

## **“Put Me In Coach”**

**Acts 4:36, 9:19b-31**

*Series: enCOURAGEMENT Week 1. What is Encouragement and Why We Need It*

The Rev. Dr. Douglas C. Hoggund

The Woodside Church

January 5, 2020

In his classic sermon, “It’s Friday, But Sunday’s Comin’” pastor and sociology professor Tony Campolo relates about a young man from his church who played basketball under one of the great coaches of America.

I was very interested in finding out what it was about this particular coach that made him so special and enabled him to turn out so many championship teams. I asked the young man what it was like to play under the direction of this legendary sports figure.

My friend said, “It was incredible. He constantly worked on getting all his players to feel good about themselves. During the game he seemed to pay more attention to those riding the bench than to those playing. He was always talking to us benchwarmers and telling us how important we were and what great players we were. Every time a shot would be missed he would nudge me and say, ‘You would never blow a pass like that.’ A play would get messed up, and he would yell, ‘Oh how we need a player like you in this game. That’s what we need; we need someone like you out there.’ He would go on like that throughout the entire game. By the time the game was over, I felt so terrific it never occurred to me to ask, ‘Coach, if I am so great, why don’t you put me in?’”

My friend went on to say, “I remember the first time I took the court in a varsity game. It was against Michigan State. I wondered whether I’d be too nervous to play and too scared to function. But when I walked onto the court at East Lansing, I felt only one emotion. It was pity. I pitied the players at Michigan State. Our coach made me and the others so confident about ourselves and so convinced that we were the greatest players ever to set foot on the basketball court, that we knew the Michigan State team would be blown away. I realized those poor Michigan State players invited their mothers and girlfriends to the game, and here we were about to destroy them. My feelings were justified; we did just that. We beat Michigan State soundly. I played well and with confidence. I believe it was all because my coach made me believe I was a great player, and it seemed natural to me to play well.”<sup>1</sup>

Encouragement – we all need it. From the toddler taking her first step to the team that just lost a game, from the spouse or child who’s feeling blue to the business person about to make a big presentation, from the at-home parent who feels lonely to the retiree looking to use work skills in a new way – you are blessed when someone comes beside you, builds you up, and urges you on to do your best.

Wouldn’t you love to have a coach you trust, a coach to guide you, a coach to encourage you? This is more than someone saying nice things about you while you warm the bench of life. Encouragement is more than mere praise. There’s a secret buried within the word: courage. The

---

<sup>1</sup> Anthony Campolo, *It’s Friday, But Sunday’s Comin’*

“en” at the beginning means to put something in. The literal meaning of “encouragement” is someone who puts courage or strength into another for a purpose. Usually, you and I need courage when we face something we fear, when we hit a barrier that’s hard to beat, when we run smack into the same old habit that keeps holding us back.

When you find yourself stuck in such a spot, too often what you receive is discouragement. The mission of discouraging people is to take away your courage – people like Mike Davis. When he died in 2016 at the age of 85 the New York Times placed over his obituary the dubious honor: “World’s Grumpiest Boss.” The legacy “Tiger Mike,” a Houston oil and gas tycoon left behind was a lot of nasty memos:

Idle conversation and gossip in this office among employees will result in immediate termination. DO YOUR JOBS AND KEEP YOUR MOUTH SHUT!

There will be no more birthday celebrations, birthday cakes, levity, or celebrations of any kind within the office. This is a business office. If you have to celebrate, do it after office hours on your own time.

I swear, but since I am the owner of this company, that is my privilege, and this privilege is not to be interpreted as the same for any employee. That differentiates me from you, and I want to keep it that way. There will be absolutely no swearing, by any employee, male or female, in this office, ever.<sup>2</sup>

When you need courage there will be many who will try to “dis” you. Maybe there’s someone in your life that makes Tiger Mike look like a mouse.

The best way to get off the bench and get into the game in 2020 is with a coach who encourages you by putting courage in you. When we think of courage the image which often comes to mind is a valiant warrior or a roaring lion. Yet courage is also that still small voice within which says, “Don’t give up. You can do it. Try again.” Here’s the Good News: as followers of Jesus we know that quiet voice within is the Holy Spirit – the one who puts courage in us to keep going at home, school, work and in life. In fact, the Greek word for encouragement in the Bible – parakaleo – is the same word Jesus uses to describe the Holy Spirit as the Comforter, the Counselor, the Advocate. The word literally means a person who is called to be with you and beside you. The Holy Spirit will comfort you, counsel you, and advocate for you. Now I know the Spirit of God is able to speak within us all by Himself. Yet the Spirit also speaks to us using someone outside us. The Spirit calls coaches to be with you and beside you. That’s what the Holy Spirit did when He called Barnabas: the first Christian Encourager.

