

Voices: What's in a name?

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All the believers were one in heart and mind. No one claimed that any of their possessions was their own, but they shared everything they had. With great power the apostles continued to testify to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus. And God's grace was so powerfully at work in them all that there were no needy persons among them. For from time to time those who owned land or houses sold them, brought the money from the sales and put it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to anyone who had need.



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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 4:32-37)

A name ...

A name says a lot about a person.

John Dunbar, a fictional first lieutenant in the Union Army during the Civil War, found himself on the Dakota plains. One day, while Dunbar was going about his daily chores, he encountered a wolf, which he eventually befriended.

Later on, some Sioux found Dunbar running around and playing with his

wolf friend and gave Dunbar the name Dances With Wolves. To our ears, Dances With Wolves sounds more cumbersome than John Dunbar, but it says so much more about the man than his given name tells us.

You see, a given name tells us what parents hope a child will do. A new name tells us what the child has done. One name is a future hope. The other name describes the present.

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The name Dances With Wolves tells us John Dunbar was a playful and courageous sort of person, a person admired and respected by the Sioux. To the Sioux, John Dunbar was just one more white hunter out to decimate the vast buffalo herds of the Great Plains, but Dances With Wolves was a man worthy of trust, a man who respected the land and its inhabitants.

Fulfilling promise

In the New Testament story that follows Barnabas', we learn about two people who were characterized by the greed of this world and who lost trust and respect as a result, a husband and wife out for themselves like the white hunters dreaded by the Sioux.

Their story begins: *Now a man named Ananias, together with his wife Sapphira, also sold a piece of property (Acts 5:1).*

"Also sold a piece of property" indicates there was someone else who sold a piece of property. The first passage, from Acts 4, tells us who that "someone" was: Joseph, called Barnabas by the apostles.

Joseph is a noble name, an old name. Joseph was the great son of Jacob, who became second only to Pharaoh and who saved his people and countless others from famine. To the people of Israel, Joseph was a hero. To

the people of Israel, Joseph was the one whose name means “the Lord will add.”

In Acts, this new Joseph, whose name also meant “the Lord will add,” fulfilled the promise of his name by selling some of his property and giving the money to the community of Christ.

Lift to others

Maybe he already had planned to sell the property and decided to give the profit to the community of Christ. Maybe he saw need in the community and then decided to sell some of his property to meet some of the need. We don't know.

What we do know is he was called Barnabas because he was the kind of person who gave to lift others. “Barnabas” means what the story tells us it means—“Son of Encouragement,” and we know this because of what Barnabas did.

Being called “Son of Encouragement” doesn't mean Barnabas' dad was named Encouragement. It means Barnabas was made of the sort of character that lifted people up, that sought to empower people to accomplish God's work. To call him “Son of Encouragement” was to say encouragement was in his very DNA.

Barnabas couldn't help but encourage. We see this about him if we keep reading the story of Acts.

More about Barnabas

While we never hear about Ananias and Sapphira again nor about their actions leading to the end of their story, we do hear about Barnabas several more times.

After Saul, the persecutor of Christians, became a follower of Christ, it was

Barnabas who stood up for him when the Christians wouldn't trust Saul.

When he (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)

Because the community of Christ trusted and respected Barnabas, they took in Saul.

When many people in Antioch started following Jesus, the church in Jerusalem heard about it and sent Barnabas to encourage them.

Some...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.

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.

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 11:20-25)

Later, when it was time for the good news about Jesus to spread throughout the Roman Empire, the Spirit of God chose Barnabas, along with Saul, to become missionaries.

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. (Acts 13:2-4)

When important work needed doing, the Lord and the people sent Barnabas because of what he was made of, and by sending Barnabas, the Lord did indeed add through the one called "Son of Encouragement."

Meet the need

Some need arose in the community of Christ, and in keeping with the promise as old as Deuteronomy 15 that there would be no one needy in God's community, the need was met through the generosity of a guy named Joseph, forever after known as Barnabas, "Son of Encouragement."

As long as we are in this world, needs always will arise somewhere, even in the community of Christ. Joseph saw the need, Joseph gave to meet the need, Joseph got a new name, and the course of history forever was changed.

When you see need arise around you, how will you meet that need? What will you give? What name will you be given? How will the course of history forever be changed by God's work through you?

May the good news of Jesus Christ abound through you!

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