

## “Be A Friend Not A Fixer”

Acts 11:19-30

Series: enCOURAGEment Week 2: Listening

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The Woodside Church

January 12, 2020

We live in a world where people rarely listen. Most people focus on what they are going to say. I came across this quotation: “The opposite of listening is not speaking, it’s waiting to speak.” When we’re not talking, we are planning what to say next instead of listening. Listening is essential in all our relationships. It’s an extremely critical skill if we hope to encourage one another. How many of you have been in a conversation where it felt like the other person was not listening? Why did so many women raise their hand while glaring at their husbands?

In his book, *Men are from Mars, Women are from Venus*, John Gray says men and women relate differently. In essence, men want to fix things and women just want someone to listen. If a wife comes home and complains to her husband about her job, the man feels it’s his duty to fix the situation, to give an answer, to provide a solution. So he replies, “Why don’t you quit that job?” But the woman doesn’t want a solution. She just wants to vent, let off steam. She simply wants him to listen. Well I’m a professional listener. A big part of my job is listening to people. But even I can improve. So years ago, when my wife Lisa worked for a different employer, she came home and complained about her work. I used every skill in my pastoral tool kit to just listen and not say, “Why don’t you quit that job.” This is what I said: “Uh huh. Uh huh. Uh huh.” I was really good at it. I wanted to give myself an award for restraining the fix-it gene on my Y-chromosome. Then my wife called her older sister, who is one of her mentors and also a physical therapist and told her the situation at work. What did the sister say? “You need to quit that job!” I said, “Hey! She stole *my* line!”

Bob Logan, who wrote *Becoming Barnabas* the book on which this series is based, says

I’ve found there’s a scarcity of real listening in our world. We listen for information when we feel the need for it. We listen in sound bites. We listen so we will know what we can say in response. We listen to bolster our own perspective or further our own agenda. Many people don’t have someone who regularly takes the time to truly listen to them with focused attention.<sup>1</sup>

To have healthy relationships it is essential for us to listen to our family members, our coworkers, our classmates, our neighbors. We need to listen to the hurts and wounds of those God places in our lives. If we hope to encourage, to put courage in others, we must first listen for what they need.

That’s what Barnabas did. We learn a lot from this quick two verse bio:

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<sup>1</sup> Robert Logan and Tara Miller, *Becoming Barnabas: A Ministry of Coming Alongside*, ChurchSmart Resources, 2014, p. 12.

Joseph, a Levite from Cyprus, whom the apostles called Barnabas (which means “son of encouragement”), sold a field he owned and brought the money and put it at the apostles’ feet. Acts 4:36-37

Joseph is not just Jewish, he’s a Levite which means he belongs to a special sacred tribe among Jews who assist the priests in God’s temple. What’s more, Barnabas is not from the Holy Land. He grew up among Gentiles on the island of Cyprus more than 200 miles by boat from Judea. So he probably speaks Greek as his native language and Latin, Aramaic and Hebrew as second languages. He also possesses an estate surrounded by fertile land. Perhaps he grew grapes, olives or wheat. With all this going for him, Barnabas could act superior as a privileged member of an elite class of Jews, he could piously profess to be holier than thou, he could carry himself as a wealthy, cosmopolitan, multilingual Cypriot landowner. In fact, he does the opposite. He sells some farmland and lays the proceeds at the Apostles’ feet to feed the poor. Nearly every time he appears in the Bible, he humbly serves others. Joseph is so brimming over with encouragement, the Apostles give him a nickname: Barnabas – the Son of Encouragement.

As I mentioned last week, the Greek word for “encouragement” means someone who comes beside you to comfort, counselor and advocate for you. It’s the same word Jesus uses to describe the Holy Spirit. This is what Barnabas does: he humbly comes alongside any who need assistance. Last week we saw him do this for Saul who later became the Apostle Paul.

When Saul came to Jerusalem, he tried to join the disciples, but they were all afraid of him, not believing that he really was a disciple. 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. So Saul stayed with them and moved about freely in Jerusalem, speaking boldly in the name of the Lord. Acts 9:26-28

Barnabas courageously meets with Saul/Paul and what does he do? He listens. He lets Saul tell the story of his dramatic vision of Jesus, how he became a believer, was baptized and preached so fearlessly in Damascus he drew death threats and was forced to flee in the night. What does Barnabas not do? He doesn’t try to fix Saul. He doesn’t doubt his vision, correct his theology or punish him for imprisoning Christians. After hearing the whole tale, Barnabas takes an incredible risk. He embraces the former persecutor as a brother, puts his arm around this penitent sinner and personally opens the door for him to join the Apostles. Imagine how encouraging that was for Saul.

