

# ENCOURAGEMENT



Rev. Peggy Casteel-Huston  
April 11, 2021  
Second Sunday after Easter

## “Home On The Range”

Oh, give me a home where the Buffalo roam  
Where the deer and the antelope play;  
Where seldom is heard a discouraging word,  
And the sky is not cloudy all day.

### Chorus

Home, home on the range,  
Where the deer and the antelope play,  
Where seldom is heard a discouraging word,  
And the sky is not cloudy all day.

\*\*\*Note: Lyrics written as a poem by Dr. Brewster M. Higley of Smith County, Kansas originally entitled, “My Western Home” in 1872. Dr. Higley moved to Kansas from Indiana as part of the Homestead Act where people could acquire land from the government for a filing fee. When Dr. Higley wrote this poem, he was living on a dugout that he built on Beaver Creek before he had the opportunity to build his cabin. His cabin is part of the historic sites in Kansas and still stands.

Higley’s friend, Daniel Kelley put the words to the melody played with guitar. The tune was adopted by cowboys, ranchers and other westerners as a rural anthem that spread throughout the west in various forms.

What struck me about this tune is that Higley wrote, “where seldom is heard a discouraging word”. I cannot imagine being a Homesteader, where winters were rough, and one had to establish everything from scratch. It had to be extremely challenging. What would have been encouraging to them was the opportunity to own land and if you read the other verses to this tune, the entire song describes the beauty of the creation that the homesteaders saw everyday which clearly Dr. Higley and all others who sang this tune enjoyed.

## First Scripture Lesson: Acts 4: 32-37

<sup>32</sup> Now the whole group of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one claimed private ownership of any possessions, but everything they owned was held in common. <sup>33</sup> With great power the apostles gave their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all. <sup>34</sup> There was not a needy person among them, for as many as owned lands or houses sold them and brought the proceeds of what was sold. <sup>35</sup> They laid it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to each as any had need. <sup>36</sup> There was a Levite, a native of Cyprus, Joseph, to whom the apostles gave the name Barnabas (which means "son of encouragement"). <sup>37</sup> He sold a field that belonged to him, then brought the money, and laid it at the apostles' feet.

### **Sermon**

How many of you would agree with me that there have been times in your life when you needed an encouraging word and that very word gave you the nudge you needed to start school; or try for the new job; or take that test or simply to try again.

I always thought of encouragement as an adjective (i.e. she speaks encouraging words) or an attribute but never as a spiritual gift. However, the more I serve the church and the more I served with young people in the church I see encouragement as a spiritual gift and would even add it to the fruits of the spirit inventory in Galatians chapter 5 to read: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control and **encouragement**.

Encouragement is a spiritual gift that has always been much needed in the church. It was an attribute of Barnabas and the gift of his encouragement made a difference in the life of Saul soon to be the Apostle Paul. Barnabas' encouragement made a difference and opened the door for Saul to serve God in a mighty way:

Listen now to the word of God: Acts 9: 19b - 31

For several days Saul was with the disciples in Damascus, <sup>20</sup> and immediately he began to proclaim Jesus in the synagogues, saying, "He is the Son of God." <sup>21</sup> All who heard him were amazed and said, "Is not this the man who made havoc in Jerusalem among those who invoked this name? And has he not come here for the purpose of bringing them bound before

the chief priests?" <sup>22</sup> Saul became increasingly more powerful and confounded the Jews who lived in Damascus by proving that Jesus was the Messiah.

<sup>23</sup> After some time had passed, the Jews plotted to kill him, <sup>24</sup> but their plot became known to Saul. They were watching the gates day and night so that they might kill him; <sup>25</sup> but his disciples took him by night and let him down through an opening in the wall, lowering him in a basket.

<sup>26</sup> When he had come to Jerusalem, he attempted to join the disciples; and they were all afraid of him, for they did not believe that he was a disciple. <sup>27</sup> But Barnabas took him, brought him to the apostles, and described for them how on the road he had seen the Lord, who had spoken to him, and how in Damascus he had spoken boldly in the name of Jesus. <sup>28</sup> So he went in and out among them in Jerusalem, speaking boldly in the name of the Lord. <sup>29</sup> He spoke and argued with the Hellenists; but they were attempting to kill him. <sup>30</sup> When the believers learned of it, they brought him down to Caesarea and sent him off to Tarsus.

