

Isaiah 42:5-12
Psalm 112
Acts 11:19-30; 13:1-3
Matthew 10:7-16

Feast of St Barnabas, Transferred
St. Barnabas Bainbridge Island
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The Rev. Karen Haig

The Courage To Encourage

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! Those words always startle me, I don't know why. I know there are wolves everywhere and it's probably always been that way, yet being a Christian in a profoundly secular world can feel like being a sheep in the midst of wolves. It is hard to know how to proclaim the good news, how to be encouraging, to be tender, vulnerable and loving in a world where politicians lie and cheat and care more about power than they care about justice and peace, in a world where basic rules of civility no longer apply in personal or public discourse, in a world where, when you stop in the middle of Winslow Way to let a person back out of the parking space somebody honks at you – honks at you! There's no honking on Bainbridge Island!

See, I am sending you out like sheep into the midst of wolves; so be wise as serpents and innocent as doves. While I appreciate being told the truth, I can't say this truth is something I particularly enjoy hearing. But this truth Jesus told in the first century is the same truth he tells us today - the world isn't a safe place. Think about it – Jesus didn't do much to create or encourage safety and security... most often he was harassed by people who opposed or wanted to destroy him. But Jesus 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 did Jesus send his disciples out into a pack of wolves, he told them to go unencumbered and unarmed. No weapons to fend off the wolf-pack, not even a bag, sandals, an extra tunic or a walking stick. It's as though Jesus was saying all they needed was the knowledge that they were building God's kingdom, and that they could trust they'd be given what they needed, because people would recognize them as the kingdom builders they were. Or at least the worthy people would. You see, the worthy people were the hospitable people. It wasn't the people who prayed 6 times a day. Or the ones who gave lots of money to the church. Or the ones who preached and pontificated. The hospitable people were the ones Jesus called worthy.

Hospitality – or the lack thereof - is the reason Jesus brought Sodom and Gomorrah into this teaching. People who use scripture to make people wrong, to exclude people unlike themselves, claim the problem with Sodom & Gomorrah was same-sex relationships. But that's not what Jesus was talking about. He was talking about hospitality, because 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 describing the mark of discipleship that is the offering of God's love and God's radical hospitality.

And his allusion to Sodom and Gomorrah, those cities of profoundly inhospitable people, tells us how serious he was.

So the disciples offered peace to hospitable households. *But if a household is not worthy*, Jesus said, *just let your peace return to you*. Just let your peace return to you. If we find that our peace is not welcomed, by friend, family or stranger, we consent to our peace returning to us so we can offer it somewhere else. We don't need to get irritated because our peace offering hasn't been accepted, quite the opposite! We simply let our peace return to us, presumably becoming profoundly peaceful even in the face of the wolves.

Be smart, and 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 seventy apostles Jesus later sent out as sheep among wolves. His Jewish parents named him Joseph, but when he sold all that he had and gave the money to the apostles in Jerusalem, the apostles gave him a new name: Barnabas, which means Son of Encouragement. 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. If it hadn't been for Barnabas, St Paul might never have been accepted by the disciples. Barnabas encouraged them to welcome Paul into the community, something most of them didn't want to do because of Paul's history as a Pharisee who had strongly persecuted Christians. So while we don't hear too much about Barnabas in scripture, he was an important encourager and played a very important role in the early church.

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 joy it is to be an encourager. To be an encourager is to hold hope for someone who can't, to see and reflect the gifts someone perhaps can't see for themselves, to walk alongside someone on the hard parts of the journey. To be an encourager is to offer God's love and peace.

Last Sunday we had a welcome brunch for people who are new or relatively new to the St Barnabas community. The food and hospitality were wonderful, and the conversation was even better. We passed the microphone around to the new folks who wanted to share their experiences of this place. Every single person spoke of the welcome they felt from you. Some spoke of the value of being part of an intergenerational community, of journeying with others who are trying to walk in the way of Jesus, who are working for justice and dignity for all people, who aren't afraid to be tender and vulnerable, people who are welcoming, encouraging and loving. And having been welcomed, encouraged and loved themselves, they are encouraged to

do the same. Do you see how it works? One person reaches out to another who reaches out to another who reaches out to another and so on and on until everybody feels welcomed into the community of God's friends.

There are stories of encouragement everywhere in this community. We are encouragers of women disarming bombs in Laos, encouragers of impoverished and homeless people in Grays Harbor County, encouragers of immigrants in Kitsap County, encouragers of Bainbridge Island students and their families, of little ones at home and in Guatemala, encouragers of the homeless and hungry people in our own community, encouragers of elders who are losing their capacities, encouragers of the ones who have lost their beloveds. There are so many ways to encourage. Your stories of encouragement are sacred, you know, and every time you tell them, you encourage others.

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?

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 into the world will never come to fruition. Jesus entrusted God's mission 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.