

September 10 – Called to Go

Scripture: Acts 13:1-5

Last week we talked about some of the people who were instrumental in Paul's conversion and early days of his new faith life, from the courageous example of Stephen, the first martyr, to Ananias who risked all to heal Paul. Today we look at Barnabas. His name was Joseph but the disciples gave him the name Barnabas which means "son of encouragement." We first learn of Barnabas when he sells a field and gives all of the proceeds to the disciples for the support of the early church. This story is at the beginning of the Book of Acts so Barnabas was one of the earliest of believers. Did he meet Jesus? Was he part of that larger group, such as the 72 that were sent out in ministry by Jesus? We don't know. What we do know is that he was respected and trusted by all in the early church.

Barnabas enters Saul's life soon after his conversion. Saul was forced to leave Damascus, because of threats, after beginning to proclaim the good news of Jesus. Saul spends some three years in the desert of Arabia and in Damascus before returning to Jerusalem. None of the disciples will meet with him, out of fear. After all, he had been part of the group that was harassing, arresting and even killing some of them. You couldn't trust him. Barnabas met Saul, when and where we do not know, but in visiting with him, Barnabas became convinced that Saul's conversion was sincere. He risked everything by taking him to visit Peter. If it had been a plot, all of the disciples would have been exposed to arrest. Even though they had initially refused to visit with Saul, with Barnabas to act as his sponsor, Peter and the others meet him. Again, some in Jerusalem tried to arrest and kill Saul because of his forceful proclamation of the Good News, so Barnabas takes him down to the coast and puts him on a ship for Tarsus.

The next eleven years of Saul's life are ones of learning, discerning and sharing the Gospel. We do not know what Saul does during this time. We are told that he continues to preach about Jesus. The disciples in Jerusalem learn that a large group of believers was now to be found in Syrian Antioch. They sent Barnabas there to lead this group. We do not know how these people learned of Jesus. It is likely that some of those first followers who fled Jerusalem because of the persecutions ended up in this

town. Barnabas soon realizes that he is going to need help. He contacts Saul and brings him to the town and together they work for a year. This means that Barnabas must have kept in contact with Saul and probably continued to mentor him in some fashion.

At the end of that year there is a famine around Jerusalem and so the faithful of Antioch raise up funds and send Barnabas and Saul to Jerusalem with their offering. Upon returning, they learn that while the faithful in Antioch had been worshiping, the Holy Spirit had said to them, “Set apart Barnabas and Saul for the work of missionary to the Gentiles.” This was the very mission Jesus had told Saul, at his conversion on the Damascus road, that he was to do. Fourteen years Saul had been learning, praying, preaching, and, I suspect, wondering if or when this other ministry would begin. After laying hands on the two they were sent forth.

We will talk about their first journey, but let us dwell on Barnabas for just a moment longer. Think about what Saul’s life would have been like without someone like Barnabas who believed in him, nurtured and encouraged him. Without Barnabas, this new faith that he had embraced might have died or become so stunted that nothing fruitful would have occurred. Who were the Barnabas people in your life, especially your life of faith? Who were those people who taught you about Jesus, believed in you, nurtured you, picked you up if you failed and always pushed you a bit to grow? Take a moment to give thanks to God for them, for without their presence in your life you might not be here in worship today.

Also, we need to hear that all of us need to be a Barnabas to others. We can be a Barnabas to others by our actions, our encouragement, our willingness to believe in them even when others might doubt, and most importantly by walking beside them until they are strong enough to walk alone. Is there someone, right now, God is laying on your heart to be a Barnabas to? Accept this as part of your calling.

And so we have Barnabas, Saul and John Mark who had returned with them from Jerusalem, leaving Syrian Antioch. Since they are moving into Greek and Roman territories Saul will use his Roman name Paul from here on out. Adam Hamilton says, “It

is a bit of a misnomer to call this Paul's first missionary journey, because he had been proclaiming the gospel in one way or another for fourteen years." The reason it is his first is because this journey was out of the familiar lands Paul knew and deliberately into the Gentile Roman world. They first went to Cyprus, the home of Barnabas, then left the island and sailed north to Perga. It was here John Mark left them and returned home. This area is in what Paul called Asia Minor and we would call Turkey. From Perga they journeyed to Psidian Antioch. There were over fifteen major towns in the Roman Empire with the name Antioch so they needed to use other descriptive words to identify them. Facing opposition, they traveled on to Iconium, then to Lystra where a mob dragged them outside the city stoning them, leaving Paul for dead. He revived and went on to Derbe. In spite of the opposition Paul goes back through the cities they had just visited strengthening the faithful. They then set sail back to their home church of Syrian Antioch. It is estimated that Paul and Barnabas traveled over 1500 miles, much of it on foot.

Paul's approach was the same whenever he entered a town. If there was a synagogue, he began by teaching there. His message was usually the same. He talked about sin and how Jesus saves us from sin and calls us to live in oneness with God. There were many Gentiles called God fearers who attended the synagogue worship service. They believed in one God in opposition to the polytheistic worship of the day. They were convinced of their need to live a moral life but could not quite accept all of the Jewish ceremonial laws required before conversion. To hear Jesus came to save them from their sins and loves them just the way they were was good news. Usually opposition begins as the Jewish teachers see many turning towards the new faith message of Paul. This would force Paul to leave the synagogue but he would continue preaching to those willing to hear. Paul kept preaching even after some tried to turn the new believers against him, sometimes resulting in violent attacks against he and his followers.

Paul also showed perseverance. He would not let fear dominate his life. Instead, he was faithful to the point of returning to strengthen and organize churches even in the community that had stoned him. Paul continues to mentor and help those leaders and

the flocks they serve. We know of this mentoring because Paul writes them letters. These documents (letters) make up more than half of our New Testament.

All of us have our mission fields. It might be our neighbor, friend, or grandchild. They are struggling with life issues and are not turning to God. We, to follow Paul, should be persistent in our sharing, knowing that at times this will cause opposition, and, when successful, be willing to be a mentor. We all have things to teach others, as we need to be taught. Ask God to help you to be faithful where you are called to minister.

Let me give you a brief example. There was a man in one of my congregations that loved to garden. As he grew older he needed help. He involved some of the neighborhood youth. They learned about gardening and their families got produce in exchange. All along he would add in bits of his faith. He shared with me that he didn't know if it was doing any good but he knew that God asked him to plant the seeds, to water those seeds of faith with kindness and love and then pray that through God a harvest will come in.

We are called to be a Barnabas, a son or daughter of encouragement. We are called to labor in the mission field God has given us. We are called to be persistent, compassionate and encouraging. Lord, help us.