

On his blog, *Christianity for the Common Good* (<http://bruceashford.net/>), Bruce Ashford writes: “If we were to update Dante’s *Divine Comedy* for the 21st century, we might revise it so that persons in the inner circle of hell would be forced to spend their days reading and interacting with the comment chains of national news outlets, popular websites, famous YouTube videos, and celebrity Twitter accounts. In other words, humanity would be punished by having to interact with *internet trolls*.”

What is an internet troll, you may ask? An internet troll is a person who aims to start arguments and upset or humiliate people by posting accusatory, inflammatory, or off-topic messages in online comment chains or chatrooms. Trolls who have mastered the dark art of *trollery* will exhibit a number of skills, including: selective outrage; obstinate quibbles over petty details; the refusal to listen to or sympathize with others, purportedly on principle but mainly to distort or hijack the conversation; and the seizing of any opening to practice these dark arts from the safety of his own basement.”

The polar opposite example of today’s internet trolls would be Oseola McCarty, a onetime washwoman who lived and worked most of her life in a small, wooden-framed house in Hattiesburg, Mississippi, saved thousands of dollars she earned washing and ironing clothes for others. According to *The Washington Post*, she earned international acclaim in 1995, when the university announced she had willed \$150,000 of her life’s savings to Southern Miss to encourage deserving, financially needy students to get their college degree.

Ms. McCarty said she wanted to give others the chance to get the education she never had. She had dreamed of becoming a nurse but had to drop out of elementary school to care for sick relatives. “Her life, her thrift and her generosity have inspired millions,” said Southern Mississippi spokesman Bud Kirkpatrick. (“Oseola McCarty Dies; Washwoman Donated Life Savings to University,” *The Washington Post*, September 27, 1999)

What do you think of Osceola McCarty? Was she a genius or a fool? Should she have used that money to live a higher priced lifestyle? Or did she do a wonderful thing in giving the money away and encouraging college students to pursue their dreams?

In our Scripture for today, the newly minted believers are described as being “*one in heart and mind*” (4:32). They were so committed to God and to one another that “*they shared everything they had.*” They would sell their possessions and distribute the proceeds to others as they had need.

One of those who sold a field and gave the proceeds to the apostles was a man they called Barnabas who would later become a co-missionary with Saul in the witness of the early church. A surprisingly large amount of the book of Acts deals with economic issues within the community, much as Luke’s first book, his gospel, dealt with matters of money. Consider the parables of the Good Samaritan, the Rich Fool, the Unjust Steward, the Rich Man and Lazarus and the Talents. Wealth is not, for Luke, a sign of divine approval—it is a danger. (William H. Willimon, *Acts* [Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1988], p. 52)

Jesus says in the gospel of Luke, “*How hard it is for those who have riches to enter into the Kingdom of God!*” (18:24). What made these early Christians sell their property and give to those in need through the

church? Luke reveals in verse 33 the source of this amazing unity and generosity. While only the apostles, he says, are endowed with “*great power,*” Luke says of the whole church that, “*God’s grace was so powerfully at work in them all...*”

I believe that’s what Barnabas and Oseola McCarty had: *God’s great grace*. The gift of God’s great grace creates a community that naturally does all it can to provide for its neediest members. Great grace enabled these early Christians to transcend the fixation on self and replace it with concern for the whole community as the highest priority.

Jesus said, “*Lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consume, and where thieves don’t break through and steal*” (Matthew 6:20). Invest yourself in the body of Christ; invest yourself in the people of God. Our church is such an investment club and one of the first things followers of Jesus learned in the early church is how to give. There are a number of models of stewardship in the Bible. Yet all of them begin with the main premise that everything comes from God, all things belong to God, and that we are called to be good stewards of God’s gifts for a while on this earth.

The second passage we read today is found in Acts chapter 11. A mysterious twist of early church history occurs when some of the believers who had left Jerusalem because of Saul’s pre Damascus Road persecution of Christians there resulted in followers of Jesus going as far as the eastern tip of the Mediterranean to a city called Antioch. These displaced believers in Antioch began preaching Christ to the Greeks there. The Lord blessed their efforts. I think there was probably a correlation between that blessing and the blessing that happened in the Spirit-led conclusion of the council of Jerusalem (Acts 15). The Lord pours out his blessing on the church whenever it responds to his guidance and follows him in faithful obedience into uncharted territory.