At first, the conversion of a fearful persecutor to a fearless preacher is a tremendous triumph. What a powerful testimony to the truth of the Gospel! Yet in short order, Saul stirs up the same trouble he drummed up in Damascus. You know how new converts can sometimes be loose cannons? Saul’s new fanatic devotion to Jesus turns up the heat for the church in Jerusalem.

Saul talked and debated with the Hellenistic Jews but they tried to kill him. When the believers learned of this, they took him down to Caesarea and sent him off to Tarsus. Acts 9:29-30

The Apostles, probably led by Barnabas, seize Saul for his own safety, take him down to the seacoast and send him by boat back to his hometown Tarsus. With Saul gone, you can almost hear them breathe a sigh of relief in the next verse.

Then the church throughout Judea, Galilee and Samaria enjoyed a time of peace and was strengthened. Living in the fear of the Lord and encouraged by the Holy Spirit, it increased in numbers. Acts 9:31

It certainly is stressful having Saul around. Yet through it all, Barnabas keeps encouraging. He is a friend to Saul, not a fixer. He doesn't try to change him or tell him what to do.

What's the difference between a Friend and a Fixer? A Fixer tells you what to do. A Friend helps you discover what to do. A Fixer gives answers. A Friend asks good questions. A Fixer prescribes a solution to you. A Friend helps you be your own solution. A Fixer sees you as a problem to be fixed. A Friend sees you as a person to be freed from a problem. A Fixer comes at you. A Friend comes alongside you. And that is the meaning of encouragement – come alongside someone and help bring the best out of them.

Barnabas was a Friend, not a Fixer. Today we will look at two Barnabas skills which will help you be a Friend not a Fixer in your marriage, family, school, workplace, community and at Woodside. The first is **Discovery Listening**. Bob Logan says,

Discovery listening means listening in order to discover the other person, listening out of curiosity, listening without your own agenda. It's based on the principle that people learn better when they discover for themselves. When we practice this skill, we move from being the expert-with-the-answers to being someone who helps others discover their own answers.<sup>2</sup>

Barnabas models this at a crucial moment in the history of the Church.

Now 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. Some 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. The Lord's hand was with them, and a great number of people believed and turned to the Lord. Acts 11:19-21

This is a huge turning point for the Church. Why? At this time all Christians were Jewish. They believed only Jews could be Christians. Today some of you tell me, "I can't talk to my friends about Jesus, they're Jewish." Back then Christians said, "I can't talk to my friends about Jesus, they're not Jewish." It was a boundary, a barrier, a wall. What's at stake? If that wall stays in place, if only Jews can be followers of Jesus, all of us who are Gentiles cannot be saved. Yet to welcome Gentiles into God's family without making them follow all the laws of Moses goes against what Jews have believed and practiced for thousands of years. This is a very delicate, risky situation. Gentiles up in Antioch are becoming disciples of Jesus. So who do the Apostles in Jerusalem send to check this out? Barnabas. Now Barnabas is the logical choice for several reasons. He's from

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<sup>2</sup> Logan and Miller, p. 13.

Cyprus so he understands the leaders of the church in Antioch. He grew up among Gentiles and he speaks their language. Best of all, Barnabas is not an enforcer but an encourager.

News of this reached the church in Jerusalem, and they sent Barnabas to Antioch. 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. He was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and faith, and a great number of people were brought to the Lord. Acts 11:22-24

A different apostle may have tried to fix this situation by saying, “Stop what you are doing. This is not kosher. Followers of Jesus must obey the Laws of Moses first.” Not Barnabas. As a friend, he came among them, listened to them, and praised the Holy Spirit for giving the grace of God to the Gentiles. Barnabas encouraged and equipped them to follow the Lord. And because he did, Barnabas opened the door for all of us who are Gentiles to become followers of Jesus.

I bet Barnabas used Discovery Listening. Bob Logan calls these *The Barnabas Questions*:

1. How are you?
2. What are you celebrating?
3. What challenges are you experiencing?
4. What do you plan to do about these challenges?
5. How can I help you and pray for you?

Here’s an experiment you can try with these questions this week. Every time someone comes to you with a question, a problem, or a request for advice, don’t immediately give an answer. Try to unpack their best thinking using these questions. You may ask, “What am I supposed to do, just sit there like a stone statue and say nothing?” No. After asking a question, try to actively listen by:

1. Focusing: Give your undivided attention
2. Summarizing: Mirror back what you hear the other person say
3. Unpacking: Ask the person to expand by asking “What else?” or “Tell me more”

Avoid giving answers, advice or anecdotes. After trying this discovery listening experiment, Bob Logan found, “about 70% of the time people would come up with their own perfectly fine answer without any input from me. Listening alone was helpful to them.”<sup>3</sup>

Right about now, some of you, especially my brothers in the congregation, are fixing to use your fix-it skills. I can hear you thinking, “Do you mean to tell me we are never allowed to give advice or answers? Some stuff needs fixing.” Yes, there is a place for that but it’s usually after a lot of listening. Just as a doctor asks diagnostic questions and performs tests before prescribing a treatment, so we need to listen and ask questions before arriving at a solution.

