

**Good Shepherd Lutheran Church, Lena, IL – 11 June 2023**  
**Barnabas, Apostle - Year A**

**1st Reading: *Isaiah 42:5-12***

**Psalm: 112**

**2nd Reading: *Acts 11:19-30; 13:1-3***

**Gospel: *Matthew 10:1-16***

**Sermon - *Vicar Thomas J. Mosbø***

In the name of the Father, ✠ and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Do you know someone in the church who is always giving of themselves, helping out, going the extra mile? No matter what needs to be done, they are always the first to be willing to volunteer, usually without even needing to be asked. But they don't step into the spotlight and say, "Notice me for all the good things I'm doing." In fact, they are often the first to honour others, to bring people together, to try to settle disputes, make peace and encourage others. They are the unsung heroes, the ones everyone can depend on.

There are a few people in this congregation who fit this description, and I think we are aware of who they are, and they are certainly appreciated in our community.

But this is also precisely a description of Barnabas, perhaps the most unsung hero in the New Testament, in the very earliest days of the church. We've heard his name, but we don't stop to remember him very often.

Well, today is Saint Barnabas day. It is the day, according to tradition, that he was stoned to death as a Christian martyr, and so the paraments this morning are red, the colour we use to commemorate martyrs in the church, in honour of the blood they shed, but also, as our paraments show, because they were inspired by the Holy Spirit to live out their Christian faith in ways that help to inspire us.

The colour today would normally have been green, but in the green seasons, the Sundays after Epiphany, and now after Pentecost, we may celebrate instead the feast days of saints that fall on those Sundays. That means that we usually only recognise these Saints once every seven years, when their days happen to fall on a Sunday. And I am delighted to think about Saint Barnabas today, for more than one reason, partly because it's such a fun story, and to see how he might inspire all of us to give ourselves in Christian love and service for the well-being of the church and for the sake of the Gospel of Christ.

We read some of his story in the Acts of the Apostles this morning, about his ministry in the church in Antioch, and it was noted that it was in this church that believers in Jesus were first called “Christians”, so that is something we can thank Barnabas for. But his story begins much earlier in the book of Acts. Indeed, he is the very first person in the church beyond Jesus, Jesus’ mother Mary, and the twelve apostles to be named in Acts, so his work began very early in the church indeed. Let me read the passage from Acts 4 where he is first introduced:

“<sup>32</sup> Now the full number of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one said that any of the things that belonged to him was his own, but they had everything in common. <sup>33</sup> And with great power the apostles were giving their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all. <sup>34</sup> There was not a needy person among them, for as many as were owners of lands or houses sold them and brought the proceeds of what was sold <sup>35</sup> and laid it at the apostles’ feet, and it was distributed to each as any had need. <sup>36</sup> Thus Joseph, who was also called by the apostles Barnabas (which means son of encouragement), a Levite, a native of Cyprus, <sup>37</sup> sold a field that belonged to him and brought the money and laid it at the apostles’ feet.”

That’s about all we know about the background of Barnabas. He was a Levite from Cyprus, so he would have spoken Greek as his native language. As a Levite, he would have been illiterate, trained well in the Torah, and he would have had duties to help in worship. He was probably fairly well-to-do since he had owned a field, most likely near Jerusalem, and in one of those generous deeds that he volunteered to do himself, he sold that field and gave the money to the apostles to help care for the needy in the church. And, as we learn later in Acts, he was the cousin of Mark, who wrote the second Gospel, and as I will suggest later, he may have been quite a good author himself. And he was given the nickname Barnabas by the apostles - his real name was Joseph, but there were lots of Josephs running around those days - so he came to be known as Barnabas, the “son of encouragement”, one of those who likes to make peace and encourage others in the faith.

And it is as a peacemaker and encourager that we next hear about him. Remember Saul, who would later be known as Paul, who had approved of the stoning of Stephen, the very first Christian martyr? After that incident, Saul had set out to stamp out the church, dragging people out of their homes so that they might be killed. But then Jesus appeared to Saul on the road to Damascus, and Saul was baptized.

But the apostles in Jerusalem didn’t trust that Saul had really changed, and they were suspicious that this was just a trick to infiltrate the church. Enter Barnabas, the peacemaker and the encourager. In Acts 9 we read:

<sup>26</sup> And when [Saul] had come to Jerusalem, he attempted to join the disciples. And they were all afraid of him, for they did not believe that he was a disciple. <sup>27</sup> But Barnabas took him and brought him to the apostles and declared to them how on the road he had seen the Lord, who spoke to him, and how at Damascus he had preached boldly in the name of Jesus. <sup>28</sup> So he went in and out among them at Jerusalem, preaching boldly in the name of the Lord.” But then, it turns out, there were now some people seeking to kill Saul, so the apostles “sent him off to Tarsus”, Saul’s home town, in the southern part of what is now Turkey, and Saul stayed there for about a decade.

