

# Sermons at Saint Paul's

*A Wellspring of spiritual nourishment; A River of service in Jesus' Name*

The Third Sunday after Pentecost/June 13, 2010

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"I died to the law," that divides, "so that I might live to God," who embraces, Paul said – with a little elaboration on my part. The sentiment captures the spirit of Saint Barnabas, the Apostle whose day the Church celebrated on Friday. Barnabas' given name was Joseph. He had been born in Cyprus of the Levite tribe. We first hear of him early in the book of Acts when he joined the apostles after selling one of his fields and giving its proceeds as an offering to God to sustain their community. The Apostles in turn gave him the new name of Barnabas which means "son of encouragement." The name fitted his personality and actions.

The carved wooden reredos above the altar here contains nine statues. Two of them represent the church's mission. One of course is our second rector, William Hobart Hare who became bishop to the great Sioux nation in 1873. We travel to the Standing Rock Reservation in North Dakota each summer so that our young people and native youth can work together to create a three-day camp. The opposite statue representing mission is Saint Barnabas. Episcopal Community Services operates a shelter for over one hundred single mothers and their children in West Philadelphia called Saint Barnabas' Mission. I was there on Tuesday to help them celebrate their 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary. It is a beautiful facility in an economically depressed neighborhood. They give remarkable encouragement and dignity to the homeless families they serve. Today we recognize Episcopal Community Services for its mission in our diocese.

Saint Barnabas carried out mission in a way befitting one called "son of encouragement." Paul went to Jerusalem, sometime after his call by the risen Christ on the road to Damascus. Many Christians there distrusted him and wanted little to do with him. He had formerly been a persecutor of the church. It was Barnabas who encouraged them to embrace Paul, not to dismiss him. Later, when Paul had an argument with Mark (and would not take him along in his mission) Barnabas reached out and included Mark in a missionary journey of his own while Paul took Silas.

Barnabas seems to embody our vision here at Saint Paul's of turning each to the other not in distrust or dismissal, but in Christ and with encouragement.

There is something of Jesus' practice in this style of mission. We find Jesus in the gospel story at table in the house of a Pharisee named Simon. In Jesus' day people reclined to eat, their left arms holding up their heads, their right arms reaching out to the food at a center table, with their legs stretched out behind. That is how it is that the woman stood behind Jesus at his feet. Simon knew that this woman was a sinner. The Law declared her ritually impure, one not to be associated with. Jesus saw someone in need of forgiveness. As Paul might say, Jesus died to the law that divides, so that he might live to God, who embraces. The woman opened a jar of ointment to rub into Jesus' feet. It was one precious thing she had. The aroma filled the room. The woman's generosity was an embarrassment to Simon's inhospitality. He gave his guest no water to wash his feet, no kiss of greeting, no oil for anointing, yet this woman seemingly knew no limit in providing all these things with her tears and ointment. Jesus forgave her (something only God had authority to do) and accepted her as God would, to which the other guests reacted with consternation. Later in the Gospel of Luke Jesus would explain: "All things have been handed over to me by my Father," including the power to forgive sins.

A Jesus and Barnabas style of mission is forgiving, encouraging and embracing. Our gifts, like the woman's costly ointment, are given in thanksgiving because we know that God loves us. Our mission does not divide and reaches out in some mysterious way to sinners who seem far removed from us. I was talking with a priest this week who is going to lead a memorial service for a young man whose criminal life led to his being shot and killed. His shooting was deserved. Can a mother place this son before God? We feel some unease. I remembered a Haitian proverb that goes, "All people are people." Somehow God's love stretches and includes.

Two weeks ago we heard Sharon Pervez talk about the persecution of Christians in Pakistan – the burning of their homes and churches, and killing. As you know we have been privileged to provide a home for her father and now the whole family while they wait to move into a house later this summer. Thursday evening I was with Rafiq Friend who is an Ahmadi Muslim known for their moderation and peacefulness. We were part of a peace delegation to Israel and the West Bank two years ago. He is grieving over 94 fellow Muslims who were killed while at prayer by

the Taliban in Lahore, Pakistan. The Ahmadi belief that their 19<sup>th</sup> century founder is a prophet coming after Mohammed is reviled by Muslim fundamentalists.

What is it that causes a people to dismiss and even destroy those who differ from them? What was it that caused Paul, before Christ called him, to persecute Christians? Paul's understanding was that he had been living by a law of division – dividing pure from impure, clean from unclean with the imperative to remove those considered offensive. Jesus shows a different way of mission, one marked by forgiveness, hospitality and thanksgiving. Barnabas found in it a basis for his encouragement. Paul found a faith that could die to a Law that divides in order to live to God who embraces. It is this faith that saves us, Jesus says – so that, indeed, we can “go in peace.”

Amen.