



SERMON OF THE WEEK

First Presbyterian Church of Honolulu at Ko'olau

January 19, 2014

"The Power of Encouragement" (Book of Acts Series)

The Rev. Dr. Dan Chun

In a recent 2013 film entitled *The Way, Way Back*, actor Steve Carell played a man named Trent who is dating the mother of a 14-year old boy named Duncan. The film begins with Trent, Duncan, Duncan's mom Pam, and Trent's daughter in a car on their way to a summer vacation in a small East Coast Cape Cod town.

Trent is not an encourager. In fact, he talks and acts in ways that belittle and put others down. The opening scene is a shot of Trent driving the car and asking Duncan through the rearview mirror: "How do you see yourself?"

Duncan replies, "A six." (as in 6 out of 10, with 10 being the highest)

Trent says, "You see yourself as a six? I see you as a three. You know why? You know what would make me say that? No? Since I have been dating your mom I don't see you putting yourself out there."

How would you like to be told you're a three? And as the movie goes on, Trent continues to put down Duncan, Duncan's mom Pam, and Trent's own daughter Steph. Trent is NOT an encourager.

I want to talk about the power of encouragement, the blessing of believing in people and seeing the good in them. And to do so, I continue our series on the Book of Acts, and I am going to rewind a bit to last week's

story and combine it with a new story in Chapter 9.

As you may recall, last week I spoke of how the Apostle Paul, who also went by the name of Saul, used to kill Christians and terrorize the early church. But then, one day Jesus appeared to Paul in a voice and a blinding light. Paul is knocked down and becomes blind for three days. He goes to a house in Tarsus, and doesn't eat or drink. Then one of the heroes of our story, a man named Ananias, enters the picture.

Acts 9:10 Now there was a disciple in Damascus named Ananias. The Lord said to him in a vision, "Ananias." He answered, "Here I am, Lord."

Acts 9:11 The Lord said to him, "Get up and go to the street called Straight, and at the house of Judas look for a man of Tarsus named Saul. At this moment he is praying,

Acts 9:12 and he has seen in a vision a man named Ananias come in and lay his hands on him so that he might regain his sight."

Acts 9:13 But Ananias answered, "Lord, I have heard from many about this man, how much evil he has done to your saints in Jerusalem;

Acts 9:14 and here he has authority from the chief priests to bind all who invoke your name."

Acts 9:15 But the Lord said to him, "Go, for he is an instrument whom I have chosen to bring my name before

Gentiles and kings and before the people of Israel;

Acts 9:16 I myself will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name."

Acts 9:17 So Ananias went and entered the house. He laid his hands on Saul and said, "Brother Saul, the Lord Jesus, who appeared to you on your way here, has sent me so that you may regain your sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit."

Acts 9:18 And immediately something like scales fell from his eyes, and his sight was restored. Then he got up and was baptized,

Acts 9:19 and after taking some food, he regained his strength. For several days he was with the disciples in Damascus,

Acts 9:20 and immediately he began to proclaim Jesus in the synagogues, saying, "He is the Son of God."

Acts 9:21 All who heard him were amazed and said, "Is not this the man who made havoc in Jerusalem among those who invoked this name? And has he not come here for the purpose of bringing them bound before the chief priests?"

Acts 9:22 Saul became increasingly more powerful and confounded the Jews who lived in Damascus by proving that Jesus was the Messiah.

Acts 9:23 After some time had passed, the Jews plotted to kill him,

Acts 9:24 but their plot became known to Saul. They were watching the gates day and night so that they might kill him;

Acts 9:25 but his disciples took him by night and let him down through an opening in the wall, lowering him in a basket.

Acts 9:26 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.

Acts 9:27 But Barnabas took him, brought him to the apostles, and described for them how on the road he had seen the Lord, who had spoken to him, and how in Damascus he had spoken boldly in the name of Jesus.

Acts 9:28 So he went in and out among them in Jerusalem, speaking boldly in the name of the Lord.

Acts 9:29 He spoke and argued with the Hellenists; but they were attempting to kill him.

Acts 9:30 When the believers learned of it, they brought him down to Caesarea and sent him off to Tarsus.

This is the Word of God!

We all need an encourager. Here are the traits of an encourager, which are all in the Scripture passage we just read:

- An encourager is willing to encourage others out of obedience to God.
- An encourager may be afraid and yet is willing to obey God.
- An encourager is prophetic in seeing the potential in a person.

First, an encourager is willing to encourage others out of obedience to God. Our passage begins with God appearing in a vision to a man named Ananias. That must have been startling to be awakened from sleep and hear God saying your name, “Ananias!”

But Ananias’ first response was “Here I am Lord.” He was willing to do what God asks him to do. That is the right response—obedience.

