

# *Sermon Text for May 12, 2019*

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*I Samuel 17:48-54, Acts 9:19b-31*

“I didn’t know you had it in you”

You know this church is a place where you come every Sunday and every Sunday you hear the same message: there is hope in Jesus Christ. I don’t care what you’ve been through this last week, month or year, there is hope in Jesus Christ.

This past week was a scary week and one in which we need to hear the words of hope that we find in Romans 8:37ff: In all things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am certain, convinced, there is no doubt in my mind that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor bombs on Easter, nor shooters in our schools, nor homelessness, nor squalid conditions, nor anything else in all creation or even the evil that we have created, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. This is the good news that we come to church to hear every single Sunday, and it is true. What we gather to do here is not a game, it is the worship of Almighty God, our Creator.

You know sometimes it takes the worst experiences in life to discover that God is able to use us and that we do have it in us. What type of potential do we have in us to serve our living God and we haven’t even come close to tapping into? In Scripture we find two people, David and Saul or Paul, who were misunderstood and whose potential was greatly underestimated, but with God’s power, whose power? God’s power they were able to obtain decisive victories for Christ. We are only going to focus on Paul today, but don’t forget the David and Goliath story, it gives the same message. Don’t ever underestimate what God is able to do with you and in your life.

## **READ SCRIPTURE**

Just to bring you up to speed where we are in Acts: Saul the Pharisee, the heresy hunter had been asked to preach at the synagogue in Damascus. This should be good, he will probably after his sermon round up the Christians on the spot, maybe even kill a couple before taking them back to Jerusalem bound in chains. The synagogue was packed, everyone knew about Saul and the ferociousness of his passion, everyone knew this man whose responsibility it was to wipe this small group of Christians off the face of the earth.

The title of his sermon was: “A funny thing happened on the way to Damascus”, okay, maybe that wasn’t his title, but the sermon probably went something like this: My fellow Jews, I hated Jesus Christ and everything he stood for. I hated Christians because I thought they were intent on destroying our faith and our way of life. I became a Pharisee to preserve the old faith and that way of life. I came here to destroy them.

But on the way, a funny thing happened. I met Jesus, I was blinded by his glory and it made me realize that I had been blind all along. For the first time in my life, I could see something that was really worth giving my life to. Jesus Christ is the risen Son of God. A week ago I would have killed every Christian I could find, today, I am one of them. I stand here to tell you there is no life apart from Jesus Christ. He can give you life just as he did to me. Believe in Jesus.

Have you ever known someone in high school or later years who were real rebel rousers and then you came to find out that God had taken their life and turned them around. What is your reaction? I can’t believe it, there is a sense of astonishment, and if you are really honest with yourself there is probably a part of you that is a bit skeptical. I didn’t know they had it in them. Brett’s ordination is coming up and probably for many of us it will be hard to see him outside of that young kid who was more like the youth than the youth themselves. When I was ordained and my friends from college came they all said they could only see me in situations that were anything but pastoral in college. It was hard for them to take me seriously. So that was encouraging.

Well, the people could not believe what Paul was saying. Look at vs. 21. All who hear him were amazed and said didn’t he wreaked havoc in Jerusalem and wasn’t he here to do the same? They didn’t know he had it in him. A couple of weeks ago we saw that for the most part we are Peter kind of people and it is really hard for us to relate to Saul or Paul kind of people. These spiritual night and day conversions are hard for us to relate to and understand. And when we don’t relate to or understand something we tend to, well criticize it, or say it can’t happen because it has never really happened to us. Shame on us for doubting that God can work in this way because God does all the time.

The same is true here in a church, or in Lancaster county in any culture of distrust and suspicion or silence if someone turns quickly from one side to the next maybe there is some ulterior motive for that. It almost seems like whatever a person says now is no longer believed and no one, I mean absolutely no one gets the benefit of the doubt. Everything is cast in light of suspicion.