Though he is one of the most important leaders in the Bible, Barnabas is unknown and unsung by nearly everyone. Few would put his name among the top ten Bible figures. In fact, most people don’t know his real name: Joseph. Barnabas is a nickname the apostles hung on him. It means “Son of Encouragement” or maybe Encouragement Boy or even Atta Boy! Why did they call him this? In the book of Acts, Joseph went around giving everyone an Atta-Boy. He

---

<sup>2</sup> Anita Gates, "Mike Davis, 'World's Grumpiest Boss,' Dies at 85, New York Times (9-25-16)

encouraged everyone and put courage into those who needed it. Barnabas first appears early in the book of Acts when the church is just beginning.

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

Barnabas generously provided for the poor and hungry. He also preached the Gospel and built up churches. Acts 11:24 says, “Barnabas was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and strong in faith.” So the Holy Spirit came alongside Barnabas, put courage into Barnabas and worked through Barnabas to put courage into other believers like Mark who wrote the Gospel and Paul, who wrote thirteen letters and formed countless churches. During this series, we’ll follow the life of Barnabas and learn how we also can put courage into others.

To use a modern term, Barnabas is a Coach. Today, coaching has moved from the sports world into the spheres of business and counseling. Today, you might seek the guidance of a career coach, executive coach or life coach. I have a ministry professor who coaches me. What do good coaches do? **Coaches Bring Out the Best in Others.** For many years you’ve heard me ask you to “Find Your Timothy.” If you are a leader in ministry – any ministry – even the ministry of Greeting and hand out bulletins – I ask you to find someone to train as the Apostle Paul trained Timothy. Paul writes to Timothy

Don’t let anyone look down on you because you are young, but set an example for the believers in speech, in conduct, in love, in faith and in purity. Until I come, devote yourself to the public reading of Scripture, to preaching and to teaching. Do not neglect your gift, which was given you through prophecy when the body of elders laid their hands on you. Be diligent in these matters; give yourself wholly to them, so that everyone may see your progress. I Timothy 4:12-15

Paul sees many gifts in Timothy – preaching, teaching, public speaking, faith, purity. So he sent Timothy to oversee and coach several churches. Yet the people in those churches dismissed Timothy because he was young. Perhaps they said, “We want to hear the Senior Pastor preach. Who is this young kid? He didn’t go to Princeton.” It was so discouraging to Timothy he stopped using his Spirit-given gift of preaching and teaching. So Paul stepped in and coached Timothy to get off the bench and back in the game. Timothy must have needed a lot of encouraging and coaching because in the start of his second letter Paul writes,

For this reason I remind you to fan into flame the gift of God, which is in you through the laying on of my hands. For the Spirit God gave us does not make us timid, but gives us power, love and self-discipline. 2 Timothy 1:6-7

Critics kept pouring cold water on the young preacher until Timothy became downright timid. All that was left was the glow of a tiny ember of the Spirit. So Paul put courage in Timothy. He told him to fan that tiny spark into a roaring fire. The Spirit, Paul said, will give you all the power, love and self-discipline you need to preach the Word.

I am grateful for the Message Team we have at Woodside: Scott Burgess, Linda Marr, Meg Smith and Martha Stringer. God has given each of them the gift of preaching and they deliver

powerful and inspiring messages. Each week we meet to encourage each other. We fan into flame the gift God has given. I'm sure there are times when each one of them feels timid about using their gifts. Sometimes people unknowingly pour cold water on their gift. Once, when Martha answered the phone in office the caller asked, "Is the pastor preaching this Sunday?" That Sunday Martha was preaching. So, in a very nice way, she replied, "No sir, the pastor will not be here this Sunday. But the Holy Spirit will be." Thankfully I frequently hear encouraging comments about all their sermons. Some of you even tell me to watch out because they'll take over my job. To me, that's not a threat – it's a triumph. Coaches bring out the best in others.

