

October 4, 2009 – Relationships that lead to abundant life

Good morning again. While the kids are making their way off to kids church, let's watch this short video to set up our talk for today.

That, of course, is Randy Newman singing "You've got a friend in me" the theme song from the movie Toy Story. Great, great movies – both Toy Story 1 and 2. I guess there's a third one coming out next summer, so if you're a Toy Story fan – be on the look-out for that one.

As you might have gathered – I want to talk this morning about friendship – specifically about the role that friendships, peer relationships play in our pursuit of this full and abundant life that Jesus talks about in John 10:10. Again, here's what Jesus said: *The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full.* Through the years, one thing that has become crystal clear to me is that this full and abundant life doesn't come to us in a vacuum. It happens in the midst of real relationship – real interaction with Jesus Christ, as we've talked quite a bit about over the past few weeks. And it comes in the midst of real relationships with other people trying to learn how to follow Jesus.

As I look back at the past 15 years or so of my life... the times I have felt most alive have included this component of real relationships. This week, I was thinking about two friends in particular that were significant early in those years: my college roommate Dan, and my good friend Kris. I'll tell you some stories about the impact of those friendships as we go along, but let's first take a look at a person from Bible that made a huge impact through his friendship... a guy called Barnabas.

We get introduced to Barnabas at the end of Acts chapter 4, where we read this: **32** *All the believers were one in heart and mind. No one claimed that any of his possessions was his own, but they shared everything they had.* **33** *With great power the apostles continued to testify to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and much grace was upon them all.* **34** *There were no needy persons among them. For from time to time those who owned lands or houses sold them, brought the money from the sales* **35** *and put it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to anyone as he 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. (NIV)*

As we read, there was some pretty powerful expressions of generosity happening with these early followers of Jesus. And apparently, this man named Joseph was such an amazing encouragement to others around him that the apostles gave him a nickname... they started calling him Barnabas (which means Son of Encouragement). The nickname stuck and he was known as Barnabas from that point on.

The next time we see Barnabas mentioned in the Scriptures is in Acts chapter 9. A man named Saul has just had an amazing encounter with Jesus and now instead of being a persecutor of Christians, Saul has become a preacher of good news about Jesus. But, because of Saul's history, this was a little hard for some people to believe. Picking up in verse 21:

21 *All who heard (Saul) were amazed. "Isn't this the same man who caused such devastation among Jesus' followers in Jerusalem?" they asked. "And didn't he come here to arrest them and take them in chains to the leading priests?"* **22** *Saul's preaching became more and more powerful, and the Jews in Damascus couldn't refute his proofs that Jesus was indeed the Messiah.* **23** *After a while some of the Jews plotted together to kill him.*

24 They were watching for him day and night at the city gate so they could murder him, but Saul was told about their plot. 25 So during the night, some of the other believers lowered him in a large basket through an opening in the city wall.

26 When Saul arrived in Jerusalem, he tried to meet with the believers, but they were all afraid of him. They did not believe he had truly become a believer! 27 Then Barnabas brought him to the apostles and told them how Saul had seen the Lord on the way to Damascus and how the Lord had spoken to Saul. He also told them that Saul had preached boldly in the name of Jesus in Damascus.

28 So Saul stayed with the apostles and went all around Jerusalem with them, preaching boldly in the name of the Lord. 29 He debated with some Greek-speaking Jews, but they tried to murder him. 30 When the believers heard about this, they took him down to Caesarea and sent him away to Tarsus, his hometown.

If you read through the earlier portions of the book of Acts, you can completely understand why the Jerusalem church was skeptical about Saul initially. Saul had been the most active of all the people persecuting the followers of Jesus, arresting them and standing on as their dear friend Stephen was stoned to death for his faith.