But then comes the awful reality setting in when God tells him what He wants Ananias to do.

Acts 9:11 The Lord said to him, “Get up and go to the street called Straight, and at the house of Judas look for a man of Tarsus named Saul. At this moment he is praying,

Acts 9:12 and he has seen in a vision a man named Ananias come in and lay his hands on him so that he might regain his sight.”

Acts 9:13 But Ananias answered, “Lord, I have heard from many about this man, how much evil he has done to your saints in Jerusalem;

Acts 9:14 and here he has authority from the chief priests to bind all who invoke your name.”

God is telling Ananias to go to the house where a known terrorist of the church is; a man known for killing Christians and destroying churches. And it’s this guy that’s Ananias is supposed to see?

This is point two: Ananias is afraid, and yet he was willing to obey. Now if you are Ananias, you’ve got to be scared when God tells you to go find this guy named Saul who might murder you, and when you find him, pray for him. Yeah, right.

I love how Ananias replies. In his ancient Middle Eastern way, it’s like

Ananias is saying, “You have got to be kidding, Lord! Do you know who this guy is? You have got to be crazy! I know you’re the God who told Noah to build an ark when it wasn’t raining, and I know you’re the God who told Joshua to walk around Jericho 7 times, and I know you’re the God who told Gideon to send back most of his troops because even with less troops He would win so that You would get all the glory.

“But what You’re asking me to do is utterly crazy. But sure, Lord, I’ll do it; I’ll go see Saul; I’ll pray for him. And why not? If he kills me, I go straight to heaven. Okay, I will talk to him.”

And when Ananias saw Saul he did what God asked him to do, which was to pray for Saul. And lo and behold, something brilliant happened that Ananias didn’t expect.

During the prayer, Paul became a follower of Jesus Christ. He really got it! He experienced the Spirit coming down and filling him. Paul said it was like scales falling from his eyes.

Who would have guessed? This is earth-shattering. Totally unexpected. This is like Osama Ben Laden coming to Christ. Or Saddam Hussein, or former Iran President Mahmud Ahmadinejad. It was that shocking.

Closer to home, it’s like the person who turned in his satin rose just before Christmas to tell me his prayer was miraculously answered when the person in his family who was the least likely decided to follow Christ.

We know that the conversion really took because Paul wanted to get baptized and then he immediately began to preach. But then intrigue and conspiracy and the dark side rose up as word about Paul’s preaching spread around.

His former Jewish buddies, who were into the Law and not grace, didn't like that so they tried to kill him. But his new Christian brothers and sisters snuck out Paul and helped him escape by lowering him in a basket through a hole in the city walls. Being almost murdered at that point for his new faith was proof that Paul was indeed converted to Christ.

Ananias played a huge role in Paul's life. But there is another person who played a key role of encouragement – Barnabas. Let me refresh our memory in what our Scripture said about Barnabas:

Acts 9:26 When he [Saul] 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.

Acts 9:27 But Barnabas took him, brought him to the apostles, and described for them how on the road he had seen the Lord, who had spoken to him, and how in Damascus he had spoken boldly in the name of Jesus.

Acts 9:28 So he went in and out among them in Jerusalem, speaking boldly in the name of the Lord.

When Saul got to Jerusalem. They were all afraid of him. How many were afraid of him? The Bible says ALL were afraid, ALL questioned, ALL doubted. ALL were afraid! Why? Because Paul was a terrorist. He was a Taliban. He was Al Qaeda. He could betray them. Yet, because of Barnabas, Saul had a chance to be whom God called and created him to be!

If it were not for Barnabas and Ananias believing in Saul's conversion as true, Saul would not have become the church's chief church planter, theologian, and writer of most of the New Testament.

Okay, here's the take-away challenge: God may be calling you to encourage someone in your life right now, someone that needs you to believe in him or her. Maybe it's a spouse, a friend, a child, an employee or employer, or maybe someone you don't know that well. And God is asking you, maybe even pushing you, to encourage and believe in someone that you have a hard time to believe in.

Think big. Don't doubt God like Ananias. Someone needs your support. Maybe it is someone who doesn't appear to need support but maybe someone who's like a clown, always smiling on the outside but inside is actually crying. Who can we encourage and defend and believe that someone could become great for the Lord? It may be someone whom you think has no potential.

At the beginning of this talk I talked about the traits of an encourager. And so now, let's talk about this final point – being prophetic in seeing the potential in a person. I once read this parable years ago, but it is so appropriate for me to read it again. I quote it from the late Scott Peck's book *The Different Drum*.

The story concerns a monastery that was once a great order, but it had fallen on hard times, and now there were only five monks left.

