them ³⁴ that there were no needy persons among them. For from time to time those who owned land or houses sold them, brought the money from the sales ³⁵ and put it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to anyone who had need. ³⁶ Joseph, a Levite from Cyprus, whom the apostles called Barnabas (which means "son of encouragement"), ³⁷ sold a field he owned and brought the money and put it at the apostles' feet."

Alright, this is the first time we're introduced to this guy named Barnabas. Actually his name is Joseph he was nicknamed Barnabas, son of encouragement. Now Barnabas is one of my favorite

characters in the whole Bible. But he's kind of a minor character and so often when I teach, he gets mentioned as an example or an illustration or he gets kind of an honorable mention. He kind of falls into the background against the power players like Peter and Paul. But I would suggest that whether you've heard of his name or not, whether you know a little bit of his story or not, his influence reaches all the way to us today. Now, we don't have time to do a complete character study of Barnabas so I brought a slide to show you that lists some of the places that we see him on the pages of scripture, some of his character attributes, some of the descriptions about him. So if you want to dive deeper into this guy's life, I just encourage you to take your phone out, snap a picture, and you can dive into this through the week on your own.

Now a couple things that we learn right off the bat is that he's a Jewish man, he's from Cyprus, he's a Levite and he's hanging out with the apostles in Jerusalem. Now a lot of times when we read scripture and we see little details like that, we just kind of read right over them. We think they're just kind of color commentary but the reality is sometimes details like that, like his ancestry, his hometown, can give us insight into who the person is. I would encourage you, whenever you read scripture and you come across the name of a geographical location, ask the question why there? Why did it happen there? Or if there's a detail that just seems kind of extra like ask the question, why did the author think it was important to include this detail for their readers?

So, Barnabas is a Levite that means he comes from a descended from a line of a tribe of people who were given special serving responsibilities in the temple in Jerusalem, but he was living in Cyprus. He was a Jewish man, but he was living outside of Jerusalem. And because he lived in Cypress that meant that his native language was most likely Greek. And he had been far more influenced by Greek culture than Hebraic culture. He was a foreigner. And because he had been so influenced by an adopted Greek culture, he would have been not allowed to serve in the temple. In fact, in the first century, there was a lot of there was a lot of tension between the Jews who lived in Jerusalem and those who lived elsewhere in the empire. The Hebraic Jews and the Hellenistic Jews often found themselves in a little bit of conflict. We can see that due chapters later in Act six.

So anyway, Barnabas shows up. He's an outsider, but he's also very wealthy. He owns land and he sells the land and he gives the money to the apostles to distribute as they felt was needed. Now, if we think about this for a moment, it's a little significant, but because the apostles, these were the 12 guys that were the original followers of Jesus. They're like fishermen, throw a zealot in there. They're not exactly guys that you think are like experts at financial management. The one guy that was, it was a guy named Judas, he was the treasurer and he was no longer in the picture. But Barnabas, this wealthy man, this man that obviously knows how to manage his finances, just brings this money and puts it at the apostles feet no strings attached. He was saying, I want to belong to a community and build a community that's bigger than myself. I want to be a part of a story that is larger than my own. I want to hitch my purpose to something much more expansive than the plot of land right here and I'm going to trust this community. And he gave; he gave with an open hand generously without hesitation, reservation or designation. In fact, he would be the first mentioned shareholder in the community of the way of Jesus. If you want to be first in assists, you've got to invest in a story that's bigger than your own. I think that begins by ceasing to be a consumer and moving in the direction of being a contributor.

For instance, why do we come to church? Is it the value that we get out of it or is it the value that we bring to it? Do we see church as something primarily existing to meet our needs or do we view the church as a body of which all of us are apart and together as we do our part, we can meet the needs of the world around us. It's interesting that the early church was propelled forward, it got the attention of the Roman Empire, not because their beliefs were a little bit different, but because of the way they acted because of the way they cared for people with grace and with dignity. They fed the hungry, they clothed the poor. They cared for the sick and it got the attention of the ancient world. In fact, Emperor Julian once said that it's a scandal that the Galileans care not only for their own poor, but for ours as well. He said; let us not allow them to outdo us in doing good. It was vexing to the emperor that anybody could be considered more noble or benevolent than the Roman Empire and yet the church was, and the church was propelled forward in the first century because of the generosity of people like Barnabas.

