

St. Barnabas, Apostle – Pr. Faugstad sermon
Acts 11:19-30; 13:1-3: “We Need Good Encouragement!”
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In Nomine Iesu

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Almighty God, Your faithful servant Barnabas sought not his own renown but gave generously of his life and substance for the encouragement of the apostles and their ministry. Grant that we may follow his example in lives given to charity and the proclamation of the Gospel; through Your Son, Jesus Christ, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. (*Treasury of Daily Prayer*, p. 422)

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen. (Rom. 1:7, etc.)

The sermon text for today is taken from the eleventh chapter of the Book of Acts. We read selected verses in Jesus' name:

Now those who were scattered because of the persecution that arose over Stephen traveled as far as Phoenicia and Cyprus and Antioch, speaking the word to no one except Jews. But there were some of them, men of Cyprus and Cyrene, who on coming to Antioch spoke to the Hellenists also, preaching the Lord Jesus. And the hand of the Lord was with them, and a great number who believed turned to the Lord. / The report of this came to the ears of the church in Jerusalem, and they sent Barnabas to Antioch. When he came and saw the grace of God, he was glad, and he exhorted them all to remain faithful to the Lord with steadfast purpose, for he was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and of faith. And a great many people were added to the Lord. So Barnabas went to Tarsus to look for Saul, and when he had found him, he brought him to Antioch. For a whole year they met with the church and taught a great many people. And in Antioch the disciples were first called Christians. / Now in these days prophets came down from Jerusalem to Antioch. And one of them named Agabus stood up and foretold by the Spirit that there would be a great famine over all the world (this took place in the days of Claudius). So the disciples determined, everyone according to his ability, to send relief to the brothers living in Judea. And they did so, sending it to the elders by the hand of Barnabas and Saul.

Now there were in the church at Antioch prophets and teachers, Barnabas, Simeon who was called Niger, Lucius of Cyrene, Manaen a member of the court of Herod the tetrarch, and Saul. While they were worshiping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, “Set apart for Me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.” Then after fasting and praying they laid their hands on them and sent them off. (ESV)

These are Your words, heavenly Father. Sanctify us by Your truth, Your Word is truth. Amen. (Joh. 17:17)

In Christ Jesus, whose name is above every name, who shares His saving name with us, and who guides and protects us as members of His holy family, dear fellow redeemed:

On Pentecost Sunday, three thousand Jews heard the preaching of the apostles and were baptized. As the apostles continued boldly to proclaim the truth about Jesus, that number grew to five thousand souls. It was a time of beautiful peace and unity. These new Christians shared

what they had with one another. Some of them even sold their land and brought the proceeds to the apostles to distribute to the needy.

One of them in particular is mentioned in the fourth chapter of Acts, a man named Joseph. We are told that he *“sold a field that belonged to him and brought the money and laid it at the apostles’ feet”* (Act. 4:37). This man was a Levite descended from the line of priests, and he was a native of the island of Cyprus in the eastern part of the Mediterranean Sea. He was known for more than his generosity. We learn this by the name the apostles gave him, the name *“Barnabas (which means son of encouragement)”* (v. 36).

Barnabas was an encourager, a consoler. He was a tremendous supporter of the apostles and a dedicated worker in the church. In today’s reading, he is described in glowing terms as *“a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and of faith.”* Barnabas was the one who brought Saul to meet the apostles after Saul was converted. Everyone was afraid of Saul, since he had severely persecuted the church. But Barnabas encouraged them to welcome him, and testified to them about Saul’s conversion on the road to Damascus, and how *“he had preached boldly in the name of Jesus”* (9:27).

We can see how highly Barnabas was regarded by the fact that the apostles sent him to Antioch after the Gospel had taken root there. When Barnabas *“came and saw the grace of God, he was glad, and he exhorted them all—encouraged them all—to remain faithful to the Lord with steadfast purpose.”* The people liked Barnabas. They respected him. Maybe you have a relative like that—someone who was always supportive, or a teacher who motivated you to work harder, or a coach who inspired you to give your best.

You especially appreciate the people who gave you good encouragement along the way. But not all encouragement is good encouragement. The people who encourage you to put yourself first, who encourage you to ignore your conscience, who encourage you to join them in doing what is wrong—these people are giving bad encouragement, bad guidance.

But it isn’t always easy to recognize what encouragement is good and what is bad. Bad encouragement conflicts with the Word of God, but it agrees with our sinful inclinations, our sinful nature. We like hearing the encouragement to do whatever our passions and desires lead us to do. We like hearing the encouragement to follow our own heart, focus on our own plans, and determine our own future.

The encouragement to follow God’s Word, focus on His plan for us, and trust Him to guide us into the future—even if it isn’t the plan and future we wanted—this encouragement is not always welcome. I know as a pastor, I have often thought how much easier it would be if I just encouraged the people I serve to do whatever seems best to them. I wouldn’t have to challenge anyone to change the way they are thinking or to repent of the wrongs they have done. I could just *“go with the flow,”* and say, *“I’m just here to support you being you!”*

That would be easier. You know how much easier it is to be the parent or grandparent who says *“yes”* all the time, instead of being the parent or grandparent who says *“no.”* But what would the world be like without any *“no”*?

