



Lamb of God Lutheran Church – Columbus, Ohio

June 11, 2017 (Festival of St. Barnabas, Apostle)

Preacher: Pastor Timothy Wagner

Sermon Text: Acts 11:22-26

Sermon Theme: Barnabas: Faithful Encourager

22 News about them reached the church in Jerusalem, and they sent out Barnabas to travel as far as Antioch.

23 When he arrived and saw the grace of God, he was glad and encouraged all of them to remain true to the Lord with devoted hearts, 24 for he was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and of faith. And large numbers of people were added to the Lord.

25 Then he went to Tarsus to search for Saul, 26 and when he found him he brought him to Antioch. For a whole year they met with the church and taught large numbers. The disciples were first called Christians at Antioch. (CSB)



His given name was Joseph, and he was a Jew from the tribe of Levi, born on the island of Cyprus. But the apostles called him Barnabas, which means “Son of Encouragement.” As you read through the book of Acts, you see that he certainly lived up to his name. Everywhere he went, he encouraged people.

When do you find that you need the most encouragement? Isn’t it when things are not going well, when your best efforts seem to fail, when you are feeling lonely and alone, confused and frightened? If we really are honest with ourselves, don’t we all need encouragement every day? Every day, we fail. We let God down. We let our families down. We let our fellow Christians down. Every day, we face opposition. We are under attack by the devil’s temptations, the world’s lies, and our own sinful nature’s desires. We are under attack by those around us who call love hate and hate love, who call virtue sin and sin virtue, who preach tolerance but won’t tolerate the truth.

God recognizes our need for encouragement, and so his inspired author wrote, ***“Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another”*** (Hebrews 10:25, NIV1984).

The Christians in Antioch in the middle of the first century A.D. needed encouragement. They were not there because the apostles in Jerusalem got together and plotted out a careful mission expansion beyond the borders of Israel. Some of them were refugees from Israel trying to escape the persecution of Christians there. Others were natives of Antioch whom those fleeing Christians told about the crucified Christ.

Now think about that for a moment. Persecuted in one place, they fled to another, and did they just go into hiding? No, they shared their faith. They told people about Jesus. They confessed the Christ for whose sake their lives were in danger. What courage and conviction must have been driving them! And Luke reports, ***“The Lord’s hand was with them, and a great number of people believed and turned to the Lord”*** (v. 21, NIV).

But not everything was easy in this young congregation. Both Jews and Gentiles faced pressure to deny faith in Jesus and return to their roots. As Jewish culture and Greek culture collided, there were no doubt conflicts and disagreements about how the church should operate. There were no real models for them to follow, no experienced leaders for them to lean on. Besides that, so many of them were new to following Christ. They brought with them beliefs and worldviews that saw the world one way, but now together they had to figure out where they were right, where they were wrong, and how to see life and truth and meaning in a whole new way. When you are new to the Christian faith, you are often very zealous and excited, but you also face questions and temptations and trials that you’ve never faced before. And, if you have a whole congregation of new Christians, that zeal could easily be misdirected, and the congregation could quickly crumble.

The Christians in Jerusalem understood this, and so they sent Barnabas to help the Christians in

Antioch. Barnabas was just the right person at just the right time. He was just the faithful encourager that they needed.

What set Barnabas apart was what he saw. Luke reports that, when Barnabas arrived in Antioch, he **“saw the grace of God.”** As he looked and saw this growing congregation, he didn’t see human achievement. He saw God’s grace. He saw how God in love used the persecution in Jerusalem to bring the good news of Jesus to Antioch. He saw how God worked through the simple message of Christ crucified and through the simple sacraments of Baptism and Holy Communion to grow faith in the hearts of unbelievers. He saw how, through that faith, God was forgiving their sins and rescuing them from hell. He saw how, with nothing more than a message of mercy and a God-given zeal to share it, more and more people were seeing their Savior and celebrating their salvation.

Do we always see God’s grace so clearly? Do we trust those simple sacraments and put our confidence in the powerful message of a crucified Christ, or do we see pastors or programs as reasons why a congregation struggles or thrives? Do we celebrate when a child is rescued from hell through the waters of Baptism, or do we lose sight of God’s grace working faith and giving forgiveness through that water? Do we thank God that our congregation is still here with opportunities to proclaim the gospel after nearly 48 years, or do we complain that God isn’t giving us enough outward success? Do you ever thank God for his grace that has kept you in faith, despite the opposition of your sinful nature and the attacks of the devil and the world?

Grace is not something that is readily seen. When most people look at the cross, they see little more than a dying man, at worst a justly condemned criminal, at best a cruel result of corruption and injustice. We see both, and we see grace. In an act of pure grace, Jesus accepted the guilt of all of our sins—all of our complaining, all of our pride, all of our failures to see and celebrate God’s grace—and he was condemned as a criminal in our place, so that justice could be carried out. And yet, because he was innocent, his death was not just. He didn’t deserve to die. His death was the cruel result of corruption and injustice – the corruption and injustice in our hearts and lives. You aren’t going to see that, if you look at the cross with mere physical eyes. Only with eyes of faith can we see God’s grace on that cross, as the innocent one died for the guilty so that we would be counted innocent and worthy of heaven.

Barnabas saw God’s grace not only at the cross but also there in Antioch, as the message of a crucified Christ rescued both Jews and Gentiles from sin and death and hell. When Barnabas saw God’s grace in Antioch, **“he was glad and encouraged all of them to remain true to the Lord with devoted hearts”** (v. 23). He knew that the devil wasn’t happy when people believed in Jesus. He knew that those Christians would be persecuted, just like we are, both by our own sinful hearts and by the sinful world in which we live. He encouraged them with the truth of God’s grace in Christ. He encouraged them with the assurance of God’s presence and power through Word and Sacraments. He encouraged them to hold onto that precious treasure of God’s mercy, when the world would make empty promises of a better, easier life.

