

A Profile of a Christian

The Story of Barnabas

Text: Acts: 22:24-26; II Corinthians 3:17-18

Richard A. Rhem
Christ Community Church
Spring Lake, Michigan
Pentecost III, June 12, 1994

Transcription of the spoken sermon

We come through the cycle of the Christian year and celebrate Pentecost, that day in which the Spirit of God is poured out with power on the followers of Jesus, and the Jesus movement which was called The People of the Way begins its way throughout the world; then, on Trinity Sunday, celebrate the God who breathes or whose breath is active in creation and who forms the world, and also forms people. We come now, finally, today to think about how that breathing God who was defined for us in the face of Jesus, this God who is revealed in Jesus, the God who breathes on us and breathes through us, and energizes us—this God whose breath is the life of the world is the God who also breathes through us, shaping us and forming us. Paul in his letter to the Corinthians tells them that they are letters of Christ, read by all people. He said, “letters written,” not with ink on paper but letters written by the Spirit, the breath of God, and written on the fleshly tables of the heart. He goes on in that passage to speak about the Christian beholding Jesus and becoming like Jesus. Contemplating the Lord, one becomes changed by degree into the likeness of the Lord. The Spirit involved in that, the Spirit of the Lord, is the Spirit that gives liberty and shapes and forms.

Today I want us to think for a few moments about what it means to be Christian. What does it mean to live out this Christian life? What shape or what form does it take? And, as I do that, I’m going to call your attention to the life of Barnabas, but before I do let me make a couple of qualifications as we think about a profile of a Christian. Notice it is *a* profile, not *the* profile. There is not one set form to which everyone must conform. God is a God who obviously loves diversity, and one of the worst things we can do to one another is force ourselves into a certain mold, a certain pigeonhole, to say, “Now *that’s* Christian.” No, this is *a* profile of a Christian, recognizing that what we’ll see from the life of Barnabas doesn’t cover everything, but at least there are some hallmarks there that we can lift up. And then the second qualification I want to make is that this is a profile of a Christian, but the hallmarks that we lift up are not exclusively the possession of Christians.

I heard a story one time, heard a sermon one time, of a Christian in New York City whose sanctuary was burned. Down the street was a Jewish synagogue and

the rabbi came to the pastor and he said, "Since your sanctuary is destroyed and while it is being renovated you are welcome to worship in our synagogue." The pastor said to him, "How very nice. That's a wonderful Christian thing for you to do." (Laughter) The rabbi said, "No, it's just a very Jewish thing to do." (Laughter) And I thought to myself when I heard that, you know it's a simple little story, but I thought how arrogant I am, how presumptuous I am to think that everything that is good and noble and true is Christian. I want to say at the beginning that I want to talk about some hallmarks of Christian life, but they are not exclusively ours. However, they are hallmarks that I see in one like Barnabas, who I believe was living in the flow of God's breath and being shaped after the image of Jesus. If there is one model, of course, it is Jesus, but again Jesus is so many-faceted that all of us only reflect a small piece.

Let's look at Barnabas. His story is in the book of Acts. I read one passage this morning from the 11th chapter, but actually if we go to the beginning we'd have to go back to chapter 4 where, in the immediate wake of Pentecost when that community was really a communistic community, it was a real commune. Everyone shared, everyone according to his gifts, to everyone according to his needs. That was what was really happening there under the full impact of the Spirit of God – there was this mutual sharing; no one had any need. Everyone took care of everybody else, and for Barnabas it was no small matter.

He was a wealthy estate owner in the Isle of Cyprus. He sold his estate and brought in the proceeds to be used by that Apostolic community. He became involved in the leadership of that movement, that early Jesus Movement, which was not at this point a Christian movement, you understand, but it was still within the pale of Judaism trying to find out where in the world it was going and who in the world they were. Then Stephen was martyred and persecution followed, and that Jerusalem community was scattered. But everywhere they went they were like sparks of fire that began to flame wherever they found themselves. At the beginning it was a cautious movement. They took the gospel to Samaria. They were half Jews. Then they began to go to some of the other cities of the Roman world, but they spoke to the Jews only because they were Jews, and they never gave it a second thought. They simply assumed that Jews were God's special people, so to Jews they went, saying that Jesus was, "your Messiah."

