



## LIVING WORD EPISCOPAL CHURCH

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### The Feast of St. Barnabas: You Are My Friends

Acts 11:22-30 &  
St. John 15:12-16  
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Today the usual scripture lessons for the Second Sunday after Trinity gets bumped as the Church commemorates St. Barnabas. Most of what we know about St. Barnabas is found in the book of Acts, although Paul mentions him in some of his epistles. We know that his given name was Joseph, that he was a Levite, and that his family came from the island of Cyprus. For centuries Jews had been scattered all over the known world—we call that the Jewish Diaspora—and Barnabas was part of that. “Barnabas” was what the other apostles called him and it means something like “son of exhortation” or “son of consolation”. The word can refer to encouragement and exhortation, but it can also refer to comfort and consolation and in some way Barnabas was characterised by this—obviously enough that that’s what the others named him. I take that to mean he was a great preacher and that he was probably also very caring in the way he ministered the gospel and the grace of God to others.

And, I guess it should be obvious from the fact that the feast refers to him as St. Barnabas *the Apostle* that he was an apostle. I don’t think I’ve ever preached on what it means to be an apostle. But since there are plenty of folks running around today claiming to be apostles, I think it’s worth taking a minute to define what makes an apostle. It’s a little difficult, because the New Testament uses the word and title in quite a few different ways. The word itself simply refers to someone who is sent by another. The Church Father, Origin, gives the basic

definition: “Everyone who is sent by someone is an apostle of the one who sent him.”<sup>1</sup> In the civil sphere it could refer to all sorts of representatives: envoys, ambassadors, and people like that. And in the Bible, an apostle is a messenger—it could be a human being or it could be an angel—sent by God—and that includes Jesus—to deliver a message or to proclaim the gospel. In the very broadest biblical sense of the word, we are all apostles. But the New Testament also uses “apostle” in a narrower sense, which is usually how we think of it. The problem of false apostles goes all the way back to the days of the early church, so we see the *actual* apostles, the ones who had lived with and been sent by Jesus himself, hammering out a definition in Acts. In Acts 1:21-22 they defined an apostle as “one of the men who have accompanied us during all the time that the Lord Jesus went in and out among us, beginning from the baptism of John until the day when he was taken up from us.” They especially emphasized that the apostles were witnesses of the resurrected Jesus. In 2 Corinthians, Paul adds that the real apostles were known by “the signs of an apostles”, which meant “signs and miracles and wondrous deeds”. And Peter stresses that the duty of the apostles was to teach the words of the prophets and of Jesus to the churches. That first part is why Paul, at least at first, was seen as an outsider by the other apostles—and, of course, it didn’t help that he’d been one of their greatest enemies before he met Jesus. Paul hadn’t walked with Jesus during his ministry, but because of his encounter with Jesus on the road to Damascus, he was an eyewitness to the resurrection and he was commissioned and sent by the Lord just as the others were. But that was a unique situation for Paul. Barnabas was not one of the twelve, but Jesus had many other disciples. Tradition says that Barnabas was one of the seventy that Jesus sent out earlier in his ministry and that made him a bona

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<sup>1</sup> *Jo.* 32.17, ed. Preuschen 1903: 453, 17

fide apostle. So if you meet someone and he (or she) tells you that he’s an apostle, you can say, “Awesome! So am I!” And if he tries to tell you that it’s something else, that he’s got special authority that other Christians don’t have, or if he says that he speaks for the Lord in a way other Christians don’t, well, I’d probably run away—because no one alive today is going to have those credentials. My observation is that most folks making this claim today, make it because they’re preaching false gospels and false doctrines. If you’re preaching the Bible, that’s all the authority you need, but these folks are preaching something else and so they claim to be apostles teaching new revelations from God. Run away from anyone who does that.

So our Epistle today, from Acts 11, tells us that Barnabas was a member of the Jerusalem church. And Luke writes that after the martyrdom of Stephen, a number of people from the church there were in fear of their lives and ran off—some as far away as Phoenicia, Cyprus, and Antioch in Syria—where they began proclaiming the gospel amongst the Jews of those places. Some of those who heard and believed in Antioch were what Luke calls “Hellenists”—Greek-speaking Jews of the Diaspora, people like Barnabas. When the apostles in Jerusalem heard this, they naturally sent Barnabas to Antioch to be their representative and to give leadership to the churches that were starting to form there. And verses 23-24 say:

**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.**

It fits right in with his nickname, “son of exhortation”. He came to a group of new believers, many of them believing but struggling as new believers often do, and he exhorted

them. Luke says he was a good man, but first and foremost, Barnabas ministered to these brothers and sisters in the power of the Spirit and, empowered by the Spirit, the gospel did what it always does: it brought many to the Lord.