Someone else's miracle may be on the other side of your investment. It might be on the other side of an open hand of generosity that gives freely without hesitation or reservation or designation and says, I want to be a part of a story that is larger than my own.

Barnabas was not just about investing in a story that was larger than his own. He also committed to building someone else's platform. So if you want to flip on over to Acts chapter nine and I'll set it up for a moment. We'll see one specific platform he built. There is a guy in Acts by the name of Saul later he's referred to as Paul, that's how many of us refer to him. It's not that his name got changed. Paul is just the Greek rendering of the Hebrew named Saul. And later in Acts, because most of his ministry was to Greek speaking people, they just went with Paul and left it that way.

Now, Saul was kind of enemy number one. Saul had orders from the temple authorities in Jerusalem to hunt down arrest and sometimes even half killed these followers of Jesus. And so he went out all over the empire hunting down followers of Jesus until one day he's heading to Damascus to do this work. And he has this unbelievable encounter with Jesus and it causes him to repent and do a 180. And he decides in the biggest surprise turn of events that he's going to be a follower of Jesus too.

A couple of weeks ago, Pastor Joel talked about a man named Ananias, an unsung hero in Damascus who went and got Paul and prayed with him and prayed that he would be healed and had him baptized and introduced him to the church in Damascus and vouched for him. But then Saul / Paul, he tries to go connect with the church in Jerusalem and in Acts 9:26 we read this.

²⁶ "When he came to Jerusalem, he tried to join the disciples, but they were all afraid of him, not believing that he really was a disciple. ²⁷ But Barnabas took him and brought him to the apostles. He told them how Saul on his journey had seen the Lord and that the Lord had spoken to him, and how in Damascus he had preached fearlessly in the name of Jesus. ²⁸ So Saul stayed with them and moved freely about in Jerusalem, speaking boldly in the name of the Lord."

See, Barnabas in this moment created a place for someone else to belong. Nobody wanted to be around Saul in Jerusalem and with good reason. He had previously had warrants for their arrest. They had known that day when their friend and brother Stephen had been stoned and this guy

was standing by authorizing the whole thing. They didn't want anything to do with him and so the leadership of the Church of Jerusalem says, no, we're not allowing this guy to come in. Now, the leader of the church in Jerusalem was a guy by the name of James who happened to be the brother of Jesus. Now, who wants to go up against the brother of Jesus? Who wants to argue with a decision that is made by the brother of Jesus? Barnabas does. Barnabas risked his reputation to go get Saul, bring him to the leaders and say, look I'm know I'm risking my reputation, I'm risking my influence but I'm vouching for this man's story and his character. He loaned his reputation, risked his life. He loaned his influence, his platform, his position to bring Saul into the family, to give him a place to belong, to give him a seat at the table, to give him a place to connect.

If we want to be first in assists, we have to be a little bit crazy because we have to have x-ray vision. We've got to see things in people that others don't see. See, when Barnabas looked at Saul, he did not see a killer of Christians. He saw a man that had the potential to take the Gospel to the ends of the earth. This goes throughout the story of God. When Samuel saw David, he'd see a little shepherd boy, he saw the next king of Israel. When Jesus looked at Peter, he didn't see a loudmouth fisherman. He said, you're a rock and on this kind of faith, I'm going to build my church. And years later when Saul, now known as Paul looks at this guy named Timothy, he doesn't see a young punk kid, but he says, you be an example to all the believers everywhere. Barnabas gave him a place to belong.

When you glance across the cubicles at work, who do you see? Do you see a threat to your position? Do you see a trespasser on your organizational territory? Do you see a brown nose or do you see someone who's just a climber or do you see someone to be loved, someone to be encouraged, someone that perhaps you can risk your reputation and loan your influence and leverage your platform to give them a seat at the table? Barnabas gave Paul a place to belong.

