

Homily – The Wellbeing of Your Church

Rob Keim

June 11, 2023 – St. Barnabas' Episcopal Church

Today we are celebrating the Feast of St. Barnabas, our annual remembrance of a man who was an early follower of Jesus. Many of you here today already know quite a bit about the St. Barnabas of two thousand years ago. But, some of you are newer to St. Barnabas, so here is some background information about the saint for which our parish is named.

Barnabas appears mainly in our New Testament book of Acts, a history of the early Christian church. He also appears in several of the Apostle Paul's New Testament letters.

Barnabas was a native of Cyprus and a Levite. He is first mentioned in the Acts of the Apostles as a member of the community of early followers of Jesus in Jerusalem. In that mention, Barnabas sold some land that he owned and gave the proceeds to the community. And, when the future Apostle Paul comes to Jerusalem after his conversion, Barnabas introduced him to the other apostles and early followers of Jesus.

This early church in Jerusalem sent Barnabas north to the even newer church in Antioch, a city in what is now modern day Syria. Barnabas found the work so extensive and weighty that he went to Tarsus to get some help from Paul. Paul returned with him to Antioch and labored with him for a whole year. Paul and Barnabas worked side-jobs to fund their ministries, and at the end of this period, just eleven years after the death of Jesus, the two were sent back south to Jerusalem with contributions from the church at Antioch for the relief of the poorer Christians in Judea. Then, Paul and Barnabas returned to Antioch to continue the establishment of that church, and later they worked to establish other churches in Cyprus and some of the principal cities of Pamphylia, Pisidia, and Lycaonia.

Barnabas and Paul were instrumental in spreading the church and the good news about Jesus to non-Jewish communities, which put them at odds with some of the original Jewish-Christians. They participated in the Council of Jerusalem which officially blessed the ministries to the Gentiles. Specifically, the Council said that Gentiles were to be admitted into the church without having to adopt Jewish practices. At some point Barnabas and Paul had a falling out and we don't hear about Barnabas anymore.

Now, as Episcopalians who are part of the worldwide Anglican Communion we do not pray to saints. Other Christian traditions may pray to saints but that is not what we

do. Instead, we hold up saints as role models from whom we can learn. So, the question for us today is what can we learn from St. Barnabas that would be applicable to us as individuals and relevant to us as a community of God? And, here is the quality of Barnabas that I want to focus on this year.

In our prayer or collect of the week Barnabas is depicted as striving for the “wellbeing of the church.” This is a phrase or concept that deeply interests me. Like many of you, I am deeply interested in the wellbeing of our church here on the hill and the wellbeing of our churches around the globe.

Now, back in 2010 some of the folks from the Gallup Institute wrote a book about Wellbeing. For the last sixty years the folks at Gallup have been trying to figure out the characteristics of a well-lived life, and they have been trying to answer the questions, what make life worthwhile? What makes a person thrive and another person not thrive? And, what actions can a person take to have higher wellbeing?

Through countless surveys from people in more than 150 countries, the folks at Gallup have come up with five categories of behavior that improve quality of life or result in a higher level of wellbeing. I’m not going to go through all five factors, but the first one is one is financial wellbeing.

And, financial wellbeing is not based on the amount of money one has. Instead, there is a base level of money for food and security, but once you get beyond that, the amount of money or the size of your house is not the driver for financial wellbeing. Instead, wellbeing is driven by the decisions you make about what to do with your money. It will be no surprise that retail therapy does not work and in fact it can drain us because we make purchase decisions that we might not have made otherwise. Higher financial wellbeing occurs when we spend money on experiences and spend money on other people. Travel, dinner with friends, and donations to groups we value, raise financial wellbeing and contribute to our sense of happiness.

Now, I want to shift from financial wellbeing to the fifth category for wellbeing that was identified by the folks from the Gallup Institute. They have called this fifth factor “community wellbeing.” It is to the research results of this book and more specifically to community wellbeing that I now turn as I grapple with the ministry of our namesake, St. Barnabas as we he sought the wellbeing of the church.

In my own experience community wellbeing and spiritual health are correlated. Through the Holy Spirit God calls us into the fullness of life. And, higher community wellbeing goes hand and hand with deeper spirituality. And, community wellbeing can be “the differentiator between a good life and a great one.”