Where did Paul learn to coach like that? From Barnabas who brought the best out of Paul. We also learn from Barnabas that **Coaches Walk Beside Others**. You may remember that Paul didn't start out as the greatest Apostle and Preacher of Christianity. In fact, he was originally the greatest persecutor of Christians. After his dramatic conversion on the road to Damascus, Paul preached boldly about Jesus – so boldly those in Damascus tried to kill him. The only way to escape was for the disciples to put Paul in a basket and lower him from a window in the city wall. So Paul started out as a basket case.

He returned to Jerusalem and tried to join the Christians. Now think about this for a moment, the man who used every ounce of his energy to arrest, imprison and persecute Christians suddenly wants to join the team and preach the Gospel? What would be your reaction?

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. Acts 9:26

Can you blame them? Nobody does a 180 that quickly. This must be a trick, a trap. He will take out the leadership of the Church. Cut off the head and the body will collapse. There was only one apostle who had the courage to talk with Paul: Barnabas. He may have been afraid but he also believed that head of the Church is Jesus. They already killed Him and that didn't stop Him. So Barnabas did a death-defying move – he met with Paul.

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 9:27-28

The Greek words describe how Barnabas "took hold" of Paul in the sense that he put his arm around him and he led Paul to the apostles almost like a timid puppy. Paul probably felt guilt and shame for having persecuted Christians. He may have been as afraid of the apostles as they were of him. So in a sense, Barnabas, the Son of Encouragement, put courage in both Paul and the apostles. He walked beside all of them and gave them the courage to fan into flame a mission that set the world on fire for Christ.

What if Woodside became filled with Barnabases? Imagine the impact it would have on this church, this community and the world. How can we make 2020 a courageous year? Let it begin with you and me. In the image for this Encouragement series you see two people: one reaching up and one reaching down. I ask you to be both.

1. Who Can Be Your Coach? Who do you trust? Who do you want to walk beside you? Who brings the best out of you? Look for someone who is a little farther along in their walk with Christ than you. Write their name down. Reach up and ask them to be your Barnabas. If they already have been encouraging, would you take a minute this week and thank them for their encouragement in an email, a letter, a phone call or in person?

2. Who Can You Coach? Who needs you to walk beside them? Who needs you to bring the best out of them? Who is reaching up to you for help? Write the name down and take a minute this week to send them an encouraging email, letter, phone call or to say it in person.

Let's start encouraging today. You don't have to be a professional coach. Even a first grader can do this. Today the Eagles will play in a wild card game against the Seattle Seahawks. I dearly hope what happened in the Wild Card game against the Seahawks on January 10, 2016 will not happen tonight. During the 2015-2016 NFL season, the Minnesota Vikings place kicker Blair Walsh made an NFL-high 34 field goals. During the Vikings' Wild Card playoff game against the Seattle Seahawks, he was three for three in that game. So when the Vikings were down 10-9 with 22 seconds left and Walsh lined up for a 27-yard field goal attempt, it looked like the Vikings would win. But Walsh's kick sailed wide left and the Vikings season came to a crashing halt.

A social media storm of criticism poured down on Walsh. Yet in the middle of all the abuse, a group of first graders in Minnesota reached out to encourage the broken-hearted kicker. First grader Allie Edwards said, "Blair was really sad, and we wanted to make him feel better." One of her classmates, wrote, "Dear Blair Walsh, I think you should keep trying. Don't give up! We still love you! Get better by practicing." Tyler Doffin filled a whole page for Walsh: "Dear Blair: I fell bad for you. Don't give up. You're still #1. Practice more so that you can get better at kicking. You're so good at kicking. So don't give up! Keep trying! We still love you."

The kids' act of kindness got his attention. He was so touched to hear from children who didn't know him that he pushed his flight home back a day to visit the classroom. After the visit he said, "It was very touching to me ... I will cherish them forever."<sup>3</sup>

The world needs Barnabases. The world needs Encouragement. Are you ready? Will you say, "Put me in coach"?

---

<sup>3</sup> Susan Elizabeth Littlefield, "First Graders Aim to Cheer Up Vikings Kicker Walsh," CBS Minnesota (1-12-16); Kevin Seifert, "Blair Walsh is human, so let's treat him that way," ESPN (1-11-16)