What made the difference in this interaction with the church at Jerusalem? It was the friendship of Barnabas. Barnabas vouched for Saul, reiterating Saul's conversion story and the fruit that was coming already from Saul's preaching about Jesus being the Messiah. Because of Barnabas, Saul (who eventually became known as Paul... they seemed to love changing names back then) Saul got welcomed into the community of believers and began ministering with the other leaders of the early church.

The next time we hear about Barnabas is a couple chapters later in Acts 11 (19-26).

19 The believers who had been scattered during the persecution after Stephen's death traveled as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus, and Antioch of Syria. They preached the word of God, but only to Jews. **20** However, some of the believers who went to Antioch from Cyprus and Cyrene began preaching to the Gentiles about the Lord Jesus. **21** The power of the Lord was with them, and a large number of these Gentiles believed and turned to the Lord.

22 When the church at Jerusalem heard what had happened, they sent Barnabas to Antioch. **23** When he arrived and saw this evidence of God's blessing, he was filled with joy, and he encouraged the believers to stay true to the Lord. **24** Barnabas was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and strong in faith. And many people were brought to the Lord.

25 Then Barnabas went on to Tarsus to look for Saul. **26** When he found him, he brought him back to Antioch. Both of them stayed there with the church for a full year, teaching large crowds of people. (It was at Antioch that the believers were first called Christians.)

Once again, we see the Holy Spirit working powerfully, drawing people to faith in Jesus Christ. And in the middle of this good stuff happening, Barnabas goes to Tarsus, finds Saul and brings him back to help with teaching and discipling all these new believers in Jesus. The next major reference of Barnabas and Saul comes in Acts 13. **1** In the church at Antioch there were prophets and teachers: Barnabas, Simeon called Niger, Lucius of Cyrene, Manaen (who had been brought up with Herod the tetrarch) and Saul. **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. (NIV)

From this meeting at Antioch, they set off on what is known as Paul's first missionary journey. It's during this trip that Saul officially becomes known as Paul, and that instead of it being Barnabas as the lead guy... now it is Paul.

On this particular trip, Paul and Barnabas travel to Cyprus and then to numerous places in modern day Turkey (then called Asia Minor), starting churches in at least 7 major cities and preaching the good news of Jesus everywhere they went.

After this first trip, Paul takes two more major missionary journeys, paving the way for all of the Western Mediterranean as well as Europe to hear the good news about Jesus. In the midst of this, Paul writes 13 epistles – these letters that end up being almost half of the New Testament. And still today, nearly 2000 years after his death, Paul is considered to be one of the most influential people in all of history.

I string all those Bible passages together, give you all that background to basically make one point. All that might not have happened, if it hadn't been for.... Barnabas.

Now I don't doubt God's sovereignty or ability to work things out another way... but the reality of that matter is that Barnabas ended up playing a crucial role in Paul's life. Of all the ways that God could have used to help Paul to get from point A to point B on so on in his journey of faith and ministry – of all the ways that God could have used, He chose to use Barnabas. More on that in a bit.

I want us to pause for a moment, and think about people that have maybe made that kind of impact in our lives. What people have been like a Barnabas to you in your life? Who have you been that in some ways for others? As I mentioned earlier, this companionship seems essential to us and others entering more and more into the fullness of life that Jesus offers us. Let me tell you about a couple friendships from earlier in my journey with God that have been significant.

The first friend I was thinking of is my roommate from college, Dan. When I arrived at Luther College 17 years ago this fall, I had no idea the way that our friendship would shape my life. On the surface, Dan and I were quite a bit different. I came from an itty-bitty farming town – he grew up in a bigger city (at least for Iowa standards). He was into computer science and math. I was just coming off of my season of being a high school jock. I had a bit of an introvert streak to me, but Dan was really introverted.

And spiritually speaking – we were coming from some pretty different experiences, too. I had grown up in a conservative Lutheran church, and Dan, while he had attended a fairly traditional Presbyterian church some as a kid, it wasn't until his junior year in high school that he connected with faith in a significant way. Dan met Jesus in a pretty radical fashion through a small Pentecostal church in Cedar Rapids. So here we were... at the time, a staunch Lutheran and a fiery Pentecostal sharing a dorm room.

