

“Build Bridges Not Blockages”

I Thessalonians 2:7-12

Series: *enCOURAGEment Week 3*

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Every year the staff of Woodside gathers for a Christmas party. It's kind of like the Christmas party you have at work except without the alcohol, wild behavior and we actually call it a Christmas party. Nevertheless, the staff Christmas party can be quirky. For example, it's always in January after Christmas. For some reason all of us are too busy before Christmas. The other odd feature is our annual Gift exchange. There is one gift that always returns – a very frightening creepy Jester and his pals. Otherwise everyone brings something from home they want to unload on someone else. This year there were crazy Christmas lights and a Coconut. What did I receive? The Lint Eater Jr.: a Rotary Dryer Vent Cleaning Kit. For some reason nobody wanted to steal this awesome tool from me. The Lint Eater Jr. is a literal life saver. Right on the package it says it

Saves Money on Utility Bills
Removes Dangerous Lint Build-Up
Helps Prevent Dryer Fires

I never realized my family was in mortal danger without the Lint Eater Jr. How did I survive so long without it? Maybe next time I should upgrade to the Lint Eater Sr.

Why is lint so dangerous? Dust and fibers from clothing build up in the dryer vent. If lint blocks the flow the buildup of hot air can ignite the lint and cause a dryer fire. The US Fire Administration Website shares these facts about home clothes dryer fires:

- 2,900 home clothes dryer fires are reported each year and cause an estimated 100 injuries, and \$35 million in property loss.
- Failure to clean the dryer (34 percent) is the leading cause of home clothes dryer fires.
- More home clothes dryer fires occur in the fall and winter months, peaking in January.

Thank God I received the Lint Eater Jr. just in time! All this can be avoided if busy people take the time to stop and clean out the lint blockage.

Blockages are everywhere. You can't travel the turnpike without eventually being blocked by traffic. I wrote this sermon to the sound of heavy equipment tearing up my street. They are installing new storm water drains and pipe. In the past, heavy rains overwhelmed the old system and turned our street into a river. We all know, and some of you have experienced, what happens when you have blockages in the arteries around your heart.

Equally damaging are the blockages which develop in our relationships. Simple busyness prevents husbands, wives, siblings, parents and children, friends and neighbors from taking the time to clean out the accumulated emotional lint. Hurts and resentments, grudges and grievances build up over time. Anger backs up and sometimes flares up. Love stops flowing. Encouraging words cease. Criticisms increase. That's how fires start.

Blockages happen in the Bible...even to one as encouraging as Barnabas. Last week we witnessed how Barnabas breaks through a blockage in Antioch. Gentiles, once blocked from following Jesus, are becoming Christians in Antioch. When the Apostles in Jerusalem hear this,

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

Gentiles start pouring into the Church. If Barnabas tries to handle this river of believers alone it will create a bottleneck and back things up. So he breaks through another blockage. He encourages Saul, who later becomes Paul, to leave his hometown Tarsus and come help him.

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

Barnabas is better than the Lint Eater Jr. By applying generous doses of encouragement, he breaks through blockages and builds bridges.

What does it take to build bridges not blockages? First, **Step Up**. Bridges span valleys, rivers, chasms. You can't build a bridge if you stay on one side. Someone has to take the first step to clear a blocked relationships. Someone needs to step up and reach across the divide.

The Holy Spirit moves Barnabas and Saul to step up, reach out and start a radical new plan.

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." So after they had fasted and prayed, they placed their hands on them and sent them off. The two of them, sent on their way by the Holy Spirit, went down to Seleucia and sailed from there to Cyprus. When they arrived at Salamis, they proclaimed the word of God in the Jewish synagogues. John was with them as their helper. Acts 13:2-5

Now wait a minute! Barnabas and Saul have a good thing going in Antioch. The church is exploding. They can't leave now. The seats and parking spaces are crammed with new believers. I'm sure the other leaders do not want to give up their best preachers and teachers. Yet when the Holy Spirit calls, they step up and say, "Here I am Lord." So the church prays over Barnabas and Saul and sends them across the sea to preach the Word. John, Barnabas' cousin, comes along to help them. They step up and build a bridge for the Gospel to Cyprus.

