

## SON OF A “PARACLETE”

Installation of Rev. Steve Bills

Executive Minister

American Baptist Churches of Oregon

Acts 9: 26-27

October 17, 2009

Dr. Joe Kutter

I must first confess that it is a great honor to be here today. For both the American Baptist Churches of Oregon and for our friend and colleague Steve Bills, this is a signal day. This signal event means that inevitably neither the American Baptist Churches of Oregon nor Steve Bills will ever be quite the same again. Your histories and your personalities will mix and match and something new will be created for the glory of God. It's a good thing. It's a God thing! And I am humbled and honored to be here today.

Now, I have another confession to make. A few years ago, I would have been intimidated by this assignment. Executive Ministers did that to me – sort of! But then I studied some of my own church members for advice and here is what I learned from a select few, only a few. Steve, knowing nothing about your job will not keep me from telling you how to do it! I learned that from just a few easy-to-remember church members.

Actually, I won't try to tell you how to do your job nor will I tell the American Baptist Churches of Oregon how to be churches in this distinctive place. There is no other place quite like Oregon and you are the only experts

I know about being church here. But I do want to hold up some scripture and some observations for your consideration with the prayer that they will be helpful.

Steve, reading “The Bible” a few weeks ago, I came across an old mutual friend and I want to suggest that you renew your friendship with him. I think that he’ll be a perfect companion for the journey that you are now on. You know him well. His name is Barnabas and I think that he is a pretty good role model for you and this region as you live together in the days and years to come.

You know that Barnabas was not his given name. His family name was Joseph but his Christian friends gave him the nickname, Barnabas, which means “Son of Encouragement.” Actually, that is the best English translation that we have but his name was really, “Son of a Paraclete.”

They weren’t talking about his genealogy. The Paraclete did not provide genetic material for his life. They were talking about his character. He was an encouraging, a “paracletal” (I just made that word up.) personality.

That’s the way they described character in those days. James and John were called the “Sons of Thunder.” They had thunderous personalities. They would flash like the lightning and boom like the thunder. They were stormy. They were “The Sons of Thunder.”

Barnabas was an encourager. He had the character of the Paraclete. Steve, you have the gift and I am simply reminding you to nurture it.

Allow me a reminder. Once, when Jesus was talking to his disciples about his own departure from them, he said something like this. Don't fret. He said, I am not going to leave you all alone. I am going to send someone else to keep you company. I will send to you a paraclete.

I believe that Jesus was talking about the Holy Spirit. I think that he was saying that the Holy Spirit will be your paraclete.

We have a problem with the Greek. The New Testament was written in Greek and some words do not easily translate into English and the word "paraclete" is one of them. It seems to wrap up and capture all of these English words at the same time.

The paraclete is your advocate, like your attorney in the courtroom. He makes your case for you.

The paraclete is your counselor, your primary giver of wisdom and sound advice.

The paraclete is your comforter, the one who takes you to calm places in the midst of the storms of life.

The paraclete is your encourager, the one who makes you believe that you can do things that you never thought possible.

Jesus said, "I'm going to send a paraclete to you, someone who will be your advocate, your counselor, your comforter and your encourager. And that ever present paraclete will be the Holy Spirit.

And as Joseph's friends in Christ got to know him, as the apostles of the church watched him, they said to one another, he's the son of the paraclete. His character is like that of the Holy Spirit of God. And they called him Barnabas, Son of Encouragement, Son of Advocacy, Son of Comfort, Son of Good Counsel.

The American Baptist Churches have been through a rough patch in recent years. If ever we needed the presence of a paraclete, it is now. I believe that the Holy Spirit is with us and has always been with us but she speaks so quietly that it is sometimes hard to hear. And she is really hard to hear when we are shouting at each other and fighting with each other, and denigrating one another and totally ignoring the commandment of Jesus that we love one another as he has loved us.

So we need a few good souls who are willing to nurture the gift of paying attention to the Spirit of God and in paying attention to the paraclete are willing to become daughters and sons of the paraclete. I believe that we need some advocates and some counselors, and some comforters and some encouragers. The way that most of us hear the paraclete of God is through the women and men who become daughters and sons of the paraclete. They embody the character. They become Barnabas to our age as Barnabas was to his own.

Rev. Bills, I know that you are one of those people. I've seen it in you. You have some of Barnabas in you. If that were enough, we could stop here and celebrate the coming of the Paraclete to Oregon. But the simple truth is that this call belongs to us all.

I've read a little Baptist history and this is what I have observed about groups like the American Baptist Churches of Oregon. (One might call this an interpretive summary.) Originally, Baptist congregations chose to come together for the purpose of being Barnabas to one another – for mutual encouragement, mutual counsel, and mutual consolation in hard times and to be advocates for the cause. They chose to join together so that they could be Barnabas to one another.

