

Homily – The Relevance of Our Church

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Today we celebrate the Feast of St. Barnabas, our annual remembrance of a man who was an early follower of Jesus. Many of you here today already know quite a bit about the St. Barnabas of two thousand years ago. But, some of you are new to St. Barnabas and during this time of Coronavirus and our online worship, some of you have never been to our campus in Arroyo Grande. So, let me share a little bit about our name sake.

Barnabas appears mainly in our New Testament book of Acts, a Christian history of the early Christian church. He also appears in several of the New Testament letters of the Apostle Paul. Barnabas was a native of Cyprus and a Levite. He is first mentioned in the Acts of the Apostles as a member of the early Christian community in Jerusalem. Barnabas sold some land that he owned and gave the proceeds to the community. When the future Apostle Paul returned to Jerusalem after his conversion, Barnabas introduced him to the other apostles and early followers of Jesus.

The early church in Jerusalem sent Barnabas to the even newer church in Antioch, a city in what is now modern day Syria. Barnabas found the work so extensive and weighty that he went to Tarsus to get some help from Paul. Paul returned with him to Antioch and labored with him for a whole year. Paul and Barnabas worked side-jobs to fund their ministries, and at the end of this period, just eleven years after the death of Jesus, the two were sent up to Jerusalem with contributions from the church at Antioch for the relief of the poorer Christians in Judea.

They returned to Antioch to continue the establishment of that church, and later they worked to establish other churches in Cyprus and some of the principal cities of Pamphylia, Pisidia, and Lycaonia.

Barnabas and Paul were instrumental in spreading the church to non-Jewish communities, which put them at odds with some of the original Jewish-Christians. They participated in the Council of Jerusalem which officially blessed the ministry to the Gentiles. Specifically, the Council said that Gentiles were to be admitted into the church without having to adopt Jewish practices.

At some point Barnabas and Paul had a falling out which appears to be on the ongoing hot topic of the intermingling of Jews and Gentiles in the early church. Perhaps this is one of the first examples of a power struggle in the Church. Barnabas does not appear to be mentioned again after this power struggle.

Now, as Episcopalians who are part of the worldwide Anglican Community we do not pray to saints. Other Christian traditions may pray to saints but that is not what we do. Instead, we hold up saints as role models from whom we can learn.

So, the question for us today is what can we learn from St. Barnabas that would be applicable to us as individuals and relevant to us as a community of God? And, here are a few things that make Barnabas a good role model.

First, Barnabas was generous with his time, talent, and treasure. He was an example to us of a good steward of the resources with which God had blessed him. God certainly calls us to follow the example of Barnabas. We too are called to be good stewards of our resources.

Second, it appears that Barnabas had a servant-heart. We see Barnabas helping others in the various early churches. Again, I believe that God calls us to follow the example of Barnabas and be servants to others.

Third, when he himself needed help, Barnabas seeks out other followers of Jesus. When Barnabas was overwhelmed with the work, he went to find Paul to get some help. Do you ask for help when you need it? And, who do you go? Is it someone who you think will lead you towards God?

Next, Barnabas reached out to those who were considered the outsider. Like Paul, Barnabas is known to have reached beyond the Jewish community. He included the Gentiles. Two thousand years ago, one of the big debates in the early church was whether one had to be a Jew to be a follower of Jesus. Barnabas was one of the advocates for including the non-Jews. Much of his ministry was to outsider, and in this way Barnabas as a role model to us as individuals and as a church. We too are to reach out to and minister with those who are the outsider. How do we reach out to those who are not already with us, especially to those who do not match us demographically or spiritually?

Finally, Barnabas seems to have internalized Jesus' message about the importance of forgiveness. Before his conversion, Paul persecuted the early followers of Jesus and did some pretty nasty stuff. Yet, Barnabas was still willing to forgive Paul, give him another chance, and commend him to the early church. We all know from personal experience that forgiveness is not easy, and Barnabas is a role model for us on how we need to forgive others.