Now before we praise Barnabas too much, let’s not ignore how Luke describes him in verse 24. He explains why Barnabas was glad to see God’s grace and why he encouraged the Christians in Antioch in their faith. It was because **“he was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and of faith.”** He was a good man. He was concerned about others. He was always putting others before himself. He was willing to give of himself and make sacrifices for his fellow man.

But his goodness didn’t come from him. He lived a godly life because he was **“full of the Holy Spirit and faith.”** God made him good by working in his heart through the message of grace that he had heard and seen. As God planted faith in Barnabas’ heart, his Holy Spirit took up residence there. It was the Holy Spirit living in him that led him to see his fellow man as God saw them – as sinners set free by the Savior, as children of God through the blood of Jesus.

My friends, the Holy Spirit lives in you, too. As you hear God’s assurance that you have been forgiven by Jesus’ sacrifice on the cross of Calvary, you don’t believe that on your own. The Holy Spirit unleashes his power through that very message to change your heart, to fill you with faith that claims as your own the

perfect life that Jesus lived in your place. The Holy Spirit strengthens your faith through his Word and his Holy Supper. And, filling your heart, he leads you to live a life that celebrates God's grace and encourages your fellow Christians. Praise God for the encouragement he gives you in your own use of his Word and as he places his Word in the mouths of your fellow Christians.

I keep a file of some of the notes and cards I have received over the years in my ministry. Those notes express thanks for ways I have served people and encouragement and prayers for the difficult times in ministry. Every now and then, I look through that file and am reminded what a blessing it is to serve in the public ministry. I give thanks to God for the people I am privileged to serve and for the Christians I am called to serve among. The encouragement that God gives me through fellow Christians like you is a source of strength for me.

But the greatest encouragement that I receive is the encouragement of God's grace, when a note I receive or something I read reminds me of the gifts that God pours out on me and on his Church, simply because of his unconditional love. I will fail as a pastor some days – maybe every day. We will struggle as Christians. Our congregation will face opposition and obstacles. There may be times of outward growth and times of decline. But through it all, we see God's grace, his love that keeps him from turning his back on us, his love that forgives our blindness to his blessings, his love that surrounds us with like-minded Christians to pray with us and for us and to point us back to his promises again and again.

God grant that we may always provide Barnabas-like faithful encouragement to one another, encouragement that sees and celebrates the grace of God, that finds full forgiveness in the cross of Christ and true rest in the reality of his resurrection. Amen.

Lessons for June 11

Isaiah 42:5-12

- ⁵ This is what God the LORD says—
the Creator of the heavens, who stretches them out,
who spreads out the earth with all that springs from it,
who gives breath to its people,
and life to those who walk on it:
- ⁶ “I, the LORD, have called you in righteousness;
I will take hold of your hand.
I will keep you and will make you
to be a covenant for the people
and a light for the Gentiles,
⁷ to open eyes that are blind,
to free captives from prison
and to release from the dungeon those who sit in darkness.
- ⁸ “I am the LORD; that is my name!
I will not yield my glory to another
or my praise to idols.
- ⁹ See, the former things have taken place,
and new things I declare;
before they spring into being
I announce them to you.”
- ¹⁰ Sing to the LORD a new song,
his praise from the ends of the earth,
you who go down to the sea, and all that is in it,
you islands, and all who live in them.
- ¹¹ Let the wilderness and its towns raise their voices;
let the settlements where Kedar lives rejoice.
Let the people of Sela sing for joy;
let them shout from the mountaintops.
- ¹² Let them give glory to the LORD
and proclaim his praise in the islands.

Acts 11:19-30; 13:1-3

¹⁹ Now those who had been scattered by the persecution that broke out when Stephen was killed traveled as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus and Antioch, spreading the word only among Jews. ²⁰ Some of them, however, men from Cyprus and Cyrene, went to Antioch and began to speak to Greeks also, telling them the good news about the Lord Jesus. ²¹ The Lord’s hand was with them, and a great number of people believed and turned to the Lord.

²² News of this reached the church in Jerusalem, and they sent Barnabas to Antioch. ²³ When he arrived and saw what the grace of God had done, he was glad and encouraged them all to remain true to the Lord with all their hearts. ²⁴ He was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and faith, and a great number of people were brought to the Lord.

²⁵ Then Barnabas went to Tarsus to look for Saul, ²⁶ and when he found him, he brought him to Antioch. So

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for a whole year Barnabas and Saul met with the church and taught great numbers of people. The disciples were called Christians first at Antioch.

²⁷ During this time some prophets came down from Jerusalem to Antioch. ²⁸ One of them, named Agabus, stood up and through the Spirit predicted that a severe famine would spread over the entire Roman world. (This happened during the reign of Claudius.) ²⁹ The disciples, as each one was able, decided to provide help for the brothers and sisters living in Judea. ³⁰ This they did, sending their gift to the elders by Barnabas and Saul.

^{13:1} Now in the church at Antioch there were prophets and teachers: Barnabas, Simeon called Niger, Lucius of Cyrene, Manaen (who had been brought up with Herod the tetrarch) and Saul. ² While they were worshiping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, "Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them." ³ So after they had fasted and prayed, they placed their hands on them and sent them off.

Matthew 11:25-30

²⁵ At that time Jesus said, "I praise you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and learned, and revealed them to little children. ²⁶ Yes, Father, for this is what you were pleased to do.

²⁷ "All things have been committed to me by my Father. No one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and those to whom the Son chooses to reveal him.

²⁸ "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. ²⁹ Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. ³⁰ For my yoke is easy and my burden is light."