<sup>31</sup> Meanwhile the church throughout Judea, Galilee, and Samaria had peace and was built up. Living in the fear of the Lord and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit, it increased in numbers.

### **This is the word of God – let our thanks and praise be to God.**

In the first Scripture lesson we heard Luke give us the resume of Barnabas.

- Barnabas was a Levite or person dedicated to the Temple and now to the early church.
- He was a native of Cyprus in the Diaspora whose ancestors had been uprooted and he had returned to become a member of the Jerusalem community.
- His birth name was Joseph but given the name Barnabas due to his reputation. His new name meant son of encouragement – one of his attributes.
- Barnabas had a generous spirit in that he sold a field to participate in the communal practice of sharing possessions so that no one lacked for anything.

Impressive resume, but as we follow Barnabas for a short trek in Acts, we are able to see how encouragement not only was an attribute of his but becomes an important ministry – a ministry of encouragement.

It was Barnabas who cleared the way for Saul to be welcomed into the Jerusalem community. You see Saul might have had a Damascus road experience but that is not what the Jerusalem church knew about him. What they knew is that he had been a zealot in his harsh attitudes towards the Christians or people of 'The Way' and Saul had used his energies to persecute them. Saul had done nothing to stop the stoning of Stephen. The community was not ready to welcome this new convert with open arms – they held him at arms length and looked at him with great suspicion and with good cause.

It took a word of encouragement from Barnabas – a witness – to open the door which allows Saul entrance to a faith community that not only confirms his prophetic vocation but safeguards even his life. Perhaps Barnabas thought – “if I encourage this guy who might he become?”

It is interesting and important that Saul is placed within a faith community. God knew that the community would be important. Once Saul had his conversion experience, he didn't stay in Damascus. Luke tells us that Saul was brought immediately to a caring community where he would find the resources, relationships **and encouragement** necessary to fully become who God intended for him to be – the Apostle Paul.

The first time that I ever preached on this text I was just returning from the Presbyterian Youth Triennium at Purdue University campus in Lafayette, IN in the year 2010 where I spent the week with over 5,000 Presbyterian youth mostly from all over the United States but also international locations. As I walked away from that experience, I felt uplifted and encouraged by what I had experienced.

I would so often hear people say that our churches have no young people and is likely to die off at some future point in time. I would hear people reminisce about the 'good ol' days' when there were several young families with children in the church. I would hear them speak about how the front of the church was full of children. The first Sunday I returned to my home congregation I was delighted to report to them that if the 5,000 teens who I just spent a week with at the Presbyterian Youth Triennium are a reflection of the future of our church, we truly are in good hands. This was only part of the encouragement I received.

### **I was encouraged by:**

- the enthusiasm of the youth in worship and the palpable energy one could feel coming from them in worship,

- their willingness to serve both in a volunteer choir, as elders serving communion, on PYT teams, etc.
- their excitement to see and be part of the living church,
- their openness in which they shared in small groups.

**I was encouraged to:**

- meet youth who already knew that they were called to be pastors,
- to hear their love of God and neighbor expressed.

I was encouraged by the advisors who mostly looked my age or older. When I would ask them “why are you here?” they would respond “where better to be than to be in a place where we can invest in the future of our church?” Amen?

Now, when I look back at this text and I think about Barnabas and his word of encouragement to Saul –I think again about the encouragement I saw with our youth at the Presbyterian Youth Triennium. I asked the question, “if we encourage our youth, the youth of this church, who might they become?”

