

*You have not chosen me, but I have chosen you, and ordained you, that you should go and bring forth fruit.*

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I want you to think for just a moment about two parallel lines. These two fingers, for example; or two match sticks; or two popsicle sticks. Or whatever image works best for you. Just think of two parallel lines. Two lines standing side by side, pointing in very the same direction. And I want you to keep that image in the back of your minds for just a moment.

Now I want to tell you three very quick stories. The first is perhaps the simplest. As you may know, the Church in her very earliest days lived together as one family; one large, extended, diverse, and at times disruptive family. There were, we are told in the *Acts of the Apostles*, no needy person in the Church, because they shared all things in common. Those who had much shared with those who had little: widows and orphans cared for in a time long before there was any kind of social welfare system.<sup>1</sup>

And we are told a story of one man who had a field; a member of the church who sold his field and gave the proceeds of the sale to the Apostles. So the first story is a simple story about great generosity and compassion.

But the second story is a story of great courage. As you may recall, a man named Saul has been making a great name for himself by arresting and persecuting, and even putting to death, the followers of Jesus Christ; in some cases traveling great distances to track them down. Until one day when he encounters the Risen Christ on the road to Damascus; and in that blinding encounter he realises that all along he's been utterly wrong; that his great desire to serve his God by persecuting the Church has been folly. So in one of those moments that shapes our history, he realises his error and repents and is baptised; and becomes a follower of Jesus Christ himself. But when, after some time, he goes to the city of Jerusalem to meet the Apostles, not one of them will have anything at all to do with him. Perhaps they imagine that this is just some great act; a deception to trick the Church; another way of searching out the members of Christ that they might be put to death. He is, as we might imagine, greatly feared by the Church; an outcast. Until one man picks up his courage and, at tremendous personal risk, putting his own life on the line, he goes to meet this man named Saul; to discover whether or not his story is true. He looks him up. And he sits down and talks with him. And he brings him to the Church, vouching for him.<sup>2</sup> And when, a few years later, plans are made for the very first missionary journey, he agrees to go with Saul; once again putting his life at risk to carry the good news to new places and new peoples.

So, first, an act of great generosity; and second, an act of great courage.

But the third story is an act of great mercy. Many years later, when a dispute

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<sup>1</sup> Acts 4:34-37

<sup>2</sup> Acts 9:26-27: And when he had come to Jerusalem he attempted to join the disciples; and they were all afraid of him, for they did not believe that he was a disciple. But Barnabas took him, and brought him to the apostles, and declared to them how on the road he had seen the Lord, who spoke to him, and how at Damascus he had preached boldly in the name of Jesus.

arises about whether or not a young man named John Mark would be permitted to join them on their second missionary journey, after he had abandoned them mid-way through the first, only one man is willing to forgive the mistakes of Mark's past, even when Paul absolutely refuses to do so.

One of the truly great heroes of the Christian tradition; and one the truly unsung figures in the Church's early history, is a man commemorated every year on June 11<sup>th</sup>. His story is told in the *Acts of the Apostles*; and it tells us of a man whose life was marked by three great virtues: by generosity, by courage, and by mercy. Originally named Joseph, he was a native of Cyprus. But the Apostles call him by another name; a name that says so much of what he was like. They call him Barnabas: 'Son of encouragement;' 'Son of consolation.' And our three stories tell us why: generosity; courage; and forgiveness. In each case, Barnabas stepped up to reach out to others; putting his own comfort; and his life; and his reputation at risk. And hopefully that tells us how we are called to be sons and daughters of encouragement.

The Greek word that comes to us as encouragement or consolation is Παρακαλέω (parakaleo).<sup>3</sup> The first part, παρά, as I'm sure will be no surprise, also gives us words like parable and parallel. It speaks of that image that I asked you to think about at the very beginning: things that are side by side; near to each other; pointing in the same direction. The second part, καλέω, means to call or bid. And put together, these two words speak of someone who stands along side us; speaking to us wherever we happen to be; not just standing back in selfishness or fear or judgement; but coming to meet us where we are; loving us as we are; caring for us wherever we may be: generously; courageously; forgivingly standing with us; even when others refuse. We see all of these so clearly in the life of Barnabas: the encouragement and consolation which he gave to the Church in its early days; the encouragement and consolation that he offered to a new Christian named Saul; the encouragement and consolation that he offered to a young man named Mark. The very same qualities which we are called to use today to change our families and our communities.

So, who is Christ calling us to come along side with; to stand with and to walk with? And who is Christ asking us to comfort in their affliction? And to whom is Christ calling us to give a second chance; or even a third? Daughters and sons of encouragement. That's who Barnabas was then. And that's who Christ is asking us to be now. By our generosity. And our courage. And our mercy. Daughters and sons of encouragement. Just as Barnabas was.

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<sup>3</sup> Παρακαλέω

From παρά and καλέω; to *call near*, that is, *invite, invoke* (by *imploration, hortation* or *consolation*): - beseech, call for, (be of good) comfort, desire, (give) exhort (-ation), intreat, pray.

παρά

A primary preposition; properly *near*, that is, (with genitive case) *from beside* (literally or figuratively), (with dative case) *at* (or *in*) the *vicinity* of (objectively or subjectively), (with accusative case) to the *proximity* with (local [especially *beyond* or *opposed* to] or causal [*on account* of]). In compounds it retains the same variety of application: - above, against, among, at, before, by, contrary to, X friend, from, + give [such things as they], + that [she] had, X his, in, more than, nigh unto, (out) of, past, save, side . . . by, in the sight of, than, [there-] fore, with. In compounds it retains the same variety of application.

καλέω

to "call" (properly aloud, but used in a variety of applications, directly or otherwise): - bid, call (forth), (whose, whose sur-) name (was [called]).

To call; speak to along side (parallel)