

Paul is listing various jobs in the church in our reading from his letter to the Corinthians. It seems that they might have been arguing about those jobs.

Because after our passage, he talks about love.

But that got me to thinking, who has the hardest job in church?

Surely, not me. I've heard it all my ministerial life that I only work one hour a week; but the reality is with having a colleague and lay readers, I really only work about fifteen minutes!

Maybe our organist and choir director, all the great music we have requires hours of practice. Or what about our marvelous support staff here at First Presbyterian Church that keeps the church operations running smoothly?

No, let me tell you who I think has the hardest job in church.

Our acolytes. I believe our acolytes, the two wonderful young people, third, fourth, or fifth graders, who each Sunday light these candles, have the hardest job in church.

They walk down the aisle, in robes that could trip them up, carrying the lit candle lighter, and they have to keep that wick burning all the way down the aisle, which means they can't go too fast or it might blow out but they can't go too slow because they try to get to the candles lit before the music finishes.

Then they have to reach way up to the candles, and they can't really see the top of it, stretching to get the candle lit without knocking the candles over, all the while keeping that wick on the candle lighter burning.

And they have to do this for each of the seven candles to get lit so we can be called into worship!

Yes, the hardest job in church belongs to our Acolytes and let me tell you why I think it's the hardest job.

We're not called the 'Frozen Chosen' for nothing. Do you realize how hard it is to get a fire lit under Presbyterians and keep it going so they will get up and go for the gospel?

Yes, Jesus says we are the light of the world, but someone has to have the job to get that light going and keep it going.

That's what our Acolytes are tasked with!

Our Acolytes are following in the footsteps of Barnabas, one of the first of the 'new' Christians we meet after Pentecost, in our story from the fourth chapter of the Acts of the Apostles.

He's from the island of Cyprus, and his given name is Joseph. But the apostles give him the name Barnabas, which means 'son of encouragement.'

He embodied encouragement. Like a redhead gets called 'Red' or a left-handed baseball pitcher would be called 'Lefty,' so Joseph, the Levite from Cyprus, it is who he is, part of his person is 'encouragement.'

He has the gift to light a fire under people and keep it lit for them. He uses his gift of encouragement to help others understand and follow their own call from Christ.

As someone said of Barnabas, he has "the extraordinary ability to inspire, encourage, and strengthen others in and through their efforts to live out God's will and calling as Christians.

Barnabas, our Acolytes, the hardest job in church.

There are four stories about Barnabas that highlight his ministry, four critical moments in the life of the early church that got them up and going and kept them going.

The first of these, in our lesson today, is a simple act of stewardship and sharing. Barnabas sells a piece of land he owns and donates the proceeds to the church to be used for the care of the poor and the widowed.

Luke contrasts this act of generosity and the generosity it brings the church with the halfhearted commitment and dishonesty of Ananias and Sapphira,

Barnabas gave because he loved God and he loved God's people. He wanted to encourage those who had come into the gospel.

He lit the candles with his generosity that gave light to those who wanted to follow Jesus Christ.

The second story, in the ninth chapter of Acts, tells how Barnabas encouraged by believing in others.

Paul had come to Jerusalem after his conversion experience on the road to Damascus.

In Jerusalem, Paul wanted to join up with the apostles. But they would have nothing to do with him, and they expected him to stay away from them.

Paul, you remember, had been a persecutor of the church. He had arrested Christians and carried them to Jerusalem. Everyone thought his supposed conversion was simply an undercover move as a persecutor of the people of God.

Who steps forward? It's Barnabas, the encourager. He's willing to risk a relationship with Paul.

He believes in Paul and brings him to the other disciples. And because Barnabas accepted Paul, they began to accept Paul.

In that moment of fear, prejudice and rejection, Barnabas stepped in and stood alongside Paul.

He lit the candle for the Apostles to see Paul in the light of Jesus Christ's love and forgiveness and power to change lives.

No one achieves anything great without help. Great achievers in history became all that they were because somebody in their life believed in them.

And Paul became great, in part, because Barnabas affirmed him. He helped Paul keep his own candle burning bright.

Then, in chapter thirteen in Acts, is the third story. Barnabas is asked to help in the growth of a new congregation in Antioch.

When the church in Jerusalem heard about the work of the Lord in Antioch, they couldn't believe a revival of this nature could break out in a place like Antioch.

Up until now, converts to Christianity had come largely from Jewish backgrounds, but Antioch was a city of Greek culture and influence.

So they sent Barnabas to investigate.

But before he went to Antioch, he left for Tarsus to look for Paul; and when he had found him, he brought him to Antioch.

Rather than attempt the task alone, he invites Paul, and for an entire year they met with the church, and it is in Antioch where followers of Jesus Christ are first called Christians.

Through the encouraging work of Barnabas to include his partner, Paul, the church began its movement away from Jerusalem and into the world.

G. K. Chesterton once wrote, "The really great person is the person who makes every person feel great."

That's really true, isn't it? When two people interact with each other, they are both changed forever.

And whether our influence is helpful or hurtful, positive or negative, depends on whether we give each other the gift of encouragement.

Encouragers are special people in each of our

lives. You know who the encouragers are in your life. Are you an encourager in someone's life? Encouragers, by nature, are other-focused and not self-focused.

Barnabas was an individual who had the ability to hold people up, to encourage them.

He was the kind of individual who believed in people. He didn't give up on individuals, even when everybody else had long since cast them aside.

He did what it took to light that candle and keep it lit, to get involved in peoples' lives, to strengthen them, to serve, to encourage them in the Lord.

Are you willing to be an encourager by serving others?

Finally, in Acts chapter fifteen, is the story in which Barnabas insists that John Mark, who abandoned him and Paul on their first missionary voyage, should be included in their next voyage.

For Barnabas, initial failure does not disqualify John Mark from the call to discipleship.

You remember that Paul and Barnabas and John Mark had been on the first missionary journey.

Things went well until they arrived at Pamphylia. For reasons unknown to us, John Mark left the team and went home to Jerusalem.

As they prepared for their second missionary journey, Barnabas wanted to take John Mark. Paul said, "No way. He was a quitter the first time, and I will not give him a second chance."

In fact, the disagreement was so harsh that Paul and Barnabas split ways.

Paul took a new missionary partner, and Barnabas went on his own missionary trip accompanied by the man he was willing to forgive, the man he was willing to give a second chance, John Mark.

If you're going to be an encouraging Christian, you're going to have to be a forgiver.

Most of the difficulties we have in our relationships are based on the fact that we're drawing the line between who's right and who's wrong, who wins and who loses.

I don't have to know if I'm right or I'm wrong – most of the time, I just need to forgive, and I need to be forgiven.

One of the best things you can give to anyone who needs that second chance is encouragement. You can make a big difference in another person's life.

Every person you encounter carries hopes, burdens, struggles, dreams, and will benefit from your encouragement, to light that candle again and again.

Four times in the life of the early church, Barnabas was there to light a candle when the church needed it; to help the church do its work as the body of Christ in the world.

If the Acts of the Apostles was a movie, Barnabas should be nominated for best supporting actor.

His ministry of encouragement through his generosity, his positive presence, his perseverance, and his forgiveness shows how he did his job of leading and supporting others in the discovery of their own spiritual gifts and call to discipleship.

Thank God for Barnabas, our Acolytes who follow in his ministry of encouragement, who light the candle, and whether it's intentional or not, the fact that there are seven candles here, reminds us that each day we are to carry the light of the gospel into the world.

TO GOD BE THE GLORY.