And it would seem that many of those people were Gentiles. That posed a problem for the early church. They were Jews. Jesus was *their* Messiah. He'd come to announce coming judgement on faithless Israel, to deliver those who would follow him, and to create a new Israel. So Jesus and the gospel were very much part of *their* story. Jesus changed everything. But there was still a lot that was the same. Even though this new people gathered to worship on Sundays, they continued to gather with the synagogues and to visit the temple. They kept the *torah*: they circumcised their children, they observed the Sabbath, they watched what they ate. And if there were any Gentiles—and there were some, but not very many, and most of them were pretty keen on the *torah* already—they expected those Gentiles to be converts to Judaism if they were going to follow Jesus. But as more and more Gentiles heard the message, as those first Jewish believers saw the promises spoken by the prophets beginning to come true—as Gentiles saw that God was with them, took hold of them, and followed them back to their meeting places to give glory to the God of Israel—well, it started raising questions. Did Gentiles really need to be good Jews to be good followers of Jesus? Did they have to be circumcised? Did they have to keep the Sabbath and watch the things they ate? These kinds of questions confronted that growing community in Syrian Antioch—and they confronted Barnabas. And then, Luke says, Barnabas thought of his old friend Saul, who was in Tarsus. Tarsus was just around the northeast corner of the Mediterranean from Antioch. It wasn't an easy journey overland, but it was a quick trip by ship. Luke doesn't

give us all the details, but I suspect that when the two of them had been together in the past, Barnabas had listened as Saul spoke out loud, working through this very problem of the inclusion of Gentiles in the covenant community.

You see, if we go back to Acts 9, we read about Saul's encounter with Jesus on the road to Damascus and his coming to faith. At first the Christians were afraid of him, because they'd heard how he had persecuted the church in Jerusalem, wreaking havoc amongst those who invoked the name of Jesus. But then he began preaching there and the Christians loved him, but he was preaching the good news about Jesus in the synagogues and, Luke says, giving proof that Jesus really was the Messiah, so then the non-believing Jews became afraid of him and hatched a plot to kill him. But the secret got out, Saul's friends heard about it, and lowered him over the wall in a basket at night. At that point, Saul decided to go to Jerusalem to join the disciples—the Twelve. But *they* wanted nothing to do with Saul and didn't believe his story. This was the man that stood by supervising the stoning of Stephen. This was the man who arrested their brothers and sisters and had them dragged before the Jewish authorities to be put to death. But Barnabas believed. It sounds as though Barnabas had heard confirming reports of what Saul had been doing in Damascus. And so after the other disciples had driven Saul away, Barnabas went after him, brought him back to the others, and pleaded his case, telling them how Saul had met the risen Jesus on the road to Damascus and telling them of the reports of his powerful preaching of the gospel there. And the others believed, they received Saul, and pretty soon he was boldly preaching Jesus in Jerusalem.

So Barnabas travelled to Tarsus and set out to look for Saul, and when he found him, he took him back to Antioch. And for a whole year, Luke

says, Barnabas and Saul met with the church there and taught the people. And Luke gives an interesting little side note, that this is when and where Jesus' disciples were first called Christians—or you could say, “Messianists”, since Christ isn't Jesus' name, it's his title, the Greek way of saying “Messiah”. It shows that the good news was getting around, and whether people really believed or not that Jesus was actually the Messiah, they knew that that's what these “Christians” believed, and that's what they called them: followers of the Messiah.

Saul—whom we usually refer to by his Greek name, but we don't see that in Acts until he and Barnabas are sent off on their first joint missionary journey—but Saul or Paul gets all of our attention. That's for good reason. But without Barnabas acting as his advocate, we may never have heard anything about Paul. He wasn't just the “son of exhortation” to the saints at Jerusalem, but he was the “son of exhortation” for Paul when he was rejected by the other apostles, and he was the “son of exhortation” when he went to Tarsus to find the very man whom he knew would have the solution to this problem of the Gentiles. And he was surely the “son of exhortation” when, with Paul, he took up a generous collection from amongst the saints in Antioch, so that the two of them could deliver it to Jerusalem for the relief of the church there, when they were hit by the prophesied famine.