At its basic level, community wellbeing is about feeling safe in your community – safe to walk the streets, safe to be yourself, safe to breath clean air and drink clean water.

At a higher level, community wellbeing is about living in a place that is a good fit for you and your family. The Gallup folks say that, “While the things that make a community “perfect” will be different for everyone, people use common themes to describe ideal communities. One of the most important factors is aesthetics, which includes naturally beautiful places and the availability of parks, trails, and playgrounds. Another key differentiator is social offerings, or places where people can meet, spend time with friends, and enjoy the nightlife. The third quality that distinguishes near-perfect communities from the rest is a general openness to all types of people, regardless of race, heritage, age, gender identity, or sexual orientation.

However, just living in the right place is unlikely to create thriving Community Wellbeing. For your see, thriving requires active involvement in community groups or organizations, and to this I would add involvement in a church. Many people belong to groups that connect them to a wider network of friends or acquaintances. Participating in outreach programs to clean up the community, feed those in need, or help children learn fosters a person’s Community Wellbeing... Unless you make an effort to get involved in social groups, it is unlikely that your Community Wellbeing will grow. Many people claim to live in strong communities, but they acknowledge that they like to keep to themselves, and as a result, most of these people have lower Community Wellbeing.

Now I want to make a leap from the wellbeing of an individual to the wellbeing of a church itself. The mission of a church is to help people with their spiritual journeys in healthy, loving relationship with God, others, self and the rest of non-human creation. And, the specific mission of our parish is on the front cover of your bulletin. It is to be God’s discerning, inclusive, Christ-centered church, engaged in outreach ministry, growing discipleship, and life changing worship. We want to help you with your inner journey of discovery, contemplation, and healing as you learn to see God presence that is always with you. But we don’t stop there for we must take our heightened awareness of God and use it to move us into action and outreach. We must work to be the hands and feet and voice of Jesus here in the South County and beyond. And, here are some of the ways your church helps you put your spirituality into action.

First, our church is an opportunity for an individual to serve inside the church. Our congregational life ministries, and discipleship ministries, and worship ministries, and administrative ministries are all ways that you serve and give of your time and talent. We often don’t think of the administrative ministries, but even serving on our

Finance Committee, or Personnel Committee or Building and Grounds Committee are all ways to serve and increase a person's sense of wellbeing.

And away from this church on the hill many of you are already serving the broader community through the Lions Club, or a school committee, or a public service group, or with Central Coast Gilbert & Sullivan as you perform The Mikado next weekend up at Cuesta College. Please excuse my shameless plug. And, if you are already serving in the community, then you know how your sense of wellbeing is elevated by making a difference. And by extension the wellbeing of our church community is also raised when we have individuals who serve in our church or serve in our broader community.

Lastly, the wellbeing of our church is enhanced when we provide opportunities for you to serve in the community in ways that are consistent with the values of Barnabas as exhibited in today's Scripture readings.

In our reading from Isaiah we heard that we are to be "a light unto the nations, to open the eyes that are blind, to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon, from the prison those who sit in darkness."

And, in today's Psalm we read, "Light shines in the darkness for the upright; the righteous are merciful and full of compassion... they have given freely to the poor, and their righteousness stands fast forever."

And in today's Gospel reading we heard, "Cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, cast out demons."

As a church we are called to do these things, and we are further called to provide you opportunities to do these things together. To that end we already have ministries through the St. Barnabas Thrift Shop, People's Kitchen, hygiene bag ministry, and our soon to be restarted Senior Potluck. Many of you improve your wellbeing by serving in these beautiful ministries.

And, here at St. Barnabas we have restarted our Social Justice Coordinating Team. Though there are many, many social justice needs this team has decided to focus on five social justice topics including, ministry with the homeless, LGBTQ folks, Latino and indigenous people, and seniors and others who need a little extra help at home. The fifth Social Justice focus area is a new one for us as we grapple with racism, white privilege, and what many are calling Christian Nationalism.

Participation and service in our community makes the difference between a good life and a great life. And, the wellbeing of our church is directly related the wellbeing of

the individuals and families in our church. Safety and a good fit are the first two factors of community wellbeing. However, unless you make an effort to be the hands and feet and voice of Jesus, it is unlikely that your personal Community Wellbeing will grow.

Prayerfully consider how you are being called by the Holy Spirit to bring the love of Christ and the love of St. Barnabas to others.