To clear a blockage and build a bridge, someone has to be the first to step up and reach across the divide. Someone has to step up and remove the emotional blockage. What does emotional lint look like? Psychologist Michael Cunningham, University of Louisville, conducted an extensive study of the most common complaints men and women have about each other. The most common complaints men have about women include:

- the silent treatment
- bringing up past transgressions

- being too hot or too cold
- being critical
- being stubborn and refusing to give in

The most common complaints women have about men include:

- forgetting important dates like birthdays or anniversaries
- not working hard at his job
- noisily burping or passing gas
- staring at other women
- being stubborn and refusing to give in¹

When both are stubborn and refuse to give in you're left with a lot of blockages. Someone has to be the first to break through. It might take courage. You may fear how the other will respond to your overture. That's why it's good to have a coach to encourage you. Barnabas, Saul and John had each other. Who can encourage you to step up and begin building a bridge? With whom do you need to step up and build a bridge?

Next, **Build Up**. To build a bridge in a blocked relationship, it's essential to focus on the other person and build them up. Barnabas is especially good at building others up. He always shines the spotlight on someone else. Blockages form when I focus on what I want and why I'm right. Bridges develop when I listen to your feelings, needs and concerns, when I try to build you up. Some Apostles did not want to let Saul into the Church. Barnabas opened the door for him. Some were glad to send Saul away. Barnabas brought Saul back. Some Christians did not want to let Gentiles into the Church. Barnabas welcomed them.

Barnabas is so good at building up and shining the spotlight on others you can easily miss an important change during this first missionary journey. At the start of the journey, the Holy Spirit says, "Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them" (Acts 13:2).

Somewhere during journey, the Bible switches the order and calls the team Paul and Barnabas (Acts 13:42). Barnabas, the coach who brought Saul/Paul up from the minors, builds up Paul to take the lead. From now on Paul becomes the great Apostle to the Gentiles and the author of most of the New Testament while Barnabas fades into the background. There is not a hint of resentment from Barnabas. In fact, this is his goal.

Compare this to what the Bible tells us about another Saul – King Saul in the Old Testament. He welcomes a young shepherd boy named David into his royal household. David rises like a meteor as a mighty warrior. When the two return from battle, the Israelite women sing:

"Saul has slain his thousands and David his tens of thousands." Saul was very angry; this refrain displeased him greatly. "They have credited David with tens of thousands," he thought, "but me with only thousands. What more can he get but the kingdom?" And from that time on Saul kept a close eye on David. I Samuel 18:7-9

¹ Jay Dixit, "You're Driving Me Crazy", Psychology Today (March/April 2009)

Instead of celebrating David and building him up, Saul seeks to take him down. He tries several times to kill. Now that may be because David is Saul's son-in-law. But Saul's greatest fear is David will destroy his dynasty. Interestingly, Saul's heir Jonathan, the one who is supposed to succeed him as king, encourages David. Like Barnabas, Jonathan builds David up.

Who can you build up? I know this is difficult but, for a moment, can you take your eyes off what you want and see the situation from the other person's perspective? Use the listening skills we looked at last week. Here is a simple example. Members of a family Growth Group are standing in the kitchen sharing a snack, when a ten-year-old complains about his school's decision to switch to uniforms. "Uniforms don't let you express your individuality!" A woman standing nearby (not his mom) nods in understanding and asks,

"What are some other ways you could express your individuality?" The boy seized on the question and ran with it, coming up with at least three good ways to express his individuality within a few minutes.

How did this adult build up the young man?

- The woman acknowledged his frustration, didn't try to explain why uniforms would be good. This would have been most adults' approach and he probably would have dug in his heels and argued further.
- She asked for his thoughts in a way that shifted his focus from what he could not do toward what he could do.
- The boy was asked for his thoughts and listened to by an adult who was not his parent. That's rare, and opens up dialogue across generational lines.
- The boy left the conversation feeling empowered. He has options. That's the opposite of how he felt coming into the conversation.²

Step up, build up and...

Don't Give Up. Bridges take time, energy and effort to build. So do relationships and people. At the end of the mission on Cyprus something went wrong.

From Paphos, Paul and his companions sailed to Perga in Pamphylia, where John left them to return to Jerusalem. Acts 13:13

This is not John the disciple of Jesus, but John the cousin of Barnabas. For some reason, probably homesickness, he leaves the team and returns to Jerusalem. No big deal. Later it is a big deal.