There was a rabbi who was prophetic in seeing the potential in people. And so the five monks asked him to come to their home and give them advice. The rabbi came and first met with the abbot – the one in charge of the monks. The abbot said, "Is there nothing you can tell me, no piece of advice you can give me that would help me save my dying order?"

"No, I am sorry," the rabbi responded. "I have no advice to give

except this. The only thing I can tell you is that the Messiah is one of you."

When the abbot returned to the other monks, they asked him what the rabbi said. The abbot answered, "He couldn't help. The only thing he did say, just as I was leaving, was something cryptic. He said the Messiah is one of us. I don't know what he meant."

And so in the days, weeks, and months that followed, the monks pondered what that meant. The Messiah is one of us? Could he possibly have meant one of us monks is the Messiah? If that's the case, which one? Probably the abbot. Yes, surely if he meant anyone, he meant Father Abbot. He has been our leader for more than a generation.

But then, maybe he meant Brother Thomas. Certainly Brother Thomas is a holy man. Everyone knows Thomas is a man of bright light.

And clearly he didn't mean Brother Elred. Such a crotchety man at times, but come to think of it, even though he is a thorn in people's sides, Elred is normally always right about things.

But surely not Brother Phillip. He is so passive. He's a real nothing. But then he does have this gift for somehow always being there when you need him. He just appears like magic at your side. Maybe Phillip is the Messiah.

And, of course, the rabbi didn't mean me. I'm just an ordinary person. But suppose he did? Suppose I am the Messiah. Not me. I couldn't possibly mean that much for God, could I?

As they all contemplated this, the five monks began to treat each other with extraordinary care and respect because what if one of them were the Messiah?

The monastery was situated in a beautiful area in the forest. And people would picnic there on the tiny lawn. People would wander along the path of the monastery and its dilapidated chapel and would often meditate there.

Somehow the people, perhaps without even being conscious of it, sensed an aura of extraordinary respect emanating from the five old monks who worked there. There was something incredibly attractive and magnetic about this love and respect flowing out of the monastery.

More and more people came with their friends and their friends' friends, and after a while some of the younger men asked if they could join the monastery. And within a few years the monastery had once again become a vital, growing, thriving order, all thanks to the cryptic message the rabbi gave the monks.

Now, we know that there is only one Messiah – and that is Jesus Christ. It is not any of the five monks in the story I just told you. But the parable does show the power of encouragement and believing in other God has equipped us. He has given us gifts; they just need to be released. And they get released when we encourage people and affirm them for the sometimes hidden gifts that God may have given them since birth.

May we be known as encouragers and affirmers, people who believe in others even when no one else does. When we become encouragers, we shall see more and more people responding to what God has called them to in order to expand His Kingdom here on earth. Amen?

But I would be remiss in ending this sermon without one more thing. I have tried to show you the

importance of encouragement. I have tried to compel you to encourage. But now allow me to encourage you. You need to be encouraged for this week.

There are times when we are blind to the good in us. Sometimes we doubt ourselves, and we need to be really hard on ourselves. But we need the accurate view of the Master above to tell us how good we are. After all, he chose to die for us. Let me show you a parable of this.

One of my favorite shows is a TV show called Master Chef, starring Gordon Ramsey. Common non-professional chefs compete by cooking a variety of dishes over ten weeks or so to hopefully be chosen as Master Chef.

Last year there was a contestant named Christine Ha, who is blind. And the test in one of the episodes was to bake an apple pie. She doubted herself. She was blind to what she had made, but the true Master, Gordon Ramsey, winner of 14 Michelin stars, looked and tasted her pie and told her what it was really like. Let's take watch this clip from that episode. (Video clip was shown.)

Friends, sometime we are like Christine Ha. We are blind to the value we have, blind to our own skills and talents. And we need God, the true Master, to tell us to stop doubting yourself. Maybe someone criticized you in your past. But they're not God. You think like Christine that what you have created in life is a pile of rubbish, but the Master is saying, "No, you have created something beautiful. You are not looking at your life like I look at your life. You have done far better than you think you have done."

In the gospels when the widow just gives two pennies to the Temple Treasury, Jesus said she gave more than anyone else that day because she gave all that she had, and

not just a portion of what she had. Jesus sees life differently than you. You think you're small, but He thinks you're big.

Our vision statement is to help people find their destiny in Christ. I told you in last week's sermon that one of the most important decisions in life is to figure out who your master is. Choose Jesus for your Master for he is the Master encourager and He will say to you, "Well done, good and faithful servant."

* * * * *

Sunday sermon texts are also available at fpchawaii.org. The audio version can be downloaded from iTunes. It can also be sent to you by e-mail. Request the free audio version at fpchkoolau@gmail.com.