

Sermon for St. John's, West Hartford

October 14, 2017

It is good to be here at St. John's. Twenty-five years ago, I began my ordained ministry as priest and pastor of another St. John's, down in Florida. I used to tell visitors that the building was indeed impressive...but the people of St. John's were even better!

I can see that is true here as well!

I was raised by a Southern Baptist mom and a Roman Catholic dad. I grew up hearing Mom say, "The Bible says it, I believe it, that settles it," I grew up hearing Dad say, "The nuns say so, so be quiet and listen!"

From Mom, I inherited a love of Scripture, and I soon found that while others were drawn to the headliners, the ones with their names in lights and their handprints and footprints in the saints' walk of fame, I loved learning about the supporting actors. Let everyone else cheer on Peter, Paul, and Mary—me, I was drawn to this other character who has for the most part been ignored, forgotten. Yet Barnabas is no two-bit performer; he actually has more time onstage in Acts than anyone else...except Peter and Paul. And he wasn't even one of the Twelve!

I would go so far as to say that without Barnabas, there would be no Christianity. Really. He first appears in these few verses we just heard read, a footnote in the story of that first community of Jesus' followers. Yet we learn quite a bit about him in this first appearance, and even more in his subsequent appearances.

First of all, we learn that his real name is Joseph, and that he is a Jew from the respected, priestly tribe of Levi. But we also learn that he is not from Jerusalem, or anywhere in Palestine. Rather, he is part of the Jewish diaspora, hailing from the island country of Cyprus in the Mediterranean. This one fact speaks volumes: it means that unlike Peter and the other apostles, his first language was not Aramaic, but Greek. And he read the Scriptures, what we know as the Old Testament, not in Hebrew, but translated in Greek. In other words, all he had to do was open his mouth, and you knew this guy was not from around here, an outsider. But we learn something else about him, something important, for the apostles gave this Joseph a nickname, Son of Encouragement, or more to the point, the Encourager. Not a bad nickname!

Now, as we are in a season when we speak of stewardship, it is important to note that Barnabas' story does not end with money. Rather, it begins there. Or more accurately, his story begins with vision, for Barnabas' generosity was not simply the result of being "a nice guy" or because he "wanted to pay his dues." No, his giving was nothing less than a public statement of faith in response to what he saw and heard happening in that apostolic community. This is, after all, the very heart of stewardship: as Jesus aptly put it, "where your treasure is, there your heart will be also." Barnabas found something special in that earliest branch of the Jesus Movement; he wanted what they had. He embraced their sacred bundle, those things that were essential to that community's identity and vision. He wanted it, he embraced it, and he was ready to share it. And then as suddenly as he appeared, he suddenly disappears from the stage, and is missing for four chapters.

Things really get interesting, however, when we next encounter Barnabas, several chapters later in Acts. By this time we have been introduced to the character of Saul of Tarsus, that religious reactionary who was determined to stamp out the Jesus Movement by whatever means were necessary. We all know the tale of how Saul encountered the risen Christ on the Damascus Road; we all recall how suddenly the persecutor became a convert. But what we may have missed is how the church leaders, the apostles, would not even see Saul when he came to offer his services as a newcomer; their negative opinions of him were fixed. But along comes Barnabas. He who was generous with his money was also generous with his friendship, personally vouching for the unwelcome newcomer before the apostles...and ultimately gaining their reluctant approval.

Now, the third time we encounter Barnabas is after word had come that the Gospel had made its way by others to Antioch, where Greek-speakers like Barnabas were doing some radical things. The Encourager was sent by the leaders in Jerusalem to check things out. Generous in spirit as always, Barnabas liked what he saw, even if it was different from the way things were done back in Jerusalem. But what is most interesting is that after seeing God at work in Antioch, Barnabas took the time to go find Saul, and bring him back as an apprentice in the work that needed to be done there in Antioch. With delightful understatement, we are told in Acts 11 that "it was in Antioch that they were first called Christians." A new tribe was born, and Barnabas the giver, Barnabas the Encourager, was its midwife. Later still, Barnabas

and Saul were sent forth as Christ's apostles and ambassadors to other places. And as they journeyed, in perhaps the most telling statement of his character, the phrase "Barnabas and Saul" changes to "Paul and Barnabas," as the Encourager allowed his gifted protégé to take center stage, moving into a supporting role himself. In all this, Barnabas showed himself to be not simply a saint, but something even more wonderful: a steward, a steward of money, yes, but also a steward of the gifts and responsibilities, and the people, given him by God.

