

Let us be Known as Christians
Feast of St. Barnabas (transferred)
Acts 11:19-30, 13: 1-3
June 6, 2021
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May the God—who creates...

This morning, my in-person visit is to our church in Chelsea: St. Barnabas. And because we are within a week of the Feast of St. Barnabas, I'm going to take this opportunity to do a dive into Barnabas' life and ministry and wrestle with what an early church apostle in the city of Antioch, (which is now present-day Turkey) what an early church apostle might have to do with us here in South Central and Southeast Michigan in the early part of the 21st century.

I think he is a bridge-builder. I think Barnabas is an apostle for our times. Let's see if I can make a case.

Barnabas first shows up in scripture early on in the Acts of the Apostles as a Jew from Cyprus who sold some of his land and generously donated the proceeds from the sale to assist the Apostles working in Jerusalem. From the beginning, he is a person who puts his money where his mouth is.

His next appearance is five chapters later when the apostles in Jerusalem are hesitant to meet with Saul. You may remember that Saul, who becomes the apostle Paul, that Saul before his conversion on the road to Damascus, is an educated Jew, persecuting Christians and was a witness to the stoning of the first deacon Stephen.

So it makes good sense that the apostles are pretty leery of being in his presence. But Barnabas goes and meets with Saul hears his story and becomes something of a mentor to him. And more importantly, he vouches for Saul's sincerity with the Apostles.

Barnabas tells Peter and the others just how much Saul of Tarsus (soon to be known as the apostle Paul) has changed since his conversion and how much he is now willing to risk because of his life-changing encounter with the risen Christ on the road to Damascus. Barnabas creates a way for Saul and the apostles to come together.

We next see Barnabas when word reaches the leaders of the community in Jerusalem that believers in Cyprus and Cyrene are making converts of both Greeks and Jews in Antioch. So they send the trusted disciple Barnabas, who speaks Greek to go and see exactly what is happening.

Remember that this then is a pivotal time in the early church, this is the time when early believers in Jerusalem are being confronted with the reality that the Gospel is spreading beyond just the children of Israel. Greeks, Romans: gentiles of all persuasions are beginning to be drawn to the life and ministry, the words of hope and actions of love, the death and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth.

Cultural divides are being transcended, polarities decreased, seemingly fixed chasms are being crossed, something new is happening and those who have been involved from the beginning are not sure that it is ok—is this what we want—is this what God is calling us to do?

So they send Barnabas, a Greek-speaking Jew, a faithful man they trust, to see what is happening -- a world away.

In Antioch, Barnabas is overwhelmed with joy and happiness. He becomes the consummate coach and cheerleader: “This is good, so good and so much of God.” He exhorts them to carry on.

Then Barnabas seeks out Saul, the apostle Paul and brings him back to Antioch. Barnabas knows that Paul has been called by Jesus to preach and teach. Together they

return to Antioch and preach and teach for a full year. It was then, for the very first time that the followers of Jesus of Nazareth are referred to as Christians.

Eventually, Barnabas and Paul make their way across the known world preaching and teaching, and Paul over time becomes the one more known, but it is at this moment this pivotal time that Barnabas' ability to transcend boundaries, to live with and delight in watching something new break-forth that I find compelling to us, for us in the here and now.

Barnabas is a Jew, who speaks Greek, he is of the earlier followers who offered the Good News of Jesus primarily to the Jewish people. The early followers are greatly suspicious of the interested Gentiles, they wonder if gentiles can just become followers of Jesus, don't they first have to convert to Judaism?

But it is the leaders of the early church, such as Barnabas, who could see past these cultural divides, who could appreciate the complexities and nuances of both groups of people, who built the bridges that spanned the chasms of distrust and the divides of different cultures who paved the way for a new group of people, a movement and a ministry based on becoming one in Christ.

It is in this time that the followers of Jesus, begin to change from a sect of Judaism into a distinct group of people known as Christians: a movement, mission, and ministry eventually known as Christianity.

Biblical Theologian, Wille James Jennings writes, *"If Barnabas questions the strength of this conversion of his non-Jewish people, then the reach of the gospel falters beyond Jewish bodies. If he concludes that the deliverance of Israel has indeed found a Gentile home, then what of his [Jewish] Levite heritage? Barnabas thankfully is not stymied by this extraordinary situation; he simply yields to the Spirit. ... This is the model of faith for these new strange times—go with the flow of God and follow what the Spirit is doing in the world,"* (p 123 *Acts: A Theological Commentary on the Bible*, 2017).

Theologian Jennings goes on to say that this type of generative work only happens through those people who are able and willing to create and hold a space where differences can exist and flourish side by side, (p 123).

Jennings says, “this place of multitude will be a place of newness and a site of creativity,” (p 124).

Like William James Jennings, I’d like to remind us that our beginnings came out of from polarities. Our Christian history, at its very core, is about a coming together of a people who did not have the same perspective or world view, a people of different creeds, cultures and beliefs.

What then is the very next thing that happens in scripture, after we hear that a disparate group of people are now known collectively as Christians?

We read that a great famine is predicted and it was then that the disciples determined that each according to their own ability would send relief to their sisters and brothers in Judea. And they did just that.

The Christians are known as a group and immediately the Christians respond as a group, assisting others in need. Barnabas and Saul bring help from the new converts in Antioch to the people in Judea.

Friends, we are in another time of creation and reformation. We are confronted with divides in our country between race and class, caste and politics, and in the midst of these potentially paralyzing divisions we find ourselves confronting a pandemic that has taken more than 590,000 Americans and more than 20,000 Michiganders.

Now is the time for us to hold our differences and still come together and lament our collective losses. Now is the time for us to listen, hear, learn and begin to comprehend

the pains and wounds that divide us one from another; And then to change our actions to alleviate the pain. Now is the time for us to work together doing such things as we can, like deeply reducing childhood poverty and hunger. As I said on Pentecost, if we as a country decide to invest in our families and make the temporary Child Tax Credit, contained in the American Rescue plan, permanent we can decrease poverty in our country by 45%. IMAGINE.

We can be like that group of disparate people in Antioch, who came together, despite their differences, the ones who were known as the very first Christians, we can be like them, coming together and immediately assisting all in need.

It is time for us again to be known as Christians. Let us make it so.

Amen.