Needless to say those differences led to some interesting conversations and some huge blessings through the course of our friendship. Dan challenged a lot of my perspectives about faith, and my approach to living my faith out. Dan was great at accountability stuff... when he saw me going down a path that was contrary to what he knew I was wanting to pursue with God, he wasn't afraid to call me on it – all in a way that I knew that he loved me and was looking out for me, rather than him playing the moral police.

And because we both moved to Cedar Rapids after college, we had the blessing of continuing our friendship.

For several years, Dan and I ate breakfast together every week or two - we'd see how each other was doing spiritually, talk through questions that each of us was sorting through with God and in life. And we prayed for each other. Dan's friendship was, and still is, from a distance now, a great blessing in my life.

The other friend I was thinking about this week is my friend Kris. Andrea and I met Kris soon after moving to Cedar Rapids. Kris had graduated from college at 19 and was in medical school, but wasn't feeling like this was his deal. Much to the consternation of his parents, Kris decided to drop out of med school to take some time to discern what direction God had for his life. Around that time, Andrea and I had just bought our first house, and sensed God's leading to offer Kris a place to live in our attic bedroom.

Kris did move in with us, and became the first of a string of 6 young adults that have lived with us right before they were going to get married. As happened with med school, Kris's parents weren't originally in favor of Kris getting married to a college friend of ours, so much so that they didn't attend their wedding. The good news is that his parents eventually softened and now have a solid relationship again, but at the time, there was a way that we and a number of other friends were "family" to Kris.

After getting married Kris continued on in his search into what God had for his life. For a time Kris was doing media production for a ministry organization, and was wondering about becoming a pastor.

Through that season, we had lots of conversations about what God was up to in his life, what he was passionate about. Eventually Kris sensed two things... a calling into financial world of business, and a longer term interest of getting into politics.

It's been 10 years since that time, and in that decade, Kris did get into finance, went to the East Coast to get a MBA, returned to Cedar Rapids to become the youngest divisional directory in his company's history, and started a non-profit organization.

By no means can I take credit for those things... we moved to from Cedar Rapids to Mankato almost 7 years ago and most of those things have happened since we've moved. But I do think that some of those early interactions seem significant. There was a part of encouragement, of comfort in difficult times, of offering a listening ear and prayer that we did provide that helped Kris get on the course that God had for his life. I had no idea all the things God was going to do in Kris's life over the next decade. I was just being his friend and trying to encourage him in the things he was sorting through. In the end, it's just great to see all that God has done!

So, those are a couple of examples about the impact friendship can make in our pursuit towards the full and abundant life that Jesus makes available to us. In the midst of those stories, maybe you were thinking about friends through the years that have played a significant role in your life. Or maybe you're drawn to pray for God to bring some new relationships into your life that can be like that.

Either way, let me pull together a few common themes that I find from the Biblical example of Barnabas and some more current day life stories.

What are some gifts we can give and receive in friendship that lead to abundant life? Here's some qualities to be thankful for in the midst of relationships you have now, and things to look for in developing future friendships.

First are the gifts of belief and accountability. With belief, we see this so evidently in Barnabas's interactions with Paul – both in the earliest instance where Barnabas vouched for Paul with the church leaders in Jerusalem, but also in later times, when Barnabas went out of his way to search out Paul, so he could bring him back to Antioch, having him partner with the ministry there. Barnabas believed in Paul, seeing things in him long before others did...

With accountability, we don't get any specific insights into Barnabas offering this for Paul, but we do learn about how Paul eventually did that for Barnabas. In his letter to the Galatians, Paul describes redirecting Barnabas, when Barnabas got mixed up in the debates over circumcision. As I mentioned earlier, accountability is a key component that my friend Dan and others have provided in my life and vice versa. It all helps lead us to become more fully alive.