Well, the enthusiasm of Paul and his message that was completely opposite of what they expected was overwhelming for the people and I think it might have been for us as well. What do we do with a group of people who believe God so much that they actually search to live out their full potential and discover what they have in them for Christ's sake? Well, after a while they got fed up with him and they try to kill him, he escapes and heads back to Jerusalem to go back to where the mother church is. Surely they would embrace him after he had been kicked out by their enemies.

We find in vs. 26 that he goes back to Jerusalem but what happens? The Christians there would not receive him because they did not believe that he had it in him that he was a disciple. What? Here he is, just had a life changing experience and actually met Jesus, risked his life for the sake of the Gospel, is seeking asylum because of his outspoken witness for Christ and the mother church wouldn't touch him with a ten foot pole. There is nothing more discouraging for someone who is on fire and loves Jesus Christ than to be surrounded by people who tell him to tone it down and to not take things so seriously.

Any of you ever had a season in your life where you were, well, stupid? You made people, your parents, your spouse, your friends, your kids shake their heads? Any of you? Are any of you in that season now? Maybe you did such horrible things to people that your credibility was destroyed? Ever try to change? Try to become a different person? Give up alcohol, kick drugs, eschew dishonest business, stop cheating on your spouse, stop lying to your parents, trying to be nice to people and not talk about others behind their back? How hard is it to change your reputation and build that trust back up when you are really trying hard to change? Isn't it like trying to turn the ocean?

Well the apostles in Jerusalem didn't think Paul had it in him. His reputation preceded him so the door was shut. That is until he meets with Barnabas in vs. 27. Who remembers Barnabas? We ran into him in chapter 4:36 in Acts his real name was Joseph, but he was cut out to encourage so they gave him the name Barnabas which meant encourager. Every time someone was beaten down, broke down, battered down, slapped down, down on his luck, down and out, it was Joseph who came along to pick him back up. Pretty soon he wasn't Joseph anymore, he was the encourager, look here comes Mr. Encourager.

And it is right here, right in the midst of what must have been the most discouraging season in Paul's life, when the church that was supposed to receive and

embrace this new member and doesn't, that Mr. Encouragement appears. Everyone was against him, even his new Christian family doubted his sincerity. But right here in vs. 27 Barnabas, Mr. encouragement takes him and puts his arm around him and lift him up, walks right up to the Apostles and became his reference.

Hey everyone this is Saul, he's my friend, he's my brother, he's our brother. He loves Jesus. Welcome him. And they did. Through Barnabas who refused to prejudge him just because of what other people had said, Saul was able to start again in the church. IN the church is where he was allowed to thrive, in fact he did so well that the non-Christian community in Jerusalem wanted to kill him too.

It took the encourager to see that Saul had it in him to preach the Gospel of Christ and he insisted that he be a part of the family.

You know, not all of us were created to be encouragers, but all of us can and need to develop that skill. And what a difference it would make in the church and in the world if our first instinct as maturing Christians and as a mature church was to encourage the failing and the rejected rather than add our voice to the chorus of derision. You can never have enough Barnabases! This church needs more Barnabases. More people who make it a habit to step in next to the person who is having the life slapped out of her, pick her back up, brush her off and introduce her to some friends and a new family. This church needs more people who will welcome the visitor and smile at them and be genuinely happy that they are worshipping with us. This church needs more Barnabases who will deliberately reach out to the new member and the new family and include them in their activities and in the activities of the church without setting up walls for our own individual programs.

Look around this room and know that a sign of a mature church is not only that each one reach one, but another mark of a mature church is that by instinct we see first the potential that people have and we expect them to live it out. Every person is to be treated with encouragement.

From the usher and the greeter who should see it as their ministry to welcome people and encourage them and be genuinely happy that they are here. To the Sunday School, Youth Group, Bible Studies, choir, Presbyterian Women, Food Bank and the list goes on where it is filled with encouragers who are not trying to defend their territory and their program but allowing the Spirit of God to bring the Saul's to their doorstep and not be afraid to encourage them and welcome them.

May God bless us with more Barnabases, and may God make us all more like Barnabas who sees that people have it in them and encourages them in their walk. May we be the church of encouragement, rebuilding broken lives and restoring a sense of purpose and destiny in every one of God's beloved children.