

Homily – Being Both a Serpent and a Dove

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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 each year I share 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, the quality of Barnabas I want to look at this year is that of a bridge builder. Barnabas connected Jews and Gentiles in a way that is consistent with the teachings of Jesus and our trust that all of the beloved of God.

Today's Gospel reading that we heard Susan read a few minute ago, is some wisdom from Jesus to his disciplines, and by extension to us, the twenty-first century followers of Jesus. Jesus gives guidance on how to be a disciple in a world that often doesn't want to hear or follow the ways of Jesus. And, at the end of today's Gospel reading we heard Jesus say, "See, I am sending you out like sheep into the midst of wolves; so be wise as serpents and innocent as doves." Sheep and wolves are normally thought of as adversaries, and the qualities of the dastardly serpent and peaceful dove are normally also thought of as opposites. There is a tension between these opposites that is very normal in the teachings of Jesus. In addition, as we look at the way he lived, Jesus is always leaning into opposites in a way that we now call non-dualistic thinking. Let's look at this a bit more.

Jesus calls us to a non-dualistic way of consciousness. In this way of thinking and being we bear the ambiguity, the inconsistencies, and the brokenness of all things in a way that can only be called love. We stop dividing things into categories of good and bad, especially not judging some people as good and other people as bad. We see that we are all a mixture of good and bad, and we are all the beloved of God. We all, every single person, have a bit of Christ in and around us. This is the way Jesus sees us, and this is the way he calls us to see and be. Our false self can cause us a lot of angst as we shift to a non-dualistic consciousness, but I assure you it is worth it. And, here is a very practical way we can put this into practice.

These days we use red and blue as code words to symbolize two sides of the political spectrum. Red has come to symbolize conservative, fundamentalist, or Republican, and blue has come to symbolize liberal, progressive, or Democrat. We all know this color code and sometimes we say that a place or an organization is purple, when it is a blend of red and blue. Some people in the place are conservative and some are liberal. The harder thing to be these days is to be a moderate. This would be a blend, just like purple, but for many a moderate is a traitor to both sides. We have become so polarized these days that moderates can be the enemy of both sides. We have become so divided that we are burning down the bridges between us. However, the Episcopal Church has traditionally played the middle. We have liked to see ourselves as halfway between Roman Catholic and Protestant. We like the middle in other ways as well.

Four years ago, before the last presidential elections, our Episcopal Presiding Bishop issued a video in which he continued to position our denomination in the middle. He correctly points out that we have good followers of Jesus who are red, we have good followers of Jesus who are blue, and we have good followers of Jesus who are purple. I think that is true here at St. Barnabas, though in my experience of you all, we tend to be a bluer shade of purple. And, my fear is that in November, after the election results are determined, that we will become more divided than we are today. However, my prayer is that we will be better able to see the things that connect us. I think this is your prayer as well. So, what are we going to do to make this prayer come true?

In his video, Presiding Bishop Michael Curry has a couple of ideas. He points out that our church needs to continue with partisan neutrality but we should never move to a place of moral neutrality. As you know, The Episcopal Church does not endorse, support, or oppose political candidates for elective office. However, this does not prohibit churches from engaging in voter education, voter registration, helping people get to the polls to vote, or even advocating for issues of public policy that are consistent with our spiritual beliefs about God. Voting is an act of moral agency. It is an act of moral discernment and decision. It is how a community, or a nation, decides how the moral values that it holds, and shares, shape public policy, and the lives of its people. So, as followers of Jesus we must remember that partisan neutrality does not mean moral neutrality. Get out and vote.

In his message, Bishop Curry also suggests that we need to shift our thinking from WWJD, what would Jesus do, to WDJD, what did Jesus do. Did you catch that. Shift from “would” to “did” – what did Jesus do. And what Jesus did was always with love. The filter of love was put on every word and every deed that we know Jesus did. So, as we select between candidates or vote for or against State propositions we must use the love of Jesus as the filter through which we make decisions. When you use the love of God to love God back, love others, love yourself, and love the rest of non-human creation, when you use love as a filter for your decision making then voting can become a sacred act. As followers of Jesus we need to make our vote a sacred vote. So, pray before you vote, pray while you vote, and for good measure pray after you vote. Pray and vote. Vote and pray.

Now, back when I was seminary, I went to two seminaries at the same time. The first was a non-denominational evangelical seminary and the second an Episcopal seminary. Both seminaries would say that they had the answers to the ways that good Christians should do something, but they were often answers opposite to one another. Was one seminary right and the other seminary wrong? This was a lesson for me that the answers to life’s questions are sometimes found outside the two sides of an argument. There can be a middle way or a third way. Instead of red, or blue, or

purple, the answer may be found with yellow or green. When red or blue become dominant, maybe this is the time that something new from God is germinating.

Over and over Jesus teaches us that a dualistic way of thinking is not helpful in our lives. Answers are not black and white, red and blue, right and wrong. Out of the tension, out of the paradox, out of the pain comes something new that is yellow, or green, or pick another color. What are you seeing around you that may be a third way? And, if there is a third way will you embrace it, or will you discard it because you will only allow red or blue? In today's Gospel reading Jesus asks us to go into the world to share God's love and build bridges.

I'm going to be away for the next three weeks taking some vacation with family on the family farm in upstate New York, and then nine days in Louisville, Kentucky for General Convention. When I get back in July we, here at St. Barnabas, are going to spend some time seeing what we can do to be bridge builders and help lower the anxiety level so many have these days. In the meanwhile, here are a few non-partisan organizations that are working to be the bridge and help a third way be revealed. The National Institutes Forum promotes public deliberation about difficult public issues. Living Room Conversations, which we did here at St. Barnabas about seven years ago, provides dialogue tools so that diverse groups of people can have meaningful conversations about things with which they disagree. With Malice Toward None is an ecumenical nonpartisan program designed for churches and faith communities and groups of all kinds. This group, recommended by our Presiding Bishop, provides a way of understanding and healing for those on any side of the political spectrum. And finally, "Make Me an Instrument of Peace: A Guide to Civil Discourse," is an online curriculum from the Episcopal Office of Government Relations.

As his followers, Jesus calls us to live into the tension of a non-dualistic creation in which there is often a third-way that arises from God. Be wise as serpents and innocent as doves. Henry David Thoreau, Mahatma Gandhi, and Martin Luther King Jr., all spoke of this as the nonviolent way of love. Our namesake, St. Barnabas, was another role model for us as he was a bridge builder between two seeming opposites, Jews and Gentiles.

Sometimes, it is only with twenty-twenty hindsight that we see the way that God was working in the world to bring light out of darkness. Look for the yellow and green things that are popping up around you and nourish them. And, pray for our elections and their aftermath. And remember, not all voting is of God, but all people are the beloved of God.