It worked. It was a good thing. In fact, it worked so well that they decided that the volunteers were not up to the opportunities before them and they hired coordinators to help them out. This worked well so the coordinators were given full time jobs and titles like Executive Minister or State Secretary. Some even wanted to call them Bishop but that never quite happened. But somewhere along the line, something like this did happen. The churches said to the professionals, not out loud mind you but by implication and behavior, “We hired you to be the Barnabas so you take care of it. It's not our responsibility any more. We have other things to do.” And there are some among us, now that we have a paid Barnabas in every region, who feel perfectly free to spend their time complaining about the paid Barnabases and belittling the churches who may be different from themselves.

In this season, the paid Barnabas is not enough and, indeed, has never been enough for any season. Our only chance to flourish is that we be Barnabas to one another both within our congregations and among our churches. The call belongs to us all.

Let's talk about the Biblical Barnabas. Do you remember that time when Paul tried to join the church in Jerusalem, just after his conversion experience, and the members of that church were afraid to let him in?

That's right. He went forward one Sunday morning and the church wouldn't vote him in! They said that they needed time to pray and talk about it. In fact, some were hoping that Paul would read the writing on the wall and go and join the Assemblies of God.

Well, it didn't happen quite that way. We only started doing altar calls about 150 years ago. But the truth is that the people in the Church of Jerusalem did not want him because of his history as a persecutor of the church.

It was Barnabas who got him in and this is what I think happened. I think that Barnabas invited Paul out for a cup of coffee, or whatever the cultural equivalent of the day was, and he said, "Paul, tell me about it." And as Paul told his story, Barnabas listened. He did not listen just to the word nor did he listen just for the facts. He listened for the soul of Paul. He gave his full attention to Paul in order to discern the spirit of Paul. And in that intense listening session, he came to the conclusion that Paul had indeed had an encounter with Jesus and that Paul had given his life to the Christ. And then, after hearing Paul's story and listening for Paul's soul, Barnabas convinced the church to receive Paul as a brother in Christ.

Friends, this is my prayer. I pray that we will nurture the ability to carefully listen to one another. I had a high school debate teacher say this to me as I

was fussing about some of the rules of the debate. The rule said that I had to be prepared to argue either side of the debate and I said that I wanted only to argue for the side in which I most believed. The teacher said something like this. When you can tell me what I believe to my satisfaction, then you have earned the right to disagree. You do not have to agree but you do need to understand.

Sisters and Brothers in Christ, I am not asking for agreement. But I do believe that Jesus' commandment that we love one another requires that we listen and try to understand one another. In this assembly, it is essential that we not play by the rules of Fox News and MSNBC. Mutual understanding must be a part of our disagreements.

Not long ago, at the suggestion of Mrs. Kutter, I took a hearing test. After the test, the audiologist said something like this. He said that I have lost some hearing in both ears but probably more importantly, I have lost the ability to hear certain tones. He said that like most men of my age, I have lost some ability to hear the higher tones which, he said are the tones that my wife speaks in. And then he added, most women of our age lose the ability to hear the lower tones, the tones their husbands speak in. I cannot hear my wife's higher tones and she cannot hear my lower tones which perfectly explains why we sometimes fight over things that neither one of us said!

And without hearing aids, there is only one way to avoid the problem. We have to pay attention to one another. I sometimes have to read her lips and watch her body language and attend to the tone of her voice.

Is that not a parable, maybe even an allegory, for the American Baptist Churches of Oregon in this season of our life? Do we not sometimes miss one another's tones? Do we not sometimes fight about things that none of us ever said? Do we not need again to learn to listen to more than the words? Do we not need to read one another's lips and listen to tones and nuance and watch one another's body language?

Is this not the time to earn the right to disagree by paying careful attention to those who may see things differently? Is this not a part of what Jesus meant when he said to love one another as he has loved us?

All good counsel, all encouragement, all comfort and advocacy begin with careful and loving listening. If we are to be Barnabas to one another, we must learn again to listen carefully to one another. Let me add this. Without listening, there can be no love.

I am asking a lot here. I am asking more than we have seen in a very long time. I am asking for a kind of spiritual maturity that comes only from an ongoing relationship with the Holy Spirit of God. If it is a lot to ask, so be it. I think that it comes from the heart of God. I think that it is the spirit of Barnabas.

Steve, Executive Minister Bils, I have a request of you. As much as I pray that you will listen carefully to all who are within the sphere of your ministry, I pray even more that you will help us to listen to one another even when we disagree with one another. Teach us to listen and in so doing, teach us to love. Teach us to be Barnabas to one another.

Friend, you have honored me with your invitation to be present. I pray God's richest blessings on you and on the ministries of the American Baptist Churches of Oregon.

Amen.