

Isaiah 42:2-12
Psalm 112
Acts 11:19-30; 13:1-3
Matthew 10:7-16

The Feast of St Barnabas
St Barnabas, Bainbridge Island
June 10, 2018
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Daughters and Sons of Encouragement

See, I am sending you out like sheep into the midst of wolves; so be wise as serpents and innocent as doves. Hmm. That doesn't sound very encouraging! I don't know what happens for you when you hear those words, but they always stop me in my tracks. I know I ought not to be taken aback by them, but I am. The world seems more wolfish than sheepish. We see it everywhere - when the grocery store clerk is astonished at our honesty because we hand back the extra \$5 in change she gave us. We see it when someone lashes out and rather than returning evil for evil, and we reply "I'm sorry you are hurting..." We recognize the difficulty of being tender and vulnerable in a competitive and self-serving culture. We see it when we tithe, when we offer food or money to someone on the street who is hungry, when we spend our discretionary time volunteering or caring for friends or family, and so run counter to the world of agreement that says "I'll get mine, and by God you're not going to take it from me. You can get your own." There are wolves everywhere. And there are countless times when being a Christian in our profoundly secular world leaves us feeling like sheep in their midst.

It's probably always been that way. Certainly it was that way in the first century Mediterranean world Jesus inhabited. No one dared venture out at night. There were in-groups and out-groups and those boundaries were crossed at great peril to those who would do the crossing. Women and children were considered property at best, and they were in constant danger when not in the company of male relatives. There are wolves everywhere. And Jesus tells us quite plainly that he is sending us out into their midst.

I have to say that I appreciate being told the truth – whether or not it is truth I particularly want to hear. I walk around in the world assuming people are telling me the truth... that way I avoid the tendency to think I can read people's minds, or know what they're "really saying." And I try to respond to the truth – or untruth – as it's spoken to me. So if someone somehow thinks they need to lie to me, they may. And still, offering a safe place in which to speak the truth seems worthwhile. That said, I think Jesus is telling us that the world isn't a safe place. Think about it – we don't hear many stories of Jesus being in safe places. And he spoke the truth even when it wasn't safe. I like this straight talking, no sugar coating Jesus. It's helpful, really. It's good to know what you're walking in to. Especially when it's a pack of wolves.

I find it very interesting that even though Jesus is sending his disciples out into a pack of wolves, he seems to say that they should go totally unarmed. Not just without the weaponry that might fend off the wolf-pack, but without even a bag, some sandals, an extra tunic or a walking stick. Instead, they are to go out into the world knowing that they are doing kingdom building work, and trusting that they will be given what they need because people will recognize them as the kingdom builders they are. Well, at least some people will – those folks Jesus calls “worthy.” Did you catch who the worthy ones are? The worthy ones were those who would offer hospitality to the wandering disciples... The ones who would offer hospitality. Not the ones who pray 6 times a day. Not the ones who give lots of money to the church. Not the ones who preach and pontificate. The ones who offer hospitality. This is the problem Jesus was referring to when he spoke of Sodom and Gomorrah. The problem was that people were profoundly self-righteous. They were mean spirited. They were violent. And they failed to offer life-giving hospitality, which in the precarious first century Mediterranean world often meant certain death to travelers and strangers. When Jesus described the worthy ones as the ones who offer hospitality, it was his way of telling us that we will be known as Christians because we offer God’s love – God’s hospitality in the world. Certainly Jesus was reiterating the sacred obligation to afford hospitality to strangers in this context because in his world a lack of hospitality was an issue of life or death. The allusion to Sodom and Gomorrah, those cities of profoundly inhospitable people, speaks of the seriousness of Jesus’ mandate. Jesus tells the travelers to offer peace to the worthy households. Yet even for the households that are not worthy, peace is not actively withheld. Instead, the peace returns to the disciples. It’s such an interesting choice of words... *If the house is worthy, let your peace come upon it; but if it is not worthy, let your peace return to you.* Jesus says “let”... allow... permit... consent to. This is gentle language. It’s sheep language rather than wolf language.