Then, how it happened, we don't know. Who they were we don't know. That's the remarkable thing. The critical breakthrough happened from people that we don't know. They began actively to speak the Gospel to Gentiles. This happened in Antioch, which was the third city of the Roman Empire: Rome, Alexandria and Antioch, north of Jerusalem, a major metropolitan center. And there some of those who were scattered through the persecution began actively to witness to those who were non-Jewish. And, miracle of miracles, they began to believe and there was a community gathered there. Well, back at headquarters they said, "We'd better check this out," because the Jerusalem core formed sort of that normative tradition-setting, credentialing community of that early movement.

They sent Barnabas who came and saw the grace of God in the lives of these Gentiles who believed in Jesus Christ. And he rejoiced and he saw the possibility of a great world movement here, and he remembered a man named Paul. Originally his name was Saul. He was the one who was going out from Jerusalem to Damascus to decimate the People of the Way, you'll remember, and he saw this light from heaven and was knocked off his horse and was brought to a conviction that Jesus was indeed Christ the Messiah. He began to witness, and when he came to Jerusalem everyone was in fear and trembling because this was the one who was decimating the Church and now that he is converted they say he is preaching Jesus. But how can you tell when everyone is afraid of him except Barnabas?

Barnabas hears his story and believes him, and Barnabas gives him entrée to the Apostolic circle. Now in this fresh situation in Antioch, Barnabas says, "I know the person for this job." He went to Tarsus, Paul's hometown, and brought him to Antioch where together they labored for a year in that congregation until it was a flourishing community. Then the Spirit of God said to the congregation, "Separate Paul and Barnabas for me and send them out," and the Christian world mission was begun.

At that point I can speak of the *Christian* world mission because it was in Antioch where they first brought the news of Jesus to non-Jews. It was in that community that the name *Christian* arose. It was used half mockingly. They were the Christ-ones. But it became the name that stuck because these were the People of the Way. They were the followers of Jesus, Jesus the Christ, Jesus the anointed one. In fact, these people were anointed, amazingly as it happened with Cornelius. When the Gospel was preached, God breathed and they were moved by the breath of God, the Wind of God, the Spirit of God. They were the anointed ones, they were the Christ-ones, they were Christians, they were of Jesus the Christ and anointed one, the one who was breathed on by God.

So, Paul and Barnabas went out into the Roman Empire to tell the Good News. They came back and there is quite a development there. They have to test whether that whole movement was authentic so they go to the Jerusalem council, etc. Eventually, Paul says to Barnabas, "Let's go out again and visit the churches that we founded." Barnabas says, "Fine, I'll call John Mark." John Mark was Barnabas's cousin and he had gone with them on their first journey. He only lasted a week or two and deserted them; he missed his mother (I'm sure he missed his mother.) (Laughter) She had a home in Jerusalem and so he gave up the mission. Barnabas says, "I'll call on John Mark." Paul says, "No way. He started out with us the first time and he deserted us. Shame on him. I take him again, shame on me. No way." Barnabas said, "Give him a chance." He said, "No way." "He was only a kid." "No way." Barnabas said, "If I go, I go with John Mark." Paul said, "Then you go alone." And Paul called Silas, and now you've got two teams going. That's the way denominations go, you know. Through the

orneriness of people you get a lot more people going. (Laughter) So he goes with John Mark and that's about all we hear in the book of Acts.

Barnabas was a remarkable person. He was one of the great leaders, not only by what he accomplished, but by what he foresaw. By his visionary leadership he was able to move the People of the Way, the followers of Jesus, into a world-wide movement—good news being brought to the ends of the world, literally. As I think about Barnabas there are a lot of ways you could go with him, and a lot of things one could say about him. But it seems to me that the first thing that underlies everything is that this man was a man who continued to be able to grow and was open to new experience. That is a remarkable quality. There's something about us human beings that we always want to shut down. We always want to bring closure. We feel uneasy being pilgrims on the way. We'd like to have it finished. We'd like to have the bottom line. We'd like to have the package tied up neatly with a bow, no loose ends dangling.

Barnabas was a remarkable human being. Barnabas, first of all, as a Jewish believer rooted in the Hebrew Scriptures and traditions, was able to see that Jesus, indeed, was the Messiah and he experienced the power of God in his life and he opened up to that. Not only did he just open up to it, in the sense that he believed it was true, but he acted on it. He sold his farm. He saw the future and he moved into it. He was one of vision who continued to grow, staying open, staying flexible and free, not knowing where the wind of God would blow him next. He was always ready. This is demonstrated once again because when there were things happening in Antioch, whom do they send? Not Peter. It took a vision on the rooftop to get him to go to Cornelius. Thank God they sent Barnabas.