Now let's look at our Gospel today. I came across something interesting when I was researching why our lectionary gives us our Epistle and Gospel today. The Gospel is about love and I thought that was interesting. We often talk about St. John as the apostle of love, because he's the one who so stressed Jesus' theme of love in his Gospel and in the epistles he wrote. Today's Gospel might seem more appropriate for his feast day. But our Gospel today, John 15:12-16,

was originally, back in the middle ages, what's called a "common Gospel". In this case, it was a common Gospel lesson appointed to be read on the feast of any apostle for which there wasn't some other Gospel lesson appointed. And while, gradually and through the years, various other Gospels were appointed to be read on the feasts of the other apostles, this common Gospel about love stuck to St. Barnabas and his feast day. And while we don't know very much about him, it fits. It fits with what we know of his defense of Paul, it fits with what we know of his care for his poor and struggling brothers and sisters, and it fits with the nickname the other apostles gave him: "son of exhortation".

Let's look at that short Gospel again. It's John 15:12-16, part of the long discourse that Jesus spoke to his friends after the Last Supper, before he was arrested and taken off to be crucified. Here's what Jesus said to them:

**This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends. You are my friends if you do what I command you. No longer do I call you servants, for the servant does not know what his master is doing; but I have called you friends, for all that I have heard from my Father I have made known to you. You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you that you should go and bear fruit and that your fruit should abide, so that whatever you ask the Father in my name, he may give it to you.**

I have to think that these words—and so many others like them—that Jesus spoke to his disciples were running around the head of Barnabas all the time. "This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you." You and I might just hear in that that Jesus is give us something to do—*another* commandment that we

didn't have before. But "commandment" said something very clear to anyone who was Jewish. "Commandment" pointed them straight to *torah*, to the law. The *torah* was full of commandments. Thou shalt and thou shalt not, over and over and over. And you'll remember that that law was about showing the people of Israel how to live as the Lord's covenant people. He had called them, he had delivered them from Pharaoh's bondage, he had brought them through the Red Sea, and at Mt. Sinai he gave them his law. The law was the covenant charter. The Lord promised to be their God and he promised to give them the promised land and to be with them and to make them fruitful and to multiply them in that land. And, for their part, they promised to be his people, to worship him and him alone, and to be a light to the nations—to show everyone what it was to live in the presence of our Creator. And the law was what set them apart from everyone else in the world: initiating them into the covenant by circumcision, reminding them of the covenant in the Passover, showing them how to be holy, and giving them instructions for making things right with their God after those times they would break his commandments. The law was their way of life as the Lord's people. And Jesus' disciples were all steeped in it. It defined them as a people.

And now, as he's about to give his life for theirs, he says to them, "This is my commandment..." He's repeating what he told them two chapters earlier at the start of his discourse, those words that we read every year on Maundy Thursday, "I give you a new commandment—that you love one another." Those words, "I give you a new commandment" would have got the attention of Jesus' disciples. If anyone else had spoken those words, it would have been tantamount to blasphemy. A "new" commandment? Impossible. The Lord had given his law through Moses and he gave it

carved on stone to make a point that it was to stand unchanged, unchanging, and forever. For Jesus to say that he was giving them a new commandment was like saying that he was giving them a new law—as if I stood here and announced that I'm giving you a new book to add to your Bibles.

But then what Jesus said: "love one another as I have loved you"—that, without the "as I have loved you" part, that was already in the law. "You shall love your neighbour as yourself: I am the Lord," said Leviticus. So, on the one hand, this was just kind of reiterating what they already knew to be in the law, but the *way* Jesus said it—the part of about giving a new commandment—that sounds like Jesus was giving a new law. And that's just what he was doing. It's where the *torah* was pointing all along, but now that love becomes the great theme. As William Cowper wrote in that great hymn we sometimes sing: "Redeeming love has been my theme and shall be 'til I die". The law is, at the same time, the same and profoundly different and new and all because of Jesus. It's that "as I have loved you" part. The disciples wouldn't have understood quite yet, but they would soon. Jesus hints at it. "Greater love has no one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends." We have often taken this verse out of context. There are times when giving your life for the sake of your friends—or your enemies—is the ultimate demonstration of love, but Jesus wasn't talking here about just anyone giving his life for his friends. He was talking very specifically about the sacrifice that *he* was about to make, the sacrifice that would literally change everything and the sacrifice that would become the cornerstone of this new commandment.