What does it mean to be a Barnabas today, here at St. John's Church?

Mark Twain, whose private secretary Franklin Whitmore was a parishioner here in days gone by, once famously remarked, "You can't depend on your eyes when your imagination is out of focus." God wants us to be "spiritual detectives," looking for God's footsteps, God's fingerprints, clues of God's presence in all that is around us. In the "canon" of Sherlock Holmes stories, the great detective was asked by Dr. Watson why it was that both of them saw the very same thing, and yet only Holmes was able to deduce fantastic things as a result. The detective's answer was brief and to the point: "You see, but you do not observe...the distinction is clear." Our challenge, our gift, is to observe keenly evidence of God at work all around us, in places where we do not necessarily expect to find such evidence, in people whom we might overlook, yet who are beloved by God, and brought by God to us at a particular time, that they might be blessed by us, that WE might be blessed by them. The apostles in Jerusalem, they were comfortable with what they had going. It was good. But it also was familiar, so familiar

that it was easy to lose sight of Jesus' challenge way back in the first few verses of Acts to be his "witnesses, BEGINNING in Jerusalem, then in Judea, and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth." They started well, but they remained right there in Jerusalem, in the very shadow of the temple. They were faithful, they were there for each other, but they lost sight of what the Prophets of old had often said, that "God is doing a new thing, will you not see it?". It is significant that it was in Antioch that the believers were first called Christians. Not Jerusalem, but Antioch. Not because of Peter the Rock, but because of Barnabas the Encourager. Jesus called his followers to GO, not to stay, not to get too comfortable with the familiar, however wonderful it felt, but to GO. To be witnesses.

Mark Twain also wrote, "The secret of getting ahead is getting started." So how do we get started here in this place? First, look at your own heritage, your spiritual DNA. I love what I read about this parish, how St. John's and its members in the nineteenth century helped give birth to several other congregations. And how, when the original property was sold, the decision was made "to jump over the neighboring parishes altogether and relocate St. John's on the outer edge of the city."

So, again, what does this look like for you, stewards of this inheritance in the here and now? Years ago, I was walking through the grounds of Emory University in Atlanta when from a distance I saw Archbishop Desmond Tutu. He was guest-teaching there at the time. Looking frail from health struggles of that time, the Nobel laureate was accompanied by a "handler" who looked like he could take on an entire platoon.

Eager to meet this legendary figure, I ran up, only to be immediately put off by the blocker. "The bishop is busy," he growled. Turning away and feeling like little more than chopped liver, I suddenly heard a tiny but powerful voice: "Come, come." As I approached him, Archbishop Tutu said, "Tell me your name." I did, and he responded, "and tell me about yourself." For the next several minutes, I have no idea how long it was, I could not have received more attention from this important figure than if I had been the President of the United States or the Archbishop of Canterbury. For that time, I was someone of infinite value. Finally, noting the handler's glances at his watch, I turned to leave, but not before Archbishop Tutu grasped my shoulder, looked me in the eye, and quietly said, "I will remember you, Chuck Robertson." I was Beloved. God's Beloved.

This is our priceless gift to all those around us, to those whose baggage has become so full, so heavy, that they have forgotten who they are and whose they are. We are witnesses, no less so than those believers in Jerusalem who worshipped and shared and learned together two millennia ago. No less so than those believers in Antioch who became something altogether new by opening their hearts and their imaginations to God's Spirit approaching them through newcomers they might otherwise have ignored. You and I, we can dare to be ambassadors and bridge-builders, spiritual detectives and stewards of those whom God nudges onto our path. We can proclaim good news, as the Prayer book says, "not only with our lips but in our lives."

Then, we individually, we together, will be...Barnabas, here and now.