

Homily – The Spirituality of Friendship

Rob Keim

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Today we celebrate 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 new to St. Barnabas, so let me share a little bit about our name sake.

Barnabas appears mainly in our New Testament book of Acts, a history of the early Christian church. He also appears in several of the New Testament letters of the Apostle Paul. Barnabas was a native of Cyprus and a Levite. He is first mentioned in the Acts of the Apostles as a member of the early Christian community in Jerusalem. Barnabas sold some land that he owned and gave the proceeds to the community. When the future Apostle Paul returned to Jerusalem after his conversion, Barnabas introduced him to the other apostles and followers of Jesus.

The early church in Jerusalem sent Barnabas 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 and resurrection of Jesus, the two were sent up to Jerusalem with contributions from the church at Antioch for the relief of the poorer Christians in Judea.

They 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 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 ministry 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 which appears to be on the ongoing hot topic of the intermingling of Jews and Gentiles in the early church. Perhaps this is one of the first examples of a power struggle in the Church. Barnabas does not appear to be mentioned again after this power struggle.

Now, as Episcopalians who are part of the worldwide Anglican Communion we do not pray to saints. Other Christian traditions may pray to saints or use saints as a focal

point, 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 are a few things that make Barnabas a good role model.

First, Barnabas was generous with his time, talent, and treasure. He was an example to us of a good steward of the resources with which God had blessed him. God certainly calls us to follow the example of Barnabas. We too are called to be good stewards of our resources in a way that helps others move forward in their own spiritual journeys.

Second, it appears that Barnabas had a servant-heart. We see Barnabas helping others in the various early churches. Again, I believe that God calls us to follow the example of Barnabas and be servants to others. When we get outside of ourselves it is a boost to our own spiritual journeys. Plus, the world needs us to be the hands and feet and voice of Jesus.

Third, when he himself needed help, Barnabas seeks out other followers of Jesus. When Barnabas was overwhelmed with the work, he went to find Paul to get some help. Do you ask for help when you need it? And, to whom do you go? Is it someone who you think will lead you towards God? Part of the benefit of being in this community, we call St. Barnabas, is that we walk with each other through the ups and downs of life. We are not alone.

Next, Barnabas reached out to those who were considered the outsider. Like Paul, Barnabas is known to have reached beyond the Jewish community. He included the Gentiles. Two thousand years ago, one of the big debates in the early church was whether one had to be a Jew to be a follower of Jesus. Barnabas was one of the advocates for including the non-Jews. Much of his ministry was to the outsider, and in this way Barnabas is a role model to us as individuals and as a church. We too are to reach out to and minister with those who are the outsider. How do we reach out to those who are not already with us, especially to those who do not match us demographically or spiritually? God's love includes all and we are meant to reflect that in our love.

And, Barnabas seems to have internalized Jesus' message about the importance of forgiveness. Before his conversion, Paul persecuted the early followers of Jesus and did some pretty nasty stuff. Yet, Barnabas was still willing to forgive Paul, give him another chance, and commend him to the early church. We all know from personal

experience that forgiveness is not easy, and Barnabas is a role model for us on how we need to forgive others. Imagine a world in which we could forgive like Barnabas.

Finally, Barnabas is depicted as the companion to Paul. We don't know much about their friendship, but it seems to have had some tough times. The work Paul and Barnabas did together was not easy. They did a lot of traveling together and were at the center of several disagreements in the early church. And at some point Paul and Barnabas had a falling out, and Paul doesn't write about Barnabas anymore. They may have had a reconciliation, we just don't know. Be that as it may, for many years, Barnabas was a dedicated companion and friend to Paul.

So, as followers of Jesus we can look to Barnabas, our namesake, as a role model. Generosity and good stewardship, serving others, seeking help when needed, including the outsider, forgiving others, and friendship. These are some pretty good characteristics for a Godly life. And today, I want to do a deep dive into this last characteristic of Barnabas, friendship.

This past week I finished a book by 1980s brat pack actor, Andrew McCarthy. Last year I read his book about the Camino de Santiago, and this year it was his book "Who Needs Friends -an unscientific examination of male friendship across America". The book is both a travelog and a reflection on the tendency for men to have fewer friends than women, but I think McCarthy's learnings are still applicable to us all.

"Friendship" can be defined as a relationship of mutual affection between people. It is a stronger form of interpersonal bond than an association, and it has been studied in academic fields including communication, sociology, social psychology, anthropology, and philosophy. Although there are many forms of friendship, certain characteristics are present in the best of these relationships. These characteristics include affection; kindness, love, virtue, sympathy, empathy, honesty, altruism, loyalty, generosity, forgiveness, mutual understanding and compassion. Friendship means enjoyment of each other's company, trust, and the ability to be oneself. It means we can express our feelings to others, and make mistakes without fear of judgment from the friend. Friendship is an essential aspect of relationships, and therefore it is central to healthy spirituality. As many of you know, I define spirituality as relationships with God, others, and self. So, friendship is very important for our spiritual journey.

And, here is a framework on friendship, a framework that I have shared in the past that I think is useful. First, friendship is about networking or collaboration. It is about banding together with another to get something done. As the saying goes "many hands make light work." So, friendship is about joining with another to fulfill a task. Sound like our St. Barnabas Thrift Shop doesn't it?

Second, friendship is about reassurance. When we see others have the same challenges and difficulties, then we feel better about our own circumstances. In this category of friend, I think of mothers, or parents, who are friends and going through the same experiences of raising a child.

The third reason to have friends is for fun. With some trusted people we can be silly. We can let go of dignity. Curiously, this third type of friend, the fun friend, helps us let go of shame. Laughter is part of the reason to have this type of friend.

The fourth reason to have friends is to help process our own minds. It is often hard for us to think on our own, and this type of friend asks clarifying questions. This fourth type of friend helps us know ourselves better.

And lastly, there are friends from the past. This type of friend was originally from one of the first four categories of friend, but they are from a prior stage of our life. This fifth type of friend is redemptive because they help us remember an earlier part of our self. We can view the path we have been on and see how we have evolved. A friend from the past can even help us reclaim some of the old self that had been left behind.

Each of our friendships can be put into these five categories. In this way we can understand what is at the center of those genuine bonds we have with others. Again, these five categories of friends are about networking, common experiences, fun, a sounding board, and they can help us remembering the past. These friends help us get something done, reassure ourselves, let go of our shame, clarify our own minds, and remember our old selves. These categories of friendship are pretty good but they miss one thing, and that is God. God needs to be at the center of our friendships.

Friendship is the true nature of God. Last Sunday we celebrated Trinity Sunday, that day each year when we remember the nature of God – God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. Or, another way to think of God is creator, redeemer, and sanctifier. The three parts of God are hard to separate from one another because they flow in and out of one another. They dance with one another. The very Triune nature of God is friendship, and our best relationships, our best friendships have God at their center. It doesn't have to be overt, but there is love in friendships. There is God in friendships. So, today we remember our namesake, St. Barnabas. He was and is a model of friendship. May you see God's love around you and may your life be filled with friends.