

**POOR OLD BARNEY**  
**Congregational Meeting Sunday –Acts 15: 36-41 –January 25, 2015**  
**The Church of the Covenant**

Barney was the name the kids gave to an old used school bus that I mistakenly *thought* was a good idea to buy and maintain in order to transport the youth group. There are reasons why school districts retire school buses and one of them is NOT because they are in perfect operating order. We conducted a naming campaign and the kids chose the name “Barna-BUS” from the Bible, meaning in the Greek “son of encouragement” and, boy, that bus needed all the encouragement it could get! I always said it broke down once on the way TO something AND it broke down once on the way FROM something. Then we painted it blue, not some nice medium “church bus” blue; oh no, we painted it light bright robin’s egg blue. So when Barney was going down the road, on those oft times when he was actually running, it looked like a giant blue robin’s egg was rolling helter-skelter down the road. Not one of my better ministry ideas --Poor Old Barney.

Our scripture, from the Book of Acts, tells of another Barnabas, also a “son of encouragement”, who was the friend and co-worker of the Apostle Paul. The passage we just read is sometimes referred to as the model for “gracious separation” in the church; where Barnabas and his brother in Christ, Paul, decide to go their separate ways. But I am not so sure the separation was so gracious. First, remember their history. It is Barnabas who takes the newly converted Paul, who not that long before was breathing threats against Christians, persecuting them, and being responsible for the stoning death of the saintly Stephen. (Acts 9:27) But good old Barney, Barnabas, nevertheless opens the door for Paul to be included and accepted by the rest of the early disciples. He puts his own reputation on the line for his newly converted friend. Then, the two of them do ministry together and the Bible lists them as “*Barnabas and Paul*”. Barnabas and Paul do such and such; Barnabas and Paul go here and there; Barnabas is always listed first among equals. (Acts 12: 25; Acts 13: 2; Acts 13: 7). But then a not-too-subtle shift occurs. There is a story of how the people call Barnabas “Zeus” and Paul “Hermes” because he was the chief speaker (Acts 14: 12). Zeus is the principle Greek God and they reserved that for Barnabas; but Paul’s fame as a preacher and speaker had him be called Hermes for the God who was the greatest orator. But after this point in time the Bible now refers to them, not as Barnabas and Paul, but the Book of Acts refers to them as “*Paul and Barnabas*”. (Acts 15: 2; Acts 15: 22) The order has changed. Barnabas has dropped to second place; he is second fiddle now. The one who paved the way for Paul to be an Apostle now takes second billing. It takes a big man to be first and then to be relegated to second place. And it is in this personality conflict that our scripture for today occurs. Church conflict is rarely about the issue over which it is fought; that is the presenting issue; the REAL issue is far more subtle and may not truly be known. Poor Old Barney.

Back to Barney the bus. Barney was held together with spit and glue. Maximum speed was 50 miles per hour, going downhill, with the wind at his back. I would always take with me on any excursion duct tape and metal clothes hangers for slapping him back together again. Once the line for the airbrakes broke and we had 30 seconds to get off the road before the brakes would lock. Duct tape to the rescue. Another time the spring in the gas peddle broke and I had to “take my foot off the gas” by putting my toe under the peddle and lifting. Metal coat hangers got us home. Barney was fond of dropping his exhaust system at the drop of a hat. Poor Old Barney. Nobody wanted Barney parked next to their house in the church parking lot. I mean, who wants to look out their picture window and see a bright Robin’s Egg blue decrepit old school bus? So neighbors would complain angrily about Barney. The angriest I ever saw the kindly old visitation pastor in that church was when Barney was parked outside his window. Poor Old Barney. I had to get Barney inspected by the state. So the first step was to take

him to the Ford dealer for the repairs we knew he needed; then drive him down to the old armory in a scary section of downtown Detroit where a state police officer would always fail him. And I'd have to take him back to the Ford dealer to get those items fixed. Fortunately, the rule was that only those failed items would be re-inspected because several other items would break between round one and round two of inspection. So I went through the whole re-inspection dance with Barney and I pull into the Detroit armory and wait in line for an hour, and I pull triumphantly forward in front of the state police inspector, put on the breaks, and sha-bam!, the entire exhaust system falls out from under Poor Old Barney. And the state policeman just sadly shakes his head and waved me on. Metal clothes hangers wired Barney back together for the long trip back to the Ford dealer. Poor Old Barney. You know, he's a lot like the church, battered and bruised and not as strong as he used to be, with too much mileage that much of the world today doesn't have much use for. Poor Old Barney.