Barnabas comes to Antioch and here is a totally new situation. This is an impossibility. These are non-Jews. They've not been circumcised. They don't keep the food laws. They don't know anything about Moses and all the traditions. How can they really be accepted as *bona fide* members of this spiritual movement of Jesus? Barnabas says, "I can't square it with the Bible, but it's true." Barnabas was one of those that recognized that, when the facts of life don't fit the faith, it's easier to change the faith. If you can't change the facts, then *blessed is the person who is able to stay open enough to honor human experience and to open one's mind to new possibilities and to see that which was may not always be, and what has been said is not the last word, that human experience is a growing experience, and the Gospel is interwoven into the historical movement so that it is a continuing movement that develops and grows with the expanding horizons of the human experience.*

Barnabas was quite a guy. If there hadn't been someone like that around they might have shut Antioch down. I want to tell you, if they had shut Antioch down, they would have shut the whole thing down, because it never would have come out of Jerusalem. You cannot trust Jerusalem. The action was not Jerusalem. Jerusalem acted in a supervisory capacity. They checked things out. They tested.

They called councils. But the world movement started from Antioch. There was not vision and freedom enough at headquarters. First Church Jerusalem was stodgy and stuck fast. It was in Antioch that the Spirit found the openness and the freedom to blow to new possibilities.

I like Barnabas. I like somebody that has a vision and enough faith and courage to act on it. In the eleventh chapter it says he was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit, and faith. I like him too, because he got caught up in a movement that was larger than himself. He saw the possibilities of Antioch. He knew that's where the future lay, and therefore, he went after the best person he could find in order to make that work come. He remembered Saul. He remembered his passion, his power, his fanatical zeal, his sharp mind. He said this is a work for none less than Saul. When He brought Paul over to work with him he worked with him side by side, but you know any man is a fool who upstages himself by the person he calls to work with him. It takes a lot of grace. One can never tell the grace it takes to play second fiddle well. I like Barnabas. He said, "What's going on in Antioch is more than I can handle. I'm going to look for the strongest, most passionate, most powerful, brilliant person I know. And I'm going to call that person and I'm going to work in his shadow, because what is important is not my prestige and position, but that the Gospel be brought to a hungry world, parched and longing for the water of life." He was self effacing, concerned about the truth, about the larger picture, and willing to do what he had to do in order to make it happen.

Maybe the nicest thing about him was he was full of grace. I already mentioned that, on the one hand, when Paul came to town now soundly converted, everybody was scared to death of him, and it was Barnabas that reached out to him. It was Barnabas that said, "Tell me your story." It was Barnabas that believed him. Do you believe people when they talk to you? Can you listen to someone's story of newness? Can you hear something that blows your mind and not immediately shut it down, turn it away? Barnabas had grace, he said, "Talk to me Paul. Tell me what happened." He said, "That's really something. Come on, I want you to meet Peter." Then, of course, he works in Paul's shadow and they go off on the missionary journeys and when they are gone on that second or third journey, he wants to bring John Mark along. Paul says, "No way."

Barnabas believed in the possibility of the second chance. He believed in giving someone a break. He didn't believe that because someone fails he or she necessarily must be a failure. So he took John Mark with him and he nurtured him, and Paul went his separate way. Barnabas had a lot of grace. Paul finally got a little grace, too. When he was old and imprisoned he wrote Timothy and said, "By the way, bring John Mark to me. He's profitable to me." He mentions him very positively in the 4th chapter of his letter to the Colossians. John Mark is most likely the guy that gives us the Gospel of Mark. What if Barnabas hadn't believed in him? What if Barnabas had not had enough grace to withstand the strong Paul to his face and say, "Nonetheless, the boy gets another shot." I like that about him.

Barnabas wasn't everything, but dear God I wish the winds of God's spirit would blow through me with such creative and energizing power that I'd have visions to see where things are going and the courage to act on it; the willingness to be self-effaced in the light of the larger movement and the grace to keep believing in my brothers and sisters as we go along together. That's not everything, but that would be a lot... if we could more and more be shaped into a Barnabas or Jesus by the Spirit of God.