

Feast of St. Barnabas Readings: Acts 9:26-30; Acts 11:19-30;13:1-3; Acts15:1-35 06/13/21
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Today we celebrate the Feast of St. Barnabas, the patron saint of this beloved church in Arroyo Grande, CA. It is a day of joy, a day of remembrance, a day to gather together as a parish family and take stock of where we have been and where we might be inspired to go in the future.

“The first recorded service of St. Barnabas Church was held on Easter Sunday in 1901 in the Masonic Hall in Arroyo Grande.” A small church was built soon after, being constructed on Mason Street at a cost of \$689. Since that time, two different churches have been built, this one being completed in 1991. The people of this congregation have enjoyed “a century of ministry, outreach, and worship in the Arroyo Grande Valley and surrounding area.” Its thrift shop ministry is highly valued, providing outreach funds for many community recipients. Today, we are celebrating 120 years of witnessing the good news of Christ in Arroyo Grande, concluding this Holy Day with a festive barbeque. I hope you will join us!

Joseph Barnabas was a Hellenized Jew from the island of Cyprus. Although he was not one of the 12 original apostles, he joined the Jerusalem church soon after Jesus’ crucifixion. He was a faithful servant who sold his property and donated the money to the church community. He gave generously of his life and substance for the relief of the poor and the spread of the gospel. He was a distinguished teacher of the Christian faith, a man filled with the Holy Spirit, and a companion and colleague of St. Paul. You can read more about his ministry in the Book of Acts, one episode of which was read today.

I always think of a patron saint as offering a particular charism and direction to the parish after which it was named. For instance, when I was an associate at St. Luke’s, I felt that the charism and direction of the church was to follow in the footsteps of St. Luke the physician, by focusing on healing ministries to a broken world, including the lost, the lame, and the left-behind. At St. Jude’s, I felt our charism and direction was to be an icon of hope; St. Jude being known as the saint of lost causes. So, what might be the charism and direction at St. Barnabas Church? Let’s take a closer look at three of the initiatives taken by Barnabas described in the Book the Acts.

1. Barnabas as Risk Taker. After his conversion experience, Saul (a.k.a. Paul) came to Jerusalem and tried to join the disciples. But they were afraid of him. After all, Paul was the one who persecuted and uttered murderous threats against Jesus’ disciples. No one really believed that Paul was truly converted as a committed disciple of Christ. “But Barnabas took him and brought him to the apostles. He told them how Saul on his journey had seen the Lord and that the Lord had spoken to him, and how in Damascus he had preached fearlessly in the name of Jesus.” (Acts 9:27)

You see, Barnabas was a man who was willing to take a risk and support another human being as being worthy of a second chance. All of us have done things that we are ashamed of. We would not like to be permanently judged by that one or two acts which disclosed our broken humanity. So for me, Barnabas inspires a posture of forgiveness, letting go of the past so that a new future becomes possible. Where might you take a risk and embrace someone who is in need of God’s grace? Where might this Church reach out and take a gamble with people who might be different, challenging, or at risk?

2. Barnabas as Evangelist: After the stoning of Stephen (early in the life of the Church), many of the disciples scattered because of the persecution. Some of them were men from Cyprus and Cyrene. They traveled to Antioch and “began to speak to Greeks also, telling them the good news about the Lord Jesus. The Lord’s hand was with them, and a great number of people believed and turned to the Lord. News of this reached the church in Jerusalem, and they sent Barnabas to Antioch. When he arrived and saw what the grace of God had done, he was glad and encouraged them all to remain true to the Lord with all their hearts... Then Barnabas went to Tarsus to look for Saul, and when he found him, he brought him to Antioch. So, for a whole year Barnabas and Saul met with the church and taught great numbers of people. It was in Antioch that the disciples were first called *Christians*.” (Acts 11:20-26)

Barnabas went to Antioch to pursue the mission of the Church. Do you know what the mission of the Church is? The mission of the Church is “to restore all people to unity with God and each other in Christ. The Church pursues its mission as it prays, worships, proclaims the Gospel, and promotes

justice, peace, and love.” (BCP 855) Through his skill, patience, and devotion, Barnabas focused on uniting those who were divided. He helped bridge the gap between followers of Jesus who were of Jewish origin and those who were of Greek origin. Not only did these two groups of folks have different cultural habits, they also had distinct perspectives on what it means to be a follower of Christ. Barnabas was a healer of division.

