

Encouragers

Some weeks ago, as I was trying to get a grip on possible sermon topics for my return from vacation, I noticed in the lectionary listings that alternate readings for today revolved around the Apostle Barnabas, whose feast day our Catholic, Anglican and Lutheran sisters and brothers celebrated on Friday of this past week. My interest was immediately piqued. Barnabas was one of the key players in the early Church, the protagonist of several stories in Acts, but I can't honestly remember hearing a sermon about him or anything about him at all since 4th grade Sunday School. Unlike the man who was at first his junior partner, Paul, or his cousin, Mark, Barnabas isn't remembered in the naming of little boys. The name has fallen completely out of usage all over the world. We don't even find many characters named Barnabas in literature. There's a very minor Charles Dickens novel called Barnaby Rudge, whose title character is a simpleton, which probably didn't do the name any good. Many of you may remember that Buddy Ebsen played a TV detective named "Barnaby Jones," and you may even be aware of a personal favorite of mine, the conflicted vampire "Barnabas Collins" of the gothic soap opera, "Dark Shadows." Rumor has it, by the way, that a new movie version of that story is in the works, directed by Tim Burton with Johnny Depp slated to play Barnabas. That might kick-start some interest in the old name.

But I'm not simply interested in the story of Barnabas this morning because I ran home from school every day to watch a scary TV show. The name Barnabas, the Book of Acts tells us, means "Son of Encouragement" and on a day that we honor those whose acts have encouraged us during the year, I think it well that we should look at the life of this apostle, insofar as we know it, and see what kind of lessons may be there for us. Barnabas is an example for us to follow and I'd like to offer six quick thoughts on how we can see his story played out for us in the lives we celebrate.

First, let's look at the passage that introduces Barnabas to the readers of The Acts of the Apostles. In the fourth chapter, Luke reports that the feeling of solidarity among the early believers extended even to the sharing of their livelihoods. In verses 32 through 37, we read, "Now the whole group of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one claimed private ownership of any possessions, but everything they owned was held in common. With great power the apostles gave their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all. There was not a needy person among them, for as many as owned lands or houses sold them and brought the proceeds of what was sold. They laid it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to each as any had need. There was a Levite, a native of Cyprus, Joseph, to whom the apostles gave the name Barnabas (which means "son of encouragement"). He sold a field that belonged to him, then brought the money, and laid it at the apostles' feet."

The first thing we learn about Barnabas is that he was a Levite. That means he was descended from Jacob's son Levi and, like all his relatives, he had a special place in Jewish society. This tribe had been assigned no property in the Promised Land. Instead, they were to live among the other tribes who were to meet their physical needs out of their tithes. The Levites were assigned to be the ones who cared for the Tabernacle and later the Temple of Yahweh, to be teachers of the Law, and, in the case of the descendants of Aaron, priests. During the days of the Temple, the Levites did everything from cleaning the brass to singing God's praises to doing the laundry. In other words, they were the ones who did the little things, the un-showy things, to make sure others could worship. In many ways, those we've already honored today are the spiritual heirs of

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the Levites and of Barnabas. If you cut the grass on our campus, or cooked a meal, or cleaned up afterwards, or taught a class or put up banners or any of the many, many other jobs it takes to keep this church and its programs running, you have honored the spirit of Barnabas.

The point of Luke's introduction of Barnabas, though, was not his genealogy but what he himself did. "He sold a field that belonged to him, then brought the money, and laid it at the apostles' feet." Barnabas was a donor and a generous one. Since we're not living communally at Good Shepherd, I don't know that any of us can afford to sell our property and bring the cash to put in the offering plate but generosity comes in all sorts of guises. Jesus, you will remember, praised the widow with her mite for her extravagant generosity. It's impressive and encouraging to me that the vast majority of our pledges continue to be fulfilled, even when many of our families have been hit hard by the recession. And I think we must also remember to honor the generosity of some of our members in the matter of time, expertise or wisdom. Hours spent with a rake or a dish towel, minutes spent utilizing the training and experience of a lifetime going over the books or recommending a roofing fix, these are precious donations as well. When we give as we are able, we are living in the spirit of Barnabas.