If the house is worthy, let your peace come upon it; but if it is not worthy let your peace return to you. If we find ourselves in a place where our peace is not welcomed, we consent to our peace returning to us so that it might be extended and accepted somewhere else. That allows us to be at peace too. Notice that we aren’t to become irritated because our peace offering hasn’t been accepted... quite the contrary. We are to let our peace return to us... presumably becoming profoundly peaceful even in the midst of those who want nothing to do with us. Even in the midst of chaos, we allow our peace to return to us, shake the dust off our feet, and move along.

Be smart, but don’t be afraid, Jesus seems to be saying. Go out into the world. Proclaim. Cure. Raise. Cleanse. Cast out. Give. Greet. Get going, there is kingdom work to be done. And while you’re being sent out as sheep among wolves, you’ll be alright, as long as you’re wise as serpents, and innocent as doves. No need to second guess or mind read, just go. No need to worry about what to take, take nothing. No need to worry about what you’ll encounter, you’ll encounter it all. Don’t be afraid... you have all that you need. I am all that you need...

Today we celebrate the feast of St Barnabas, our patron saint. Some of you know a lot about St Barnabas, the apostle Paul's sometimes companion. He was thought to be among the ones Jesus sent out as sheep among wolves. The name Barnabas means Man or Son of Encouragement. I love being part of a community who chose the encourager for their patron saint. Knowing God would be his provider, Barnabas gave his life to encouraging everyone he encountered by proclaiming the Good News wherever he was sent.

I've been thinking a lot about what it means to be a part of a community of encouragers, thinking about how we encourage one another, and how we sometimes don't, about how we're sometimes too shy, too self-absorbed, too worried about our encouragement not being welcomed. And I remember what Jesus said... offer your peace, your encouragement, your love... if someone doesn't want it, it can all come back to you. But offer. Always, always offer.

A couple of days ago I was walking along the beach, listening to the seabirds, watching the waves, saying my prayers and thoroughly enveloped in the beauty of God's creation. I looked up and off in the distance I saw a woman running toward me. She was running very fast, yet her movement through space and time was absolutely exquisite - graceful and seemingly effortless. I couldn't take my eyes off her and before I knew it she was right in front of me. "You are an amazing runner!" I cried out as she sped by. Why did I do that? Because it was true! And because her beauty was a gift to me and I guess that's the best way I knew how to say that in that split second. I walked on and she ran on and that was that, or so I thought. But when I was nearing the end of my walk, that same woman ran up behind me, slowly this time, but passing me still. As she ran by, she turned and said "You were just the encouragement I needed today! I'm doing speedwork and it is so hard." And then she was gone.

There are stories of encouragement everywhere in this community of encouragers. We are encouragers of the impoverished and homeless in Grays Harbor County, we are encouragers of the Kitsap County women who are victims of domestic violence, we are encouragers of students who are fighting against gun violence, we are encouragers of women in Mongolia whose lives are being changed as they begin new businesses, we are encouragers of the homeless and hungry in our own community, we are encouragers of little ones who are learning about Jesus and about God's love for us all. This fall we begin a group of encouragers who will explore the next chapter of their lives together as they navigate lives having lost their beloveds. There are so many to encourage...

I've been asking to hear your stories of encouragement. They are beautiful and I hope you will keep telling these stories out in the world. These words, from one of you, show us what happens when we encourage one another...

*If one...who seems to see a finer person that we believe ourselves to be, **one whose choice is to speak [words] precisely attuned to our ability to hear what our souls need to hear**, then our lonely moments are graced with beauty, hope and joy. It may be a small gesture – a smile, touch or quick hug. [We can] offer encouragement and care by simple yet profound attention to [the one who is right in front of us], right then and there, in that very moment, by offering the gift of... presence.*

Barnabas, Son of Encouragement is our patron saint... which somehow makes us sons and daughters of encouragement too. How would our community be different if we took up the mantle of St Barnabas and took to heart our job as encouragers? When was the last time you let yourself just offer some encouragement without any concern about the outcome? When was the last time you were encouraged?

We are a people called to encourage one another with the good news of God's redeeming love by simply being present, by **using our own gifts and our own voices to be encouragers in a broken and heartsick world**. Our job is to offer without concern about outcomes. We are simply called to go out into the world and love it back into wholeness... and when given the opportunity, to say that we are followers of Jesus of Nazareth **who is our encouragement** and the reason for our life and our loving. Amen.