Barnabas was not just an encourager. He was an encourager of what is good. He encouraged the Christians in Antioch *"to remain faithful to the Lord with steadfast purpose,"* to love the Lord their God with all their heart, soul, strength, and mind (Luk. 10:27) and to cling to His saving Word of grace. He encouraged them in this way because *"he was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and of faith."*

This good encouragement to remain with the Lord in faith comes from the Holy Spirit. It is the encouragement you receive whenever you hear the Word of God. Those who stop listening to the Word of God open their ears to other things. That's when bad encouragement starts to sound reasonable, and right is exchanged for wrong. Then ears will no longer hear the good encouragement, and God's truth sounds strange and even offensive.

The very things that God warns us away from because they cause injury and pain, are the things the world tells us to celebrate and take pride in. And if we challenge those things out of love for our neighbor's soul, we are accused of being hateful and bigoted. That is discouraging. It is easy to feel discouraged when you know that what you believe and confess is right, but so many around you say it is wrong.

That's why you and I need the continued encouragement of the Holy Spirit. The name "Barnabas" means "son of encouragement," and the Greek word for "encouragement" sounds like *para'klesis*. Jesus used a very similar word to describe the work of the Holy Spirit. He called the Holy Spirit the *para'kletos*, which means the Helper/ Counselor/ Encourager (Joh. 15:26). The Holy Spirit encourages you by taking what belongs to Jesus Christ and declaring it to you (Joh. 16:14-15).

Today's reading tells us something very interesting about the disciples in Antioch. It says that because of the teaching of Barnabas and Saul, *"the disciples were first called Christians."* What were they called before? When Saul went on his rampage against the Church, he was looking to arrest anyone who belonged to *"the Way"* (Act. 9:2). That was how believers identified themselves, probably based on Jesus words, *"I am the way, and the truth, and the life"* (Joh. 14:6).

Now they became known as *"Christians"*—followers of Christ, those who were baptized into His death and resurrection, who listened to His Word of truth, who partook of the holy food and drink of His body and blood. By the powerful work of the Holy Spirit through the Word, you also are one of those Christians.

You are baptized into Christ, clothed in His righteousness. You are cleansed of all your sins by His holy blood. You are an heir of eternal life by faith in Him. You are a holy one, a saint, one who is set apart by the grace of God. There is nothing more encouraging than to know that your Savior smiles upon you. He forgives you all your sins. He is present through His Word and Sacraments to strengthen you and guide you. He fights for you against the powers of darkness and the temptations of this fallen world. He calls you by His name, which means your future is tied to His future. What an honor to be called a Christian!

But it is not an honor in the world, and it is getting more and more unpopular to be called by the name of Christ. When Barnabas and Saul went on their missionary journey, preaching the good news of Jesus' saving work, they faced constant opposition and persecution. They wanted

to share the greatest, most encouraging message there is, and many did not want to hear anything about it.

Jesus had warned His disciples, *"If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me"* (Mat. 16:24). He told them that they would have to suffer for His name. He did not say this to discourage them, but to prepare them. He was encouraging them to stay the course and keep their eyes on the finish line. Again He said, *"If the world hates you, know that it has hated me before it hated you.... But all these things they will do to you on account of my name, because they do not know him who sent me"* (Joh. 15:18,21).

We Need Good Encouragement, the encouragement of God's Word of grace. We need to be reminded that all the things of this world will pass away, but the everlasting treasures stored up for us by God will never pass away. Kingdoms rise and fall, rulers come and go. Christian congregations in various locations flourish and diminish, pastors and church leaders come and go, *"but the word of our God will stand forever"* (Isa. 40:8).

The Holy Spirit called Barnabas to preach and toil and suffer in the name of Christ and then called him to his eternal rest. Tradition indicates that he died a martyr's death by being stoned in his home country of Cyprus. But through his work, many were encouraged by him, and we still find encouragement from his life of faithfulness. He did not trust in his own work, his own abilities. He trusted in his Savior Jesus. He found his encouragement and strength through the unchanging promises of Christ.

This encouragement he shared with others is the encouragement we share with one another, the encouragement *"to remain faithful to the Lord with steadfast purpose."* We do not face the challenges, temptations, and persecutions of the world alone. We face them together in the body of Christ, over which He reigns as our Head.

These persecutions can also be a source of encouragement, because they show we are not of the world; we are of Christ. The apostle Peter writes, *"If you are insulted for the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the Spirit of glory and of God rests upon you,"* and *"if anyone suffers as a Christian, let him not be ashamed, but let him glorify God in that name"* (1Pe. 4:14,16).

Glory be to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Ghost; as it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be, forevermore. Amen.

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