So, as followers of Jesus we can look to Barnabas, our namesake, as a role model. Generosity and good stewardship, serving others, seeking help when needed,

including the outsider, and forgiving others. These are some pretty good characteristics for a Godly life.

Now, one of the things that has always puzzled me about Barnabas is that at some point he seems to disappear from the scene. I guess if he had an argument with Paul and Paul's writings make up much of the New Testament, then Paul just stopped writing about Barnabas. At least in this lifetime we will never know what happened to Barnabas.

Did he get grumpy? Did he continue with his ministry? Did he stay a follower of Jesus? Did he become irrelevant and just fade away from the scene?

And it is this last question that I want to turn to on this St. Barnabas Sunday. How is our church relevant to the community around us? Or, how do we make sure that we stay relevant and don't fade from the scene?

I am just about done reading a book by Timothy Egan called "Pilgrimage to Eternity – From Canterbury to Rome in Search of Faith." In this book, Timothy Egan struggles with the relevance of the church especially given all the atrocities that have been in the name of Jesus.

And, this past week I received a essay from a wise parishioner that also questioned the relevance of our church. This wise person wrote, *"Often when I see conflict, violence, division, the triumph of evil, the ascendancy of injustice; I often wonder at the relevance of Christianity in those realities. Further, when I hear the voices of those at the forefront of struggles for justice, equality and democracy - it appears to me the voice of the Church is muted or absent. Worse - on many occasions, some Christians seem encamped on the wrong side of the issues."*

These days, Christians have become the biggest obstacle in people coming to Christ. In fact, Christians are the primary reason that many are denying Christ and moving away from the church. Yes, these times we are living through are changing us, but these times are also revealing the ugliness that is just under the surface. These days are also showing us the horridness that is in our churches and supported by our churches.

Enabling the rich is wrong. Chasing worldly power is wrong. Choosing money over life is wrong. Critiquing the righteous anger of a people that have been oppressed for centuries is so utterly, obviously, horribly wrong. Our churches have been on the wrong side of morality so many times that many only see the bad that gets done by churches.

Our church must be much more inclusive. Either we see Christ in everyone or we hardly see Christ in anyone. Either we are Christ to everyone, or we cannot be Christ to anyone. And, here is something that may not be self-evident about becoming more inclusive. The answer is not less Jesus but more Jesus. Let's live like Jesus really meant the stuff that he said. May our church and all the church put Jesus back into the center of our future.

Last month our vestry or governing board here at St. Barnabas established a Macedonia Fund. This fund is to help folks at St. Barnabas who are experiencing financial distress, especially when it is caused by the Coronavirus and the associated economic impact. We are running a special fund raising campaign to raise money for this economic impact fund.

The fund is called "The Macedonia Fund" because of today's New Testament reading about our namesake, Barnabas.

"At that time prophets came down from Jerusalem to Antioch. One of them named Agabus stood up and predicted by the Spirit that there would be a severe famine over all the world; and this took place during the reign of Claudius. The disciples determined that according to their ability, each would send relief to the believers living in Judea; this they did, sending it to the elders by Barnabas and Saul."

Two thousand years ago, Saul, also know, as the Apostle Paul, collected money from the churches in the region of Macedonia, and he and Barnabas took it to the early followers of Jesus in Jerusalem who were suffering from a famine. Like the Jews, followers of Jesus are to take care of those in need, and that is what we want to do today.

So, if you have the means, then would you consider giving a little extra to St. Barnabas and put Macedonia fund in the note when you make the extra donation. Thank you for your generosity.

And, if you have a need for funds, then let me know, and we can setup some time together to figure out if the fund can help you. What we can share will be based on the funds we receive. We want to help when we can. We want to be like our namesake, Barnabas.

And, as I said earlier, may our church and all of our churches put Jesus back at the center of our future.