

Encouragement
Feast of St. Barnabas
June 11, 2020

Son of encouragement. That is what the name Barnabas means, and encouragement is something we could use a little extra dose of right now.

Encouragement comes in many shapes and sizes. It looks different depending on the circumstances in which it is needed. It can be active and outgoing or quiet and reflective, a devoted supporter cheering excitedly from the sidelines or a faithful friend sitting quietly to listen even if only to silence. We need different encouragement in different seasons: to rouse us from complacencies, to support us when we are tired, to share with us in our joys, and to help us bear our sorrows.

All of these are forms of encouragement, but they all have some things in common. First, encouragement is about showing up, and not only or even necessarily physically, but being present emotionally and spiritually for those with whom we have relationships. Which is a second point, encouragement assumes relationship. Whether long-standing or newly formed, to encourage is to speak into the life of another and not simply at a situation.

We see these traits in the example of Barnabas, an example we would do well to ponder. When Paul first makes his way to Jerusalem after his conversion, the majority of the church keeps their distance, unsure of what to make of this strange turn of events. But not Barnabas. He steps into the gap and reaches out to both sides, bringing Paul to the apostles and bearing witness to the work which the Lord was doing in and through him. He encouraged Paul and the apostles by showing up and standing where others were afraid to tread.

Some time later, we hear that Paul and Barnabas have a parting of ways after much successful work is done on behalf of the Gospel, encouraging work in the founding of new churches and the support of the saints across Asia Minor. And when it came time to plan a new journey, Barnabas once again sought to be an encourager and to give the young, and still somewhat impulsive, John Mark a second chance after his early departure from their first journey. Paul is not convinced. We cannot say that Paul or Barnabas was right or wrong in the moment when they part ways, but we can say that because of his relationship with Mark, Barnabas saw something worth encouraging, relying on his relationship with one who later in life would be considered useful in the ministry according to Paul's letter to the Colossians and the request in the second letter to Timothy to bring Mark with him.

In both cases, Barnabas encouraged those who would go on to minister to generations of the church, and like many encouragers, Barnabas's name, though well-attested in the life of the early church, does not garner near the attention of those whom he supported. We have no books of the Bible written by him, but it is entirely possible that we have his heart and ministry of encouragement to thank for some of the earliest material which we would come to receive as the New Testament in the Epistles of St. Paul and the Gospel according to Mark.

Which brings us to the question of how we are to be sons and daughters of encouragement in our own day. We live in a time in which criticism comes far easier than compliments, when tearing someone down comes more easily than doing the work of encouragement. But we are called to be people of

reconciliation, and to reconcile is to walk the long, hard road together not charge at one another with jousts outstretched to knock one another down from a distance. There is no encouragement to be found in such actions, because there is no Gospel in such behavior.

Encouragement isn't the act of donning rose-colored glasses but rather taking an honest look at the situation and seeing how God is at work in people and circumstances before us. It is showing up and being in relationship.

One of the ways we do that is by listening. As I commented last week on the Visitation the need for us to listen has perhaps never been greater. Listening can certainly be an act of encouragement, because not only does it require the showing up, but to really listen, so as to truly hear the one who speaks, is to desire the deepening of relationship. Listening is to be an active undertaking and not just a passive courtesy while we wait to respond.

I am continually amazed at just how many Christians, much less the general population, fail to comprehend the importance of this. When we go into a conversation, event, Facebook post, or any setting, including worship, with our ears tuned in for buzz words and positions, we are only listening to confirm our own perspective or to give ourselves permission to disregard all that is being said because it does not fit our own narrative. And when we do, we close ourselves off to the possibility that we may be encouraged by a different viewpoint or that we might be called to expand the circle of those we encourage just a bit further.

So when you hear me say that we need to listen, don't hear me say that we need to sit on our hands and do nothing about the issues of race, injustice, oppression, hatred, division, and sin. That's not what I'm saying. What I'm saying is that I don't have the answers to the pressing circumstances of our day, save the truth that we are all sinners in desperate need of God's grace and salvation in Jesus Christ. What I'm saying is that we need to find ways to turn down the temperature of the rhetoric so that we can turn up the volume on the much-needed conversations with those we seek to serve, with brothers and sisters in Christ, with community members, leaders, agencies and ministries, and with any others who are already doing things from which we may learn and grow. Most importantly, I'm saying we need to listen to God, not to see if he is calling us to action, because He is, but to find out how he is calling us to serve. To learn what encouragement is he asking St. Andrew's to render to those around us.

Until we learn to listen, first to God and then to our neighbors, we cannot hope to be true ministers of encouragement, because even with the best of intentions, we will hear what we want and assert ourselves as arbiters of what is good, right, and true. We will seek quick, self-satisfying changes rather than long-lasting, substantial ones. We will strive to win, or at least for our opponents to lose, more than we will seek justice, freedom, and peace. We will seek our wants and desires above the ministry of the kingdom of God.

We have much to learn about ourselves and about our calling as Christians, both as individuals and as a parish. In the coming days, weeks, months, and even years, I pray that we will show up in our community and build lasting relationships in the lives of our neighbors. And I pray that it is because we are ever encouraged by our relationship with God and by the example of his saints, like Barnabas with whom we share the call to be ministers of encouragement.