

Today is the feast of St. Barnabas. St. Barnabas holds a unique place in the history of the church. In the early church he was esteemed amongst St. Paul and the twelve Apostles. However, he has not authored one of the books of the New Testament, neither was he a companion of Christ. The esteem of the early church was rightly placed, though. For Barnabas played a very important role in the ministry of Christ's body.

Our second lesson records the first mention we have of Barnabas in the New Testament: "And when Saul was come to Jerusalem, he assayed to join himself to the disciples: but they were all afraid of him, and believed not that he was a disciple. But Barnabas took him, and brought him to the apostles, and declared unto them how he had seen the Lord in the way, and that he had spoken to him, and how he had preached boldly at Damascus in the name of Jesus." The other apostles feared Paul, remembering his fierce persecutions. However, Barnabas was able to see past what Paul had been, to what the Holy Spirit was working in his life. Barnabas recognized the talent, and more importantly the fledgling faith of this former enemy, and he sought to nurture it and bring him into fellowship with the believers. This he accomplished, although Paul relates in his epistle to the Galatians that the only apostles who he interacted with were Peter and James the brother of Jesus. After spending some time with them, Paul is sent away to Tarsus in order to escape the murderous intent of the Jews in Jerusalem. He waits there for several years.

Barnabas, in the meantime, is sent to Antioch to oversee the growing church there. There is some unrest amongst the Christians of that city because some gentiles have received the gospel of Jesus and wish to join the church. Barnabas, St. Luke records, was, "a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and faith..." Under his leadership, the church in Antioch grows both among the Jews and Gentiles.

It is during this time that Barnabas remembers Paul and goes to find him in Tarsus and seek his assistance in Antioch. Not only did Barnabas recognize the great gift that Paul was to the Church, but he also saw that God was calling Paul to minister to the gentiles. After serving with Barnabas for some time in Antioch, the church there recognizes the call to send missionaries to the surrounding areas and throughout the Roman empire. Paul and Barnabas are selected for this mission and sent out. The travel first to the nearby Isle of Cyprus, which was where Barnabas was from. They together begin to teach the gospel in the cities, establishing a pattern of evangelism which would characterize all of Paul's ministry.

John Mark, the nephew of Barnabas and later author of the Gospel of Mark joins them on this journey. However, at Perga in Pamphylia their first stop having left Barnabas' native land, John Mark leaves them. We are not told exactly why John Mark departs, but we know that Paul views it as desertion. Barnabas and Paul carry on their mission throughout Asia Minor, enduring opposition from both Jews and Gentiles. They are chased from cities in hunger and thirst, ridiculed and interrupted, even physically attacked and stoned. However, they persevere and are rewarded with many converts to the faith.

Upon returning to Antioch the duo is called upon to defend the Gentile Christians at Jerusalem. Their testimony to the work of God throughout the Cyprus and Asia Minor is influential in the Council of Jerusalem's decision to accept Gentiles as Christians without requiring they become Jewish first.

Later, intending to return to the mission field Paul and Barnabas argue over whether or not to bring John Mark. Paul, on account of John Mark's earlier defection, is unwilling to make him a companion, and so Barnabas and Paul decide to part ways. Barnabas takes John Mark back through Cyprus, and Paul travels north through Asia Minor and on towards Greece. Although Scripture records this was a sharp disagreement, Paul's later letter to the Corinthians reveals that their friendship was unimpaired. Also, by the time Paul is writing the letter to the Romans, John Mark is once again traveling with him. And in first Timothy, Paul says Mark is a useful helper to him.

Mark would go on to aid and travel with St. Peter, and it seems from him learn the stories which he would record as the Gospel of Mark, which many scholars take to be the first Gospel account which the church receives.

Barnabas is among the first of the Apostles to welcome in the Gentiles, and to initiate ministry amongst them. He also is the first to receive Paul after his conversion, courageously accepting his claims of repentance and faith in Jesus. Finally, Barnabas overlooks John Mark's earlier failing in order to continue to develop the young Evangelist. Barnabas seems to have the uncanny ability to recognize the blessing of God where many of the other Apostles have less clear sight. Barnabas is a nurturing pastor, bringing along those who have failed and transgressed, that they might be built up in the Lord.

Our first lesson from the book of Job beautifully describes the ministry of Barnabas: "Because I delivered the poor that cried, and the fatherless, and him that had none to help him. The blessing of him that was ready to perish came upon me: and I caused the widow's heart to sing for joy. I put on righteousness, and it clothed me: my judgment was as a robe and a diadem. I was eyes to the blind, and feet was I to the lame. I was a father to the poor: and the cause which I knew not I searched out." This is what Barnabas did. He ministered to the literal and spiritual orphans and widows. He received those who had nothing to give, and built them up in Christ. Barnabas sought out the cause of those who, even in the church community were ready to be turned away. And in God's blessing which was bestowed on Barnabas, those around him were blessed. What spiritual gifts Barnabas received he poured into Paul and Mark who became great men of God and leaders in the young Church of Jesus Christ.

There are many lessons which we can learn from the life of St. Barnabas, but I wanted to highlight two this morning. First, St. Barnabas was ready to receive the penitent sinner. In both Paul and Mark, Barnabas recognize the previous sins, but did not allow those sins to continue to control the lives of these men. Barnabas receives Paul's penitence before anyone else in Jerusalem is willing to do so. Barnabas had certainly been

personally effected by the persecution of Saul of Tarsus. Similarly, the desertion of Mark had had real consequences for the missionary effort of Paul and Barnabas. However, Barnabas was ready to forgive and reconcile and continue the work set before them. He does not hold a grudge, or hold on to fear. He dismisses the question of whether this penitence is genuine or whether it will last. He acts in faith, forgiving and moving forward. This is the call for all Christians. We are to receive the repentant sinner and build them up in the Lord. It takes courage to forgive. It requires faith, and even a willingness to suffer for Christ. God often works through our forgiveness to confirm and strengthen the young faith of the penitent sinner.

Secondly, St. Barnabas sets the example for encouragement in ministry. Barnabas finds Paul and Mark and draws them into the work which God sets before them. He recognizes their calling, even perhaps before they themselves do. Barnabas involves them in the work of God without jealousy or pride. Barnabas does not try to lay claim to Paul's fame or Mark's service. Barnabas recognized that the ministry was God's not his. In Lystra we are told that it was Paul who was the "chief-speaker" between them. Paul who was the newer Christian and who had initially worked so hard against the growth of the church. Yet, Barnabas does not begrudge this position of Paul. Rather, Barnabas works to build Paul up, supporting his work however he is able. This is a great example of servant leadership. St. Barnabas uses his gifts to put these other men in a place where they are able even to surpass him.

And so, as we celebrate the work of God in the life of his servant St. Barnabas, let us endeavor to follow in his example. Let us commit ourselves to forgiveness and reconciliation. May we not hold onto the failings of the past, but encourage repentance and Godly service. And Let us build one another up in our several callings. It is for us to encourage each-other in Godly service. The world certainly will not. May we ever use our gifts the honor and glory of God in all humility, that we may bring forth fruit by the grace of God and by the power of the Holy Spirit. Amen.