Barnabas comes into the narrative of Acts another time before the twinned passages of the lectionary which I read earlier. In chapter nine, Luke tells the story of the conversion of Saul, a young man who has heretofore been the arch-enemy of the new faith. Saul is a zealous Pharisee, bent on eradicating any heresy in Judaism, and he will go to any lengths, up to and including torture and death, to dissuade any Jew considering following the teachings of Jesus of Nazareth. Saul is apparently one of the organizers of the stoning of Stephen, the first of Christ's disciples to be killed for the faith, and he is on his way to Damascus to arrest followers of the Way when he is blinded and convicted by the spirit of Jesus. When he recovers, Saul begins to preach the Good News, first in Damascus and then, when his own life is threatened, in Jerusalem. The disciples in Jerusalem, not surprisingly, are afraid of him. "But," Luke reports, "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." It is only after Barnabas vouches for Saul that the Jerusalem church accepts him as one of their own. Barnabas is clearly someone that the rest of the disciples trust. He must have been a friend of Stephen and many others who suffered because of Saul. But just as Jesus had forgiven those who persecuted him and taught his disciples to forgive, so Barnabas forgives Saul, takes a chance on him and helps him find community. How would the history of the Church be different, I wonder, if Saul had been rejected by the disciples in Jerusalem? Who would have become the Apostle to the Gentiles? Who would have written epistles like the ones we still study today? We can never know when an act of forgiveness, of reconciliation, of encouragement will bear wonderful fruit but whenever we act in these ways, we are continuing the witness of Barnabas.

Of course, it could be that without Saul, later known as Paul, we would remember Barnabas himself as the Apostle to the Gentiles. As we heard earlier, Saul's violent campaign against the followers of Jesus had scattered many of them abroad. Among these were believers from Cyprus and Cyrene, old Greek colonies off the coast of Turkey and in modern Libya that had attracted large communities of Jews during the time that Greeks had ruled from the Eastern Mediterranean all the way to Persia. These men and women would have been observant Jews but they also

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would have been comfortable in a multi-cultural environment. Some of them fled to Antioch, a city in the south of what is now Turkey. We may not think of this as an important city now but during this period of the Roman Empire, the Romans considered Antioch as the Eastern capital of their territory, much as Constantinople would be later. If we compare first century Rome with Washington D.C., Antioch might be thought of like Los Angeles or Chicago, the “Second City.” In this cosmopolitan environment, the Jewish disciples of Jesus began spreading the Good News to their Gentile neighbors as well as fellow Jews and the Gentiles were likewise converted. When the leaders of the Jerusalem church heard of this development, they sent the most qualified man to check it out – Barnabas, who’d proven himself again and again and who, like some of the new leaders in Antioch, was a Cypriot, accustomed to dealing with Greeks, Romans and other members of the Empire. Again, it was Barnabas who brought the news to Jerusalem that the new work was from the Holy Spirit, confirming it by bringing gifts from the newly-nicknamed “Christians” for the poor of Jerusalem. Once again, Barnabas provides a wonderful example for us. We, too, live in a cosmopolitan city, with immigrants from all over the world. Like Barnabas, we should be open to relationship with them, encouraging them regardless of their background with the Good News of God’s love, celebrating the ways in which they appropriate the life-changing Gospel into their own culture, helping them to learn the things that are truly important in God’s Word and not simply our own cultural biases. I am encouraged by those who’ve reached out in friendship to our new neighbors and other strangers in our midst and I am proud to be an American Baptist, where our international missionaries focus on building indigenous churches with indigenous leaders and not on recreating Christians in American form. I like to think Barnabas would recognize his own ministry gifts in us.

Our second lectionary reading this morning ended with Barnabas and Saul being sent out as missionaries from Antioch but of course their story does not end there. If you read chapters 13, 14 & 15 of Acts, you will see how Barnabas and Saul and John Mark set out from Antioch and preached in Cyprus (where Saul began to be known as Paul), in Pamphylia (where John Mark left them to return to Jerusalem), and across Asia Minor. Along the way, Paul begins to take the lead role – after he healed a crippled man in Lystra, the crowd decided that he was the god Hermes, since he was the spokesman, and that Barnabas must be Zeus. With Barnabas’ quiet encouragement, Paul made converts, started churches and survived attempts on his life (a common occurrence in Paul’s life, if you read all of Acts). Eventually, they visited Jerusalem, where they argued the case for Gentile believers to avoid circumcision in the first great theological council of the Church. The arguments of Paul and Barnabas carried the day. Again, it is unclear what contributions were Paul’s and which belonged to Barnabas but we must remember that both were called by the Holy Spirit to the mission and that in partnership they were the first of the Church’s great missionaries. It’s also a reminder that we don’t have to be an articulate lightning rod to do great things for God. Sometimes, the quiet encourager is exactly what is needed.