A second set of gifts that we can give in receive in friendship are the gifts of companionship, challenge, and comfort. The truth is that we need people to walk through life with. We weren't meant to be islands unto ourselves, and it seems that each of us needs people in our life to talk out loud with. Sometimes those friends provide great insight or ask great questions. Other times they just sit with us and listen well.

Having companions in the journey of following Jesus is one of the greatest blessings we can experience. This is at the heart of why we stress small groups so much here at Two Rivers. It's in those environments that we can develop that companionship, receive and offer those kinds of challenges in each others lives, as well as be the hands and feet of Jesus that bring comfort in difficult circumstances. Those are all huge blessings.

A third set of gifts we can give and receive in friendship are the gifts of forgiveness and reconciliation. In the midst of real relationship, there is bound to come hurt, disappointment and disagreement. With Barnabas and Paul, this came just before they were ready to set off on a second missionary journey. In Acts 15, we read that Barnabas wanted to take a young man named John Mark along, but Paul didn't. John Mark had been on their first trip, and had left them in the middle of it. Barnabas wanted to give John Mark another chance, but Paul didn't want to take the risk. The disagreement between Paul and Barnabas was so strong that they decided to part ways. Pretty hard stuff... The good news is that down the road, Paul, Barnabas and John Mark were reconciled, with John Mark serving later as a ministry partner with Paul in one of the churches he had planted.

Hurt happens in the midst of friendship, but that doesn't have to be the end. If we can turn to God and turn towards each other in forgiveness and reconciliation, God uses that to draw us into an even deeper experience of being fully alive.

Here's a final set of gifts we can give and receive in friendship. Common mission and lasting impact. For Paul and Barnabas, we see this most clearly in the churches they started, and in the people they brought into relationship with Christ.

With my friend Dan, I can see how God used our friendship to shape and mold each of us more into the men we were hoping to become. With my friend Kris, some simple expressions of friendship helped pave the way for greater things God had in store for his life. With these kinds of relationships there are often ways that God knits us together in common mission, often for the direct advancement of the gospel, but often in other pursuits. And through those connections, and in our relationships, God brings lasting impact, fruit that lasts, as Jesus talks about.

In the end, there is something really beautiful about how God uses friendships to lead us towards the fullness of life we long to experience. If you have a number of those relationships today – I'd encourage you... treasure them, thank God for them, and dive into them with all you are.

If you're hungry for more connections in friendship like what I'm describing today – that's a desire I believe God wants to meet. Ask God what avenues He might want you to pursue... I know a number of people are investing in small groups for the first time this fall as a way to develop these relationships. Maybe you grab lunch with someone after church or during the week. Maybe you start doing breakfast with a co-worker or a neighbor that you seem to connect well with. There are tons of ways that God can use to bring life-giving relationships into our path...look to Him, seek His direction and I believe He'll give you some ways to pursue that important goal.

This morning, we are going to celebrate communion, the Lord's Supper. As we prepare for that, let me offer this final thought. In everything we are talking about today regarding friendship - in the grandest sense, Jesus is all those to us...

Jesus is the ultimate source of belief and accountability. He sees things in us long before anyone else does, and has a way of redirecting us so we stay on track. Jesus offers us companionship, challenge and comfort. Jesus makes available to us the gifts of forgiveness and reconciliation. And in Jesus, we can find common mission and real, lasting impact.

As the old hymn says - what a friend we have in Jesus.

In John 15, we hear Jesus saying this to his disciples. *“My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you. **13** Greater love has no one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends.”*

Of course, there is no greater example of that kind of love than what Jesus did just a short time later, in offering up his life on their behalf, and our behalf, by dying on the cross. His body was broken for us, His blood was poured out, so that we could experience the gifts forgiveness, of salvation, and of new life in Him. We remember his sacrifice this morning, as we take the bread and we take the cup. We remember that Jesus came to die our death.....so we could in turn, experience his fullness of life.

Let's pray.