The second time I thought about this text was right after the youth from the First Presbyterian Church of Columbus, where I was the Associate Pastor, participated in the Detroit Presbytery’s youth mission blast week in 2011. We went there knowing that in the city of Detroit, during that time, had over 18,000 people who were homeless of which approximately 20% were children. Prior to taking this trip, I read news articles and watched interviews with their major about the abandonment of homes and the massive job losses within their community. I studied the plight of Detroit with our youth in preparation for this trip. We traveled to Detroit expecting to be their encouragement and instead **they were ours.**

We walked away encouraged by the leaders of the Detroit Presbytery’s youth mission blast, their dedication to their city and their mission and by the way that they opened their hearts, hands and doors to those less fortunate in their community.

Our youth walked away encouraged by their spirit of hope and by their faith (you see, the leaders of the Detroit Presbytery’s youth mission blast prayed more by noon than our youth group did in a month). I can assure you that the experience encouraged our youth to do more, to do more in our community and more in other communities, for which we were grateful.

Once again I asked the question, "if we encourage our youth, the youth of this church, who might they become?"

When a child or infant receives their baptism, we take a vow as a congregation to "guide and nurture by word and deed, with love and prayer **encouraging them** to know and follow Christ". It is an important commitment that we together as the church make to our children and is never something that can be relegated to someone else.

Most Presbyterian churches have more gray hairs than young hairs. We need our people with gray hair but we need everyone to encourage and relate to the young people.

Kenda Dean with Sustainable Youth Ministry writes, "Youth ministry is the church's ministry, not just that of specialists who can "relate" to young people. The mandate to be there for young people belongs to the Christian community, not to any individual or group of individuals." I think Kenda understood our vow of baptism.

Let me tell you what I have learned for I have served with youth much of my career both voluntary and paid. I have learned that we all need encouragement including the youth. They need people like you and me to come alongside of them and walk with them. They need to know that we care and that we are there for them. They need opportunity. They need our time. They need our presence. They need role models. They need healthy relationships. They need the church. They need several Barnabas people in every congregation who will speak for them and see that doors get opened for them.

I have worked with lots of youth. I can tell you that their struggles are different and varied but just as God knew what Saul needed in his time of newness to the faith and learning – God knows what youth need and where to place them – right within a faith community that not only confirms their prophetic vocation but also where they will find the resources, relationships and **encouragement** necessary to fully become who God intends for them to be.

By their very baptism God has placed the children and the youth in this community for their safekeeping, for their nurture, and for prayer. Together, we are to be the ministry of encouragement necessary to allow our youth to fully become who God intends for them to be.

The last time that I thought about this text was about 7 years ago. As the Associate Pastor for children and youth at First Presbyterian in Columbus, Indiana I served with a youth group that faced some exceedingly difficult tragedies. In February 2012, one of the youths flipped her car end over end. The youth broke her neck and was life flighted to a specialty hospital in Indianapolis. She survived and with years of work actually was able to walk again. There were also a set of twins who were both in emotional distress doing things that harmed themselves and a young man who in his first year of college made a mistake that landed him in jail for 2 years.

During those difficult times of serving with youth, I was reminded of Barnabas who walked beside Saul. When people were focusing on his past, his shortcomings and his failures I couldn't help but ask the question, "what might have happened to Saul if there hadn't been a Barnabas?" I know that as the church continued to walk with these youth in their distress it made a difference.

Children and youth face difficult times – they need us – they need the church – they need to know that they have a faith community who accepts them just as they are and where they are and who loves them. Most importantly, they need words of encouragement – our words.

Well, I didn't come here today to instruct you in a better program or way of doing youth ministry. I came to give you a word – and the word is encouragement and to challenge you with this thought, 'if you became really intentional about encouraging your youth, who might they become? Next week the youth of this church will do the entire worship service – how great is that!

There is a powerful, palpable, important ministry that I hope you see. It is the ministry of encouragement. Encouragement is needed in many places – towards your clergy; towards your serving elders; towards your mission committees; but today my word for you is the importance of encouragement toward your youth and children so that this becomes a place where "*seldom is heard a discouraging word and the skies are not cloudy all day.*"

May God bless this place to be a place of encouragement for the youth, the lonely, the lost, the sorrowful, the excluded or anyone else that needs a word of encouragement this day.

Amen