So the apostles sent “generous to a fault” Barnabas, the encourager, to check on the power of evangelism that had been unleashed in Antioch. In his customary Spirit-inspired affirmation, he rejoiced at what the followers of the Way were doing there. But he also discerned that they needed help in that secular city where political intrigue, cults, and sensual sin abounded. Who could do that? Who had the intellectual training, Roman citizenship, and spiritual power, to establish a beach head there? Who else, but Saul of Tarsus?

Barnabas went to Tarsus to call the meditating Saul into active ministry. The 14 years of preparation had made him ready. His mind was alert with Christ; his thinking was fashioned around the mind of Christ and his will was under the control of his new and indwelling Lord. Saul responded with vigor and enthusiasm, and the missionary team of Saul and Barnabas was formed.

They preached for a full year in the city of Antioch. It was a good place to begin. If they could win converts and establish a church there, anything was possible. The city was ranked third in prominence to Rome and Alexandria. It was called one of the “eyes” of Asia in the far-flung Roman Empire, and a Roman prefect was stationed there to assure the power of Rome in the area. The culture of the city was Greek. Cosmopolitan and metropolitan in spirit and size, it was also one of the most corrupt cities of the then-known world. Ritual prostitution in the temple of Daphne characterized the orientation of the morals

of the city. And it was in that atmosphere that Saul began his ministry of preaching Christ! (*The Communicator's Commentary*, Vol. 5: Acts, p. 194)

What Saul needed after time in the Arabian desert, in Jerusalem, and back in his hometown of Tarsus was the encouragement of someone like Barnabas. Luke writes in Acts 4:36 that the apostles gave Barnabas his nickname and explained that it meant “Son of Encouragement.”

Everyone can use a little encouragement from time to time. It doesn't take much more than a kind word of concern or a simple statement of appreciation to boost our feeling of accomplishment to more positive levels. Research has found that people are much happier on the job if they feel appreciated for their work. This factor is more important in day-to-day job satisfaction than the amount of one's salary or the size of one's office. On the other hand, a well-deserved raise in pay is like your boss saying, “I really appreciate your work!”

As the world today puts even more distractions in front of us, encouraging others is becoming a lost art. Today, we just get too busy to be concerned about the welfare of our fellow human beings, and busyness becomes an excuse for neglecting them. As Christians, we must find the time to be concerned about others—about their welfare, about their happiness, about their spiritual growth!

As I noted earlier, Barnabas is first mentioned in Acts 4 as a landowner who sold some land and generously donated all the proceeds to the apostles in Jerusalem (4:36-37). A few years later, God appoints him as an apostle with Saul to the Gentiles (13:2-3). He spent many years preaching the gospel in lands a far distance from both Jerusalem and from Cyprus.

Tradition says that Barnabas was one of the seventy-two whom Jesus sent out in pairs “*like lambs among wolves*” into every city in Luke 10. They were to carry no money, baggage, or sandals, nor were they to greet anyone along the road. Jesus told them that they were on a special mission of peace to those God was calling. He sent them to preach the kingdom of God.

“*The seventy-two returned with joy*” it says in 10:17. They had been greatly encouraged by the power and purpose of their mission. Jesus clarified that their joy should not be in their authority over demons “*but rejoice that your names are written in heaven.*” Barnabas received “eternal encouragement” from Jesus that prepared him for teaming up with Saul in Antioch and beyond.

While I could never imagine Barnabas as an internet troll, we should also recognize that he was not afraid to stand with God's messengers in a time of danger. He was the first person of influence and responsibility to extend his personal warmth and welcome, and his home, to Saul of Tarsus, when those in Jerusalem were still ready to stone him (Acts 9:26-31). The disciples in Jerusalem, who knew Saul only as a fierce persecutor and murderer of the saints, were afraid of him. They could hardly believe that the feared inquisitor had become a believer. Although the rest shrank from Saul in fear and suspicion, Barnabas came forward and showed great kindness toward him.

Barnabas was clearly “called to encourage.” And I believe God wants our church to be a model of encouragement. Encouragement is about willingness, and not about coercion. Our Scripture begins with the generosity of Barnabas in the communal practice of the early Christians, and it ends with the encouragement shown to Saul by Barnabas. It was no one-and-done event for Barnabas because encouragement is a way of life.

In fact, it’s a calling. Amen.