Back to the Apostle Paul. So Paul says to Barnabas that he thinks they ought to return to the places they've already started churches and revisit. And Barnabas says he wants to take his friend John Mark with him. Paul disagrees because in his estimation John Mark has done something that precludes him from being included. And Zeus and Hermes go at one another; it is a battle royale of the lesser gods. And the Bible says, *"And there arose a sharp contention" (Acts 15: 39)* The Greek here means a bitter conflict, an un-reconcilable disagreement. Barnabas and Paul go after one another. They are angry, their anger fueled by many things not just the issue regarding John Mark. And so these two friends, these two brothers in Christ, these two apostles and exemplars, they break covenant, they go their separate ways. Barnabas is never heard from again in scripture. Paul goes on to become "the Apostle to the Gentiles" and the primary interpreter of the GRACE of the Lord Jesus Christ. But here on this day there is no GRACE. Here in this story, there is no forgiveness. The mind that penned the great statement on reconciliation – *"All this is from God, who through Christ reconciled us to himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation... We beseech you on behalf of Christ",* writes the Apostle Paul, *"be reconciled to God". (2 Corinthians 5: 18, 20)*, the great mind and heart of the Apostle could not be reconciled to his best friend and co-laborer in the vineyard of ministry. This is not a story of *gracious* separation, this is a sad story of two friends who should have been reconciled, but were not, and could have forgiven one another, but did not, and who went their separate ways because of SIN. SIN –that's what divided Paul and Barnabas and that's what divides the church. I love the Bible because it doesn't try to sugarcoat it; it lays it out as it was, warts and all. The Bible is believable because it shows that even Paul and Barnabas were just two frail, sinful human beings, who couldn't reconcile with even their best friend. Poor old church. Poor old Barney. Poor old Paul.

Back to Barney the bus. Came time for Poor Old Barney to go to wherever buses go when they die. We could junk Barney for \$600. And some resourceful Presbyterian discovered that we could sell tickets to bash Barney with a sledgehammer at \$5 for three hits and we could still sell him for the same amount for scrap. Say what you will about Presbyterians, we do know how to make a buck. So a great crowd assembled on the appointed day. The neighbors were there and they took their turns bashing him with a sledgehammer. And the kids in the youth group and the parents were all there –3 hits for five dollars! And the kindly old visitation pastor was there putting his cash money down, too. And the crowd went after Poor Old Barney with animalistic delight, smashing and bashing him, breaking his windows, denting his door panels, ripping the seat covers, frenzied with all their frustration and rage. I think I was the only one there who might have wanted to have shed a tear for Poor Old Barney. But even I didn't. I was glad I didn't have to take him to be inspected any more. **Church conflict is just like taking a sledgehammer to Poor Old Barney.** It has been done a lot over the years. People feel quite justified in it. People call it "gracious" when it isn't. Call it what it is --Its not GRACE its SIN. And then everyone wonders why the church of the Lord Jesus Christ isn't as strong as it used to be. Why would we think that an old school

bus, held together by duct tape and wire hangers, could stand being pummeled by sledgehammers and still run?????

I am blessed I serve a church that in this past year COULD HAVE HAD a major contention over many things and some folks COULD HAVE gone their separate ways but instead we all chose to lay down the sledgehammers and help the old bus to keep running. Thank you, for being the church I always knew you to be, Church of the Covenant. And now, my beloved, let's work on being fully reconciled to one another, especially with those with whom we disagree. Lest we be like the Apostle Paul and Barnabas, and SAY we believe in a reconciling Christ, but cannot live it out in our lives. The reason why we have a full time Christian Educator today is because we laid down the sledgehammers. Yes, sometimes the church is just "Poor Old Barney". But, God help me, I love her so. And Amen.

*By: The Reverend Dr. Stuart D. Broberg, The Church of the Covenant, Washington, PA  
IF THIS HAS BLESSED YOU, PLEASE PASS IT ALONG TO A FRIEND!*