For example, you may want to use your fix-it tools when you think your teen is going out with the wrong person. I know of one story when a Mom felt very strongly her daughter was dating the wrong guy and wanted her to break up with him. One day the daughter came to her and asked,

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<sup>3</sup> Logan and Miller, p. 14.

“I don’t feel good about this relationship. What should I do?” Mom wanted to shout, “Break up with him.” But she didn’t. With all the patience at her disposal she asked, “What do you think?” This opened the door for the daughter to share her feelings and frustrations. Mom gave no advice or answers. She just listened and said, “Tell me more.” Ultimately, at least in this case, the daughter decided on her own to end the relationship. Now imagine if Mom tried to fix it. She might have made her daughter dig her heels in.

The other Barnabas skill is **Open-Ended Questions**. It’s a very popular technique for Rabbis to answer a question with a question. Jesus does this frequently in the Gospels. I bet Barnabas continued this practice. We’ll never know for sure but I think Barnabas used open-ended questions when he reached out to his old friend Saul. The church in Antioch was growing rapidly and Barnabas needed help.

Then Barnabas went to Tarsus to look for Saul, 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. The disciples were called Christians first at Antioch. Acts 11:25-26

Remember, when we last saw Saul he was stirring up so many death-threats the apostles packed him off to his home in Tarsus. What follows are called the “silent years.” For six to eight years Saul/Paul disappears from the story. What was he doing all that time? Some say he needed time alone with the Lord to mellow out or study the Scriptures. Some believe he preached the Gospel and started churches. Or it’s possible he was living in parents’ basement doing nothing but sulking.

Suddenly, after all those years, his old friend Barnabas appears. Saul is lounging on the old hide-a-bed downstairs in the basement with wood paneling binging on the Good Place and the Walking Dead. Now if Barnabas asks him closed questions, Saul will answer like a Junior High – “Yes” “No” “Whatever.” Instead, I bet he asked open questions such as:

What are your options?	What do you want to accomplish?
What’s really important?	What are possible ways to get there?
What else needs to be done?	Which path will you choose?
What obstacles are you facing?	

Whatever Barnabas asked it worked. Once again he put his arm around his old pal Saul and led him back into God’s mission which Saul/Paul followed to the end of his days. Together they taught great numbers of new believers in Antioch. Here is the first place followers of Jesus were called Christians. Eventually Antioch became the launching pad from Paul’s great missionary journeys and his letters. Yet it all started with an encouraging friend named Barnabas.

Here is an experiment that will help you be a Barnabas for the next seven days. When you talk with a family member, friend or coworker, see how long you can listen and ask questions before adding your thoughts, giving advice, anecdotes or answers. Here are some tips to help you listen.

- Take the time necessary to listen – don’t be in a hurry.
- Focus on the other person, not on what you’re going to say.

- Summarize what you're hearing the person say.
- Invite the person to say more.
- Ask open-ended questions to draw out a person's thoughts.
- During pauses, don't say anything. Give them time to think.

Someone in your life could use a Barnabas, not a fixer but a friend who really listens. That's what Rosie needs. An episode of *This American Life* relates the story of nine-year-old Rosie who presented her single dad Matt with a list of 50 perplexing questions about life: Where do we go when we die? Why is there a heaven and hell? What is love? What is the meaning of life?

Being a dad and a guy, Matt considered it his duty to supply his daughter with detailed answers to each question. Yet he learned, that's not what she wanted or needed. What Rosie really needed was her dad to be with her during a difficult time.

It all started when Rosie first moved to New York City. Then her grandpa, who she was really close to, died. At the same time, she started at a new school, where the kids either ignored or bullied her, and she felt lost. One day, she came home from school and decided she needed to do something about it. So she wrote the questions.

What was dad doing? Rosie says,

He was writing papers on his computer. And I knew how important it was, but part of me still wished he'd put down all the screens and just talk. So I wrote all the questions down.

Rosie's not looking for answers, but eye contact and enjoying dad's presence.

I was lonely. And I felt a little sad that nobody had really stepped out to say, "Oh, hey, It's gonna be OK. I'll be your friend." So that's when I really, really needed somebody to talk to. That's really why I felt like, oh, this is my dad. He's a really important person. I love him very much. I really want to become closer with him. I wish there was something that I could do to make us closer.<sup>4</sup>

Rosie didn't need a fixer. She needed a friend. Who is the Rosie in your life?

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<sup>4</sup> Ira Glass, "Fermi's Paradox," *This American Life* (5-19-17).