Perhaps being a healer of division is the charism that is being required of us in the 21st century Church. We need to start with ourselves. Is there any division in your own life? If so, it is time to heal those divisions. Do you see divisions in the Church or the larger Arroyo Grande community? If so, how can you be an intentional bridge builder to restore unity, justice, and peace? I think this important work begins with listening carefully to differing opinions rather than closing off our mind. It continues with aligning our speech and actions with gospel precepts and baptismal promises rather than identifying with the rhetoric of political parties. We need to focus on what unites us rather than emphasize our differences.

3. Barnabas as Change Agent: What do you think has been the most controversial issue facing the Christian Church? Was it the formation of the Nicene Creed in the year 325? Was it the forcible baptism of Jews and non-Christians during the middle ages? Perhaps it was the religious wars or the separation of the Church into Orthodox, Catholic, and Protestant. Maybe you are thinking of modern-day controversies such as the publication of the 1979 Book of Common Prayer, the ordination of Women, or the consecration of a gay bishop. While all of these changes seemed earth shattering at the time, perhaps one of the most controversial issues facing the early church was the issue of circumcision. While circumcision is still a controversial issue in Africa among women and in Europe regarding male babies, circumcision became a critical religious issue among converts in the 1st century.

Most Jews at that time felt it was absolutely necessary to be circumcised before being baptized, based on over a thousand-year custom that was legislated both by Scripture and Jewish tradition. This requirement however, discouraged non-Jews from embracing the Christian religion. It was into this context of contention between Jew and Gentile, that “Barnabas and Paul and some of the others were appointed to go up to Jerusalem to discuss this question with the apostles and the elders. The apostles and the elders met together to consider this matter. The whole assembly kept silence and listened to Barnabas and Paul as they told of all the signs and wonders that God had done through them among the Gentiles.” After there had been much debate, this council of Jerusalem (which included Peter and James), declared that disciples of Christ are saved by God’s grace and not by circumcision, thus putting aside years of tradition. This radical change paved the way for the Church to flourish in the Gentile regions of the world. (Acts 15)

We love our traditions and ways of doing church, don’t we? However, we admit that many of our children and our children’s children do not belong to a church community. In fact, fewer and fewer Americans are attending church on Sunday and many consider themselves spiritual but not religious. What things must we hold onto in order to remain faithful to our baptismal promises? And what cultural preferences can we let go of to be the Church of the 21st century? Are there impediments to our faith journey? I don’t have all the answers, but I do know this: Love is the way! Love God, love your neighbor! Everything else in Christianity is simply a commentary on this great commandment. If it isn’t about love, then it isn’t about God. This pandemic has radically changed the game plan for churches. So like Barnabas before us, we too need to be open to change. Perhaps the greatest change for us will be learning how to love extravagantly.

I think Barnabas was faithful in his ministry because he loved God and others with all his heart, mind, and soul, until the day he died. We really don’t know how Barnabas’ life ended, although tradition holds that he was martyred and buried in Cyprus. That is why the vestments are red today. And while his bones are buried in a tomb in the city of Salamis, Barnabas’ spirit remains alive in this community of faith. So, how might his spirit be guiding us as we plan the future of this church after a year of COVID lockdown? How might the leadership of this parish discern a direction based on the promptings of the Holy Spirit? Perhaps a focused biblical study (like *Lectio Divina*) on the acts of St. Barnabas is in order. May God’s grace bless you and the leadership of this congregation as you move forward into the future.

“Grant, O God, that we may follow the example of your faithful servant Barnabas, who, seeking not his own renown but the wellbeing of your Church, gave generously of his life and substance for the relief of the poor and the spread of the Gospel; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. *Amen.*” *(BCP)*