

Title: “Barnabas & Paul”

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Acts 11:22-26

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Service Readings: Is. 42:5-12, Acts 11:19-30, Acts 13:1-3, Mark 6:7-13

We look at the pattern of discipleship from Barnabas and Paul and explore the application to our own lives

Message:

Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ.

²²News of this reached the church in Jerusalem, and they sent Barnabas to Antioch. ²³When 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. ²⁴He was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and faith, and a great number of people were brought to the Lord.

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

It was an early evening, the sun had only recently set. This was one of those rare occasions where he, Barnabas, and Paul could sit outside their little residence and just... relax. Moments like these almost never happened, but when they did, the two would take full advantage and try to recover some of the energy that had been spent since the last one. And so on this evening that is exactly what they were doing. The air was warm, but not uncomfortable and there was a gentle breeze coming from the West. They had just shared a meal together and were now reclining outside.

It was difficult, nearly impossible to exclude their work from conversation, but they tried. They wanted to set that aside as completely as they could and just discuss other things – small talk, even. Of course, as it is with any two people who are close, especially those who have spent long stretches of time together, the small talk has long run out and so the conversations tend to always meander back to what is most important, most pressing on their minds, and for them it was the church.

At this very moment they had just recalled the events of the last year. They remember arriving here in Antioch and finding a vibrant, growing Christian community that hungered for God’s Word and Jesus’ teachings. A year later that hunger had only grown, and the church along with it. So many people, Jews and Gentiles alike had been brought to the Lord. It was miraculous! And it was only the first year! They couldn’t even begin to imagine what the second might bring.

But it wasn’t an easy first year. For all the work that Jesus had done through them and all of the Christians, it had come at a price. This vibrant, growing community, was launched as a reaction of

what had happened in Jerusalem those many months ago. You see, the Christians that had arrived before either Paul or Barnabas had fled from there to escape the terrible persecutions that started after Stephen was martyred. Their hearts were weighed down with the remembrance that death became the catalyst for this migration of people and expansion of Christ's church into the world. But that is exactly what God had allowed, and because of it the church was growing faster than either had ever thought possible. "Could you imagine," asked Barnabas, "how much slower it might have grown, how much smaller it might be right now without these persecutions?" Of course neither of them welcomed the violence and they prayed constantly for the peace and safety of Christians everywhere, but they sat in silence for a moment in awe as they contemplated God's ability to work all things for his good.

I would like to take a pause this story and talk about today. We live in a world not all that different from the time of this early church. Our country has never experienced the same level of persecutions, but there are plenty of other countries that have, and still do. Now, here in the United States, we may have more religious freedoms, but we are increasingly pressing up against a society that doesn't seem to understand or even care about the message that we bring. We stand on the proverbial street corner and shout Jesus crucified, Jesus resurrected but the response we get back is one of rejection. They don't want Jesus crucified, Jesus resurrected. They just want Jesus crucified, for that offers the most freedom to live a life of service to self instead of service to Christ. They have little need for the message of hope that comes from the cross because they don't believe in hope – only hopelessness. They don't believe in salvation by anyone other than themselves. And this is the stance that they take, and this is the identity that they form. They are who they say they are, for no one else has the right to define them.

And through all of this uncertainty, this individualism, this challenge in spreading the Gospel, the church still grows. Numbers are added to it every day, even if we don't always see it, and even if it seems infinitesimally small. We need only just pause and look around to witness this as true. The details and worldly context may be different for us than Barnabas and Paul, but the challenges are largely unchanged.

We are surrounded by people who don't know Christ, or who have abandoned him, or who even fight against him so how are we to respond? What are we, Christians, supposed to do? I think the answer presents itself in this passage. If we were to summarize the selected passage from Acts, we might say that Stephen was stoned, the people were persecuted, some fled, and the church grew, both locally and internationally. If we take a slightly wider view and look at the entire book of Acts, we might summarize it this way: Jesus was crucified, died and resurrected, people were persecuted, some fled, and the church grew, both locally and internationally. And if we take an even wider view and include our time, we might summarize it this way: Jesus was crucified, died and resurrected, people were persecuted, some fled, and the church grew, both locally and internationally. You see the pattern? Regardless of the context, or even the time, the church is growing – even in spite of anything humans do, like persecutions, ungodly ideologies, corrupt or oppressive governments.

Whatever is happening, these facts remain: Jesus was crucified. He was killed and buried. Three days later he was raised from the dead. He tasked the apostles with growing his church. And the church grew, and it continues to grow. But just like Paul and Barnabas were discussing, the growth was not from their work but from God's. It was his will that the church would extend to Antioch,

and so it did – through Paul and Barnabas, but also through those who fled Jerusalem. You could even say that it spread through the death of Stephen.

You see, the Christian response to the world today is the same as it was 2000 years ago. It follows the pattern of these early disciples because these early disciples were following the pattern of Jesus. And the message of hope that they proclaimed is the same message of hope that we proclaim. The world was dark then, and it may be dark now. It was decaying then and it may be decaying now. It may be all the things that the secular world says it is. But at the end of their conversation, at the end of all they proclaim is wrong, at the end of their prophetic opinions about how it's all going to end... they have nothing. Simply nothing. Nothing to cling to. They have no hope. No promise of *anything* past their physical death..... and that is a terribly scary place to be.

And so how are we to respond? I believe the first thing we do is understand where they are coming from. We understand where they see themselves going, and what they see on the other side of death. And when we do this, when we place ourselves in their shoes, it becomes nearly impossible to debate them, for how can we debate someone that we empathize with? You see, when we place ourselves in their position and realize that what they see is hopelessness, we can't help but set aside our own opinions, our own wills, even our own preferences so that we can proclaim Jesus to them. For we can feel this passion welling up within us to be the light in their dark world. We can feel our response to this empathy that we feel towards them. They cannot, must not live another moment in this state of loss, of darkness, not when we have such a message of hope for them! And so we set aside our own opinions about the things of this world, for in the end it matters little what political ideology we align with. Just as it matters little what ideology *they align* with. All that matters is that they need, they *must* know Jesus crucified and resurrected. They *must* know because that is really all that matters. And so we see ourselves as Paul and as Barnabas, living a life that attracts others to us so that we can have an opportunity to proclaim this message of hope to them. For isn't that what we are all about?

Please pray with me.

Lord,

I come today with arms full; full of biases, self-interests, and sin. Today I lay them down and ask you to take them from me. Free me from all of my selfish ambitions and send the Holy Spirit that I might be even more motivated to go out into the world and make disciples, just as you have called me to do.

Amen.