Flip over to Acts 11. Now in Acts 11 something really fascinating happens. All of a sudden reports are coming to Jerusalem that there are Gentiles, Greeks in the city of Antioch that are now following Jesus. Now, that's not surprising to us today. Most followers of Jesus are in fact Gentiles, they're not Jewish but that wasn't the case at this point in the story. The earliest followers of Jesus, all the followers of Jesus were Jewish. Jesus was a Jewish Rabbi. And so those who were following Jesus were simply a sect of Judaism other than Cornelius and his family in Acts chapter 10 at this point, there were no Gentile followers of Jesus until these reports start coming back to Jerusalem from Antioch. And so when there are Pagan Greeks worshipping Jesus, they want to have it checked out. So in Acts 11 verse 22...

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."

Alright, Paul gets all the credit for taking the Gospel to the Gentiles. Barnabas was the one that paved the way. Barnabas was the one that went first. But what's fascinating is Barnabas didn't

even make it at all about him. He had the humility to recognize that his gifts and abilities alone would not get the job done. And so he went out and found that Saul guy and said, hey, I need you to come and help me with this mission. It's like in Jerusalem; Barnabas gave us all a place to belong. In Antioch Barnabas gave Saul a place to matter. He gave him an opportunity to learn how to lead, to learn how to teach, to develop his preaching gifts. In Jerusalem, Barnabas was an advocate, in Antioch he was a mentor.

Now I think a lot of times we think of mentoring is like the older wise or Yoda sitting across the table from a younger leader and dispensing all the wisdom, but I'm not sure that's the best way for it to work. See, there's a big difference between travel agents and tour guides. A travel agent will sit at their desk in the comfort of their climate controlled office tell you where you should go, what you should do, what you should see, how to prepare, what you're going to experience when you're there. A tour guide does something very different. They lace up their shoes, they strap on their pack, they go on the journey with you and in real time help you experience the road that you're traveling. I think when it comes to mentoring; we need a lot more tour guides than travel agents. Give people an opportunity to matter. Be a mentor. See that intern that's in your office you can talk to them about what it means to be a person of integrity. You can teach them what it means to sanctify their competitive streak in their vocation. You can talk to them about how to finish projects with excellence or you can just take them into every meeting you have. Bring them into every project that you're a part of and let them watch you do it. Invite them to do life with you as you live it. Be a tour guide.

Speaking of tour guides, flip over. Acts 13 verse two

2" While they were worshiping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, "Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them." 3 So after they had fasted and prayed, they placed their hands on them and sent them off."

And so Barnabas and Saul go on the first missionary journey where they plant churches all over Asia Minor. Now in ancient literature, the order of names was significant. Barnabas was the leader of this trip. He was the leader of this team. In fact, when got to a town called Lystra the people there mistakenly identified Barnabas as Zeus and Saul as Hermes. And yet something interesting happens in chapter 14, when they get to Iconium. In Iconium we read Paul and Barnabas went to the synagogues. The order flips; it's also where Paul begins being called Paul for the rest of the story. The order flips in Jerusalem, Barnabas gave Paul a place to belong, in Antioch, he gave him a place to matter and on that first missionary journey, he gave him a place to lead.

In Jerusalem, it's as though Barnabas just kind of took Paul under his wing and then in Antioch, he gave Paul his wings. And on the first missionary journey he let him fly and then he put himself underneath as his wing man. See, real leaders aren't intimidated by the gifts of other people. In fact, they build a platform for them. Barnabas was willing to be the second ranked point guard and be first in assists to let Paul do what God had called Paul to do. They built a platform.

One interesting thing that we see in the story is that in Acts 13:3 before they launched this journey, it says that there was a young man named John Mark who joined them. And eight verses later John Mark deserts them. He jumps off the trip; he leaves the team for whatever reason he cuts out.

In Acts 15 verse 36 we read this...