Think about the old law. We sum it up every Sunday in the words of Jesus: Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength, and your neighbour as yourself. And there are parts of the

law, *torah*, that are easy to understand in light of that. If you love your neighbour, you don't steal his stuff, you don't tell lies about him, you don't kill him, you don't move the boundary markers of his property, you don't speak harshly to him. But there are a lot of things in the law that don't translate nearly so easily. There were some things in the law that God's people just had to do in obedience, trusting that it made sense—that somehow it equated to either "Love God" or "Love your neighbour". Under the old covenant, Jesus says, these men were like servants. They did what their Lord told them to do, even when they didn't understand or it didn't make sense. But Jesus says that those days are over. He calls them his friends, not his servants, and he tells them that—well, first, because he's going to die for them as a demonstration of just how much he loves them as friends, but also because his death and resurrection will establish a new covenant and it will be like the sun has risen and driven away every shadow like the light of the sun at noon, because of that everything about this new covenant will make perfect sense in light of what Jesus has done. If someone just tells you to love your neighbour, that leaves all sorts of questions. What about this situation or that situation? What if your neighbour is annoying? What if your neighbour does something to offend you? What if your neighbour sins against you? What if loving your neighbour means you come up short-handed or hurt? And, of course that ever-present question: Who am I obligated to consider or to treat as a neighbour? But Brothers and Sisters, when the cross of Jesus stands before us at the centre of this new covenant, every one of those questions fades away and the answer stands out clear and bright as day. At the cross Jesus has shown us what love looks like. If we love like Jesus, it doesn't matter if your neighbour is annoying, if he sins against you, or even if loving him means coming up short yourself. Jesus gave his life. That's love.

Period. And that Jesus-like love is the law of the new covenant. It's what shapes the life of us, this new covenant people. It's the fruit we bear.

Of course, this new law of love is overwhelming. The disciples didn't yet understand. Today's Gospel tells us what the new law is and that the cross of Jesus is the lens through which we understand it, and it's his cross—his death for us—that motivates our love for him and for each other. But if this is all we have from Jesus, the new covenant people will fail at this new law as miserably as the old covenant people failed at keeping the old law. So it's providential that we remember St. Barnabas and celebrate his feast day so close to Pentecost. Our Gospel today comes from the same discourse we've been reading throughout Easter and Ascensiontide in preparation for Pentecost and so we can't read today's Gospel without also remembering Jesus' promise and gift of God's own Spirit to indwell his people. When we hear his commandment to love each other unconditionally and to the uttermost end it sounds impossible. And then we see his own sacrifice for us at the cross and our hearts well up with gratitude and we know that what he deserves from us in return is that same kind of love—for him and for each other. And we *want* to love that way. But on our own—even as our hearts well up with gratitude for what he's done for us—we can only get so far, because the cost is too great or because that person or this person is just too much or too hard. Brothers and Sisters, that's when the Spirit does his work. He transforms our affections so that our hearts well up not only with our own gratitude for what Jesus has done for us, but our hearts also well up and overflow with the very love of God. We see that love in Barnabas. He risked everything for the sake of his Lord, Jesus, and to proclaim the good news of the cross and the resurrection. He knew that it might cost him everything to come to

the defense of Saul, whom his friends had unanimously rejected. And we see the love of Jesus, implanted in him by the Spirit, as he worked for the relief of his brother and sister saints when they were starving. It was an act of love that demonstrated the unity of God's people, the gentiles and the hellenised Jews, giving generously from what they had, to provide for the Jewish believers in Jerusalem. And we also see that love—love for Jesus and love for neighbour, as he set off, first with Paul and later with John Mark—those are wonderful stories in themselves, but they'll have to wait for another time—but in them we see again a love that only the cross of Jesus can motivate and that only the Spirit can keep alive, a love that risks everything for the sake of Jesus. Brothers and Sisters, that the same love we know ourselves, the same love we're reminded of when we come to the Lord's Table to participate in the great events of our salvation, the same love that the Spirit has poured into our hearts just as he did Barnabas. So go forth to love and serve the Lord, my friends, and as you do so, let St. Barnabas the Apostle be a reminder of just what that looks like.

Let's pray: O Lord God Almighty, who endowed your holy apostle Saint Barnabas with special gifts of the Holy Spirit: Do not leave us destitute of your many gifts, nor of grace always to use them to your honour and glory, through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever.  
*Amen.*