

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 11, 2023  
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*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 when you hear those words, but they always startle me.

The world out there seems more wolfish than sheepish. We see it everywhere - when the grocery store clerk is astonished at our honesty because we tell her the asparagus is organic and she didn't charge us enough. We see it when someone lashes out and rather than returning evil for evil, we reply "I'm sorry you are hurting..." even when it's hard to be tender and vulnerable in a mean-spirited world. We see it when we tithe, when we offer food or money to someone on the street who is hungry, when we spend our free 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. No one dared venture out at night. Women and children were considered property at best, and they were in constant danger when not in the company of male relatives. Yes, there are wolves everywhere. And Jesus tells us quite plainly that he is sending us out into their midst. I have to say, I appreciate being told the truth - whether or not it is truth I particularly want to hear. The truth Jesus was telling in the first century is the same truth he tells today - 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 appreciate that. It's good to know what you're walking in to. Especially when it's a pack of wolves.

Not only does Jesus send his disciples out into a pack of wolves, he tells them to go unencumbered and unarmed. No weapons to fend off the wolf-pack, not even a bag, some sandals, an extra tunic or a walking stick. All they need to take with them is the knowledge 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 the worthy people will. And the worthy ones were the ones who would offer hospitality to those wandering disciples. 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. No. The ones who offer hospitality are the ones Jesus calls worthy.

Hospitality, or the lack thereof, is the reason Jesus brought Sodom & Gomorrah into this teaching. Those who would use scripture to exclude people unlike themselves, would have us believe the problem with Sodom & Gomorrah was same-sex relationships. But Jesus was talking about hospitality, and the people of Sodom and Gomorrah were profoundly inhospitable. They were self-righteous. They were mean spirited. They were extremely violent. And they failed to offer life-giving hospitality which in the precarious first century Mediterranean world could mean certain death to travelers and strangers.

When Jesus described worthy people as those who offer hospitality, he was saying that we will be known as Christians because we offer God's love and God's radical hospitality. Jesus talked about 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. And the allusion to Sodom and Gomorrah, those cities of profoundly inhospitable people, tells us how serious he was. Jesus told the apostles to offer peace to hospitable households. But if a household is not worthy, he said, just 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 we can offer it somewhere else. We don't need to be irritated because our peace offering hasn't been accepted, we simply let our peace return to us... presumably becoming profoundly peaceful even in the face of those who want nothing to do with us, even in the midst of wolves.

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 our patron saint, Barnabas – *a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and of faith* - and there must be a reason this gospel passage was chosen for him. Some of you know a lot about Barnabas, the apostle Paul's sometimes companion. He was thought to be among the apostles Jesus was sending out as sheep among wolves. The name Barnabas means Son of Encouragement. That wasn't his given name. He'd been born Joseph, but the apostles called him Barnabas. Knowing God would provide for him, Barnabas gave the proceeds from his worldly goods to the fledgling church and gave his life to encouraging everyone he encountered by proclaiming the Good News wherever he was sent.

I've been thinking a lot lately about what a gift it is to be a part of a community of people who encourage one another, about what a gift it is to be an encourager. To be an encourager is to hold hope for someone who can't. To be an encourager is to see and reflect the gifts someone perhaps can't see for themselves. To be an encourager is to walk alongside someone on the hard parts of the journey. To be an encourager is to offer peace. I think sometimes we don't offer encouragement because we're too shy, or too worried about whether our encouragement will be accepted, or even because we're too self-absorbed. But then 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.

Some years ago, I was walking down at South Beach, listening to the seabirds, watching the waves, and saying my prayers, completely lost in my own world. I looked up and 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 a 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 impoverished and homeless people in Grays Harbor County, we are encouragers of immigrants in Kitsap County, we are encouragers of Bainbridge Island students and their families, encouragers of little ones at home and in Guatemala, we are encouragers of the homeless and hungry people in our own community, we are encouragers of elders who are losing their capacities, and encouragers of the ones who have lost their beloveds. There are so many ways to encourage. What are your stories of encouragement? I hope you’ll share them with me and with each other. Your stories of encouragement are sacred, you know, and every time you tell them, others are encouraged.

Barnabas, Son of Encouragement is our patron saint... which somehow makes us sons and daughters of encouragement too. I wonder what would happen if we took up Barnabas’ mantle 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? I don’t mean affirmed for doing something someone wanted you to do... I mean encouraged to be more of who you really are and to use your gorgeous God-given gifts for God’s glory and for uplifting God’s people?

Luke tells us that Barnabas gave generously of his life and substance for the relief of the poor and the spread of the gospel. That is the mission of the church, my dears. It’s the mission of our church – to be a community of faith that welcomes and values and encourages all people. A community committed to following Jesus Christ, serving others, growing our faith, and transforming the world by sharing God’s love. That’s a big commitment, a commitment that will take all our lives to live into. But if we don’t try, the peace, justice, equality, dignity and love God calls us to bring forth in the world will never come to fruition. Jesus entrusted God’s mission in the world to a handful of fishermen, a persecutor, a tax collector, a traitor, some doubters, 70+ ragtag followers and one encourager. And that motley crew did such a good job that we are here, some two thousand years later, following Jesus of Nazareth by living lives of love and service.

Our community is called to encourage one another with the good news of God’s redeeming love, by showing up and using our gifts and our voices to be encouragers in a wolfish, broken and heartsick world. No concern about outcomes, no concern about wolves. God calls us 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 lives and our loving. Amen.