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." Barnabas wanted to take John, also called Mark, with them, but Paul did not think it wise to take him, because he had deserted them in Pamphylia and had not continued with them in the

² Bob Logan and Tara Miller, *Becoming Barnabas* p. 20-21.

work. They had such a sharp disagreement that they parted company. Barnabas took Mark and sailed for Cyprus, but Paul chose Silas and left, commended by the believers to the grace of the Lord. Acts 15:36-40

Paul has no patience for a deserter. Barnabas wants to give him another chance. The disagreement becomes so sharp it cuts apart their partnership. They each stomp off to their homes, Barnabas and Mark to Cyprus, while Paul and Silas head to Tarsus and beyond. The sad news is we never see Paul and Barnabas together again for the rest of Acts. The good news is Paul does eventually change his mind and give John Mark another chance. A dozen years later we find Mark helping Paul while he is in prison. Near the end of his life, Paul even says,

Get Mark and bring him with you, because he is helpful to me in my ministry. 2 Timothy 4:11

John Mark, the deserter, ultimately becomes helpful to all believers through the ages. He writes the Gospel of Mark, what scholars believe to be the first of the four Gospels. I would not be surprised if Barnabas was behind all this. He didn't give up encouraging and building bridges.

The Holy Spirit asks Barnabas and Paul to do something radical. He tells them to leave their beloved church in Antioch, the church that is growing in leaps and bounds, the church that needs them. He tells them to leave it and build a bridge of faith to people beyond the horizon. This Lent, starting March 1, I ask you to do something radical. You know how people usually give up something for the six weeks of Lent – chocolate, coffee, binge watching the Bachelor? What I ask you to do sounds crazy: I challenge you to give up your Growth Group for Lent. Like Barnabas, Paul and Mark, I ask you to take a break from your Group, partner with two people and form a microgroup for six weeks from Ash Wednesday to Easter. You pick the time and the place. I'll provide the study. And here's one more thing I ask: invite one or two people not in any group, not even from Woodside, to join your microgroup. Meet in a microgroup for six weeks and if, at the end of the six weeks you want to go back to your group – no problem. This is radical. It's different. It's not for everyone – just the courageous bridge building Barnabases out there. Why do this? To build a bridge to new believers, to clear the blockage between people and Jesus.

What if this Woodside were filled with Bridge building Barnabases? What if every one of us builds bridges not blockages? What if each one of us stepped up to build up others and didn't give up? What if each one of us came alongside someone in need and encouraged them? Let's build bridges that heal marriages. Let's build bridges which reunite families. Let's build bridges to sobriety and recovery for addicts. Let's build bridges to hope for the homeless, hurting and hungry. Let's build bridges for the doubters to faith, the depressed to hope, the dejected to love.

Tomorrow we will honor and remember perhaps the greatest bridge builder of the 20th century – Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Dr. King didn't just break through the blockages of racial segregation, he also built bridges to bring people together to build what he called "The Beloved Community." Yet even Dr. King, the great encourager, became discouraged. On May 29, 1966, Dr. King preached at the Cornerstone Baptist Church in Brooklyn, New York. He's in the prime of his life. Time magazine named him Man of the Year. He led the epic Montgomery bus boycott, led the Selma to Montgomery March, gave his "I have a dream" speech during the March on Washington in 1963, and he won the Nobel Peace Prize. Yet he's also dealing with bomb threats, death threats, threats from the Ku Klux Klan, threats to his family. White supremacists constantly

warn him tomorrow will be your last day of life. In a very candid and confessional moment he shares how he deals with discouragement. He quotes an old spiritual, "There is a balm in Gilead to heal the sin-sick soul."

Then there came with another verse that I like: "Sometimes I feel discouraged ..." I'm not going to fool you this afternoon. Sometimes I feel discouraged. Living every day under the threat of death, sometimes I feel discouraged. Having to stand amid the surging moment of life's restless, sometimes I feel discouraged. Having to face the problems and the frustrations, sometimes I feel discouraged. Many days in Alabama, I felt discouraged. Many days in Mississippi, I felt discouraged. Many days in the ghettos of the North, I felt discouraged. Many days as I've lived life, I've felt discouraged. And there have been times when it was difficult to sleep at night. I go on and sing this song. Sometimes I feel discouraged, and feel my works in vain. But then the Holy Spirit revives my soul again, I've seen the lightning flash. I've heard the thunder roll. I've felt sin breakers dashing, trying to conquer my soul. I heard the voice of Jesus promise never to leave me, never to leave me alone. No, never alone. No, never alone. He promised never to leave me, never to leave me alone. The Spirit of the Lord is upon me because he has anointed me to heal the brokenhearted, to preach the gospel to the poor, and preach the acceptable year of the Almighty God.

Dr. King stepped up, built up, and didn't give up. How about you?