³⁶ "Some time later Paul said to Barnabas, "Let us go back and visit the believers in all the towns where we preached the word of the Lord and see how they are doing." ³⁷ Barnabas wanted to take John, also called Mark, with them, ³⁸ but Paul did not think it wise to take him, because he had deserted them in Pamphylia and not continued with them in the work. ³⁹ They had such a sharp disagreement that they parted company. Barnabas took Mark and sailed for Cyprus,"

We can read right over that and we keep going in the story and it actually picks up pace really well right here because then Paul goes on the second missionary journey and it's really exciting, the church spreads to Europe. But this has gotta be one of the most heart wrenching moments in scripture. They've been doing this together for 15 years and they came to a point of disagreement. The Voice translation says it this way.

³⁹ "Their difference of opinion was so heated that they decided not to work together anymore."

Now it's hard to draw a lot of conclusions from this. We don't know why John Mark Left. We don't know his motivations, his reasons. We don't know what caused Barnabas to want to take him on this trip or what John Mark's current state of emotional intelligence and spiritual maturity was. We don't know what happened that caused Paul to be so upset about it and Barnabas to not be as upset about it. But what we do know is that Barnabas was committed to giving people second chances. And he takes John Mark and they go on their own trip.

If we're want to be people that commit to raising the next generation of leaders, we've got to be people who are willing to commit to second chances and third chances and fourth chances and fifth chances. What do you think when you see the generation that's coming behind you, an apathetic Gen Xer, an entitled Millennial, digitally distracted Gen Zer? Or do you see someone who has been created in the image of God, gifted by God, called by God to play a very specific role in the story that he's writing? See for those that are coming behind us, we can't control the choices that they make, but we can control the words that they hear. So make them big, make them life-giving, make them not only inspirational, but aspirational, giving them a higher level to aspire to and to grow to. And we cannot control the choices that they make, but we can decide to jump into the mess of their life when it happens and it certainly will. And we recognize that messes are not problems to be solved, but environments to manage and to walk with them through a process because messes can be incubators for miracles. If we are willing to go through the process and allow that mess to forge character and form faith in them, are we willing to commit to giving people second chances?

John Mark's story was not done and Barnabas knew it and he was willing to step in and once again cheer for the underdog and take another one under his wing. Now here's what's interesting. This is at the point of scripture where the name of Barnabas kind of falls off the pages of

scripture, but his influence is just beginning to be felt. John Mark would go on and eventually actually be reconciled with Paul and write the Gospel of Mark. Paul would write 13 letters to churches around the empire that would shape the culture and the life of the church for 2,000 years more than any other person other than Jesus. The Gospel went to the Gentiles because of Barnabas and the church spread to Europe through the influence of Barnabas' leadership. His influence, I would argue, comes all the way to us today. But here's the deal those weren't even his goals. His goals were people. I think it's tempting for us to believe that the tasks in front of us and what is urgently in our face and the projects that we're called to complete or what we're supposed to throw ourselves into, but I would argue that at the end of our life, what is going to be most fulfilling and what is going to be the most beneficial work is not in the projects we complete but the people that we develop. I believe that your obedience point today is to a person, Be a disciple maker, be a leader maker, be a hero maker. What if we all lived our lives in such a way that we believe that at the end of our lives, our success would not be measured and the size of the organizations we lead, the level on the ladder that we climb, the number of people that are influenced by our voice, but how much we had shaped the lives of those coming behind us to the third and fourth generation. Invest in a story that's bigger than yourself. Build a platform for someone else. Give someone else a place to belong. Give someone else a place to matter. Give someone else a place to lead and when it all falls apart and breaks down and it's complicated and it's chaotic and it's messy, give somebody a second chance.

Father, we thank you today that you have given us a second chance that the story of Barnabas ultimately points to a higher story of Jesus Christ who would take a lower place to come and take our place in order to lead us to the place that you created us and called us to be. Father, I pray this morning that you would raise up a generation of hero makers, a generation of leader makers, a generation of disciple makers who understand that at the end of the day, the scoreboard is not about their success, but how well they have set up those coming behind them. God, may we give people a place to belong, give people a place to matter give people a place to lead. May we give people second chances, and may we invest ourselves in a story that's larger than our own. In Jesus' name, Amen.