Paul, after all, was not an easy man to get along with. He seems to have picked a lot of fights, even with his friends. After some down time in Antioch following the Jerusalem council, Paul was ready to set out on the road again and he wanted Barnabas to come with him. As Luke records in Acts 15, “Barnabas wanted to take with them John called Mark. But Paul decided not to take with them one who had deserted them in Pamphylia and had not accompanied them in the work. The disagreement became so sharp that they parted company; Barnabas took Mark with

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him and sailed away to Cyprus. But Paul chose Silas and set out, the believers commending him to the grace of the Lord.” In the event, Barnabas was quite right to have faith in Mark – tradition tells us that this young man was eventually the author of our oldest Gospel. What might have become of him had his older Cousin Barnabas not stood by him? For those of us who sometimes despair of the young people in our charge, let this be a lesson to us. Sometimes all they need is someone to believe in them so that they can bloom. All of you faithful teachers and youth workers and nursery attendants and parents and relatives who love children and young people even when they are not particularly loveable are walking in the way of our friend Barnabas. You are mighty encouragers.

Even Paul apparently came around to that way of thinking, eventually. In his first letter to the Corinthians, he defends the itinerant ministry of Barnabas as well as his own, although he and Barnabas had split up long before even his first visit to Europe. And when Paul wrote the letter we have to the Colossians from a prison somewhere, one of his trusted colleagues was the formerly rejected Mark. Colossians 4:10 reads, “Aristarchus my fellow prisoner greets you, as does Mark the cousin of Barnabas, concerning whom you have received instructions—if he comes to you, welcome him.”

Church tradition tells us that Barnabas is considered the founder of the Cypriot Church and he is believed to have been martyred in Salamis, Cyprus, in AD 61. The Catholic Encyclopedia summarizes his career in this way: “With the exception of St. Paul and certain of the Twelve, Barnabas appears to have been the most esteemed man of the first Christian generation. St. Luke, breaking his habit of reserve, speaks of him with affection, "for he was a good man, full of the Holy Ghost and of Faith". His title to glory comes not only from his kindness of heart, his personal sanctity, and his missionary labours, but also from his readiness to lay aside his Jewish prejudices, in this anticipating certain of the Twelve; from his large-hearted welcome of the Gentiles, and from his early perception of Paul's worth, to which the Christian Church is indebted, in large part at least, for its great Apostle. His tenderness towards John Mark seems to have had its reward in the valuable services later rendered by (Mark) to the Church.”

And so, I think it is worth remembering this unique man, even among those of us who have discarded the tradition of Saints’ Days. Worker, donor, forgiving, open-minded, supportive, loyal – all of these are attributes that caused the other apostles to nickname him υἱὸς παρακλήσεως, “son of encouragement,” a name that clearly owes a great deal to the Holy Spirit, the Paraclete, who dwelt in him. Today we have honored our own sons and daughters of encouragement, for all who labor here in service to the rest of us, all who strive for the achievements of scholarship and training, all of you inspire and encourage the rest of us. I am encouraged by all of you and by those of our little flock who cannot be here today; folks like Jean Lindmark who has never allowed her physical struggles to keep her indomitable spirit down for long. When I look out among you, and I hope when you look around among yourselves, I see the encouraging truths that we have sung about today – that we are the Church together, that we have been blessings to each other, that in each others’ fellowship we have found the sweet pilgrim way, that in the love we find together we also find the rock-solid and blessed assurance of the love of Jesus. And so, my brothers and sisters, let us not grow weary in doing what is right, for not only will we reap the promised reward at harvest time if we do not give up, but we will also encourage each other so that all may share in the glorious bounty that awaits us in the

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banquet room of God. May the grace of God and the love of Christ Jesus and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit attend you all, on this day and all the days to come. Amen.