And that’s where we picked up the story in our reading from Acts. So let me re-read the first part of that account:

<sup>19</sup> Those who were scattered because of the persecution that took place over Stephen traveled as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus, and Antioch, and they spoke the word to no one except Jews. <sup>20</sup> But among them were some men of Cyprus and Cyrene who, on coming to Antioch, spoke to the Hellenists also, proclaiming the Lord Jesus. <sup>21</sup> The hand of the Lord was with them, and a great number became believers and turned to the Lord.’

OK, so the Hellenists were Jews who spoke Greek as their native language, including Jews from Cyprus, which is exactly the description we had of Barnabas. So we continue to read:

<sup>22</sup> News of this came to the ears of the church in Jerusalem, and they sent Barnabas to Antioch. <sup>23</sup> When he came and saw the grace of God, he rejoiced, and he exhorted them all to remain faithful to the Lord with steadfast devotion; <sup>24</sup> for he was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and of faith. And a great many people were brought to the Lord. <sup>25</sup> Then Barnabas went to Tarsus to look for Saul, <sup>26</sup> and when he had found him, he brought him to Antioch. So it was that for an entire year they met with the church and taught a great many people, and it was in Antioch that the disciples were first called “Christians.”

So here we have Barnabas, sent by the twelve apostles to be the leader of the church in Antioch, which became the most important center of Christianity outside of Jerusalem for centuries to come. Once again, as a peacemaker and encourager, he went and got Saul to help him out, and it was then from Antioch that Saul (or Paul) and Barnabas set out together on their missionary journeys to spread the Gospel throughout the Roman Empire. Barnabas also enlisted his cousin Mark to help out, but unfortunately, this did cause some tensions, and even Barnabas the peacemaker couldn’t make peace for a while between Paul and Mark. Even the saints, certainly Paul, were not perfect. But eventually, as we read in some of Paul’s later letters, it is clear that both Barnabas and Mark once again did become good friends and coworkers with Paul.

Then, as time went by in the church, and because of how important Paul came to be viewed, Barnabas seems to have receded into the background and came to be remembered mostly as Paul's sidekick, but as we have seen today, he was so much more than that. His tireless actions actually helped to build up the church perhaps more than any other individual in the early church, including Paul. Barnabas voluntarily gave his own wealth to the church to help the needy, gave Paul a chance when even the apostles were suspicious of him - and for this reason Barnabas is considered to be the patron saint of second chances. He not only reconciled Paul with the apostles, but he brought him to Antioch to help out as well.

And it was under Barnabas's leadership that we Gentiles were first admitted into the church - there in Antioch. Barnabas was perhaps the first Christian missionary, and it was his encouragement that enabled Paul to also become the missionary that he was.

And there's one more thing about Barnabas that you won't read in very many places. As you know, I spent about eight years studying and researching how the New Testament came to be written, and there is one book in the New Testament whose author has been a question mark for centuries. Who wrote the Letter to the Hebrews, which does not have a greeting from its author?

In the Eastern church, Hebrews came to be attributed to Paul, and in some Bibles it is listed as the Letter of Paul to the Hebrews, even though Paul does sign all of his own letters very clearly, the theology of Hebrews has a very different emphasis than any of Paul's letters, and the style of Hebrews is known to be the best Greek in the entire New Testament, far better than Paul's own. Down through the centuries there have been many debates about who really wrote Hebrews, and some of the theories (including Martin Luther's) are a little shaky.

But there are a few ancient authors, Tertullian especially, who state quite categorically (and assume that their readers know this to be true) that the Letter to the Hebrews was written by Barnabas. And this makes perfect sense - that a Levite, who understood the Torah, whose native language was Greek, and who was known as the "son of encouragement", the cousin of another New Testament author, one of the most important leaders in the early church, would write a letter to Jewish Christians explaining how Jesus had fulfilled the levitical rituals in the Torah, encouraging them to keep their faith in the face of persecutions. So I think the evidence that Barnabas wrote Hebrews is overwhelming.

Well, what should we take from all of this? It seems that Barnabas was to a large extent *the* unsung hero of the early church, with many of his good deeds being credited in the end to Paul. And yet he remained the “son of encouragement” for Christians throughout his life and to this very day. So I hope that the unsung heroes in our midst will take encouragement from this as well. Even if you seem under-appreciated, even when you try your best to follow Jesus and be a true disciple, serving others to the best of your ability, even when you are not noticed. God sees. God blesses your efforts, just as he blessed those of Barnabas. Well done, good and faithful servants.

Amen.

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