

## A Tribute to a Lady Full of Grace In Memory of Barbara Dee Timmer

Richard A. Rhem  
Hope Church  
Holland, Michigan

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Thank you, Barbara and John, for an invitation to pay tribute to your mother, Barbara Dee. It brings closure for me to the warm and gracious relationship I was privileged to share with your parents. As I reflect back over the years, I'm reminded of so many wonderful moments and experiences.

Norm and Barbara showed up at Christ Community one Sunday for worship. The trigger that moved them was their recognition that we needed affirmation and support for the position we took with regard to sexual orientation – not a moral issue, just a matter of the marvelously diverse patterns of creation. We did not decide one day to address the issue, although we should have long before. However, as so often happens, something occurred that put before us an occasion to do the right thing.

It was the height of the AIDS epidemic. My pastoral team at Christ Community Church designed a workshop on a Saturday composed of physicians, health care workers, and clergy and invited the community to be present. With no responsibility – simply being present – I noticed a man with a clerical collar whom I did not know. I introduced myself and asked where he was from. He told me he was starting a Metropolitan Community Church in Muskegon. I asked where they met and he said in the basement of a bar on Sunday evening. I asked why such a setting. He said they had contacted a dozen churches in Muskegon but either did not get a response or were turned down. I was shocked. I told him I would bring the matter to our consistory. I remember vividly the meeting when I put forth the request. One of our young deacons said, “What would Jesus do?” Issue settled. The Metropolitan group was offered our chapel on Sunday evenings and a classroom for Bible study during the week.

The *Muskegon Chronicle* learned of the group and wrote a story. They also published with the story a picture of the group in our chapel, telling how we offered them hospitality.

That story appeared in the press about a week before the spring meeting of the Muskegon Classis and became the catalyst for an investigation of our ministry to homosexual persons. The rest is history.

I tell you that story because – so typical of their spirit – Barbara and Norm showed up at CCC to encourage, affirm and support. I like to think we borrowed them for a few years as positive signs of grace in the face of some difficult times.

On an All Saints' Day Service in 2002, I preached a sermon that spoke especially meaningfully to Norm. He told Barbara, "I want that sermon preached at my funeral." Norm's health broke down. He was taken to The Inn at Freedom Village. Returning home from Florida, I saw I had received an email from John saying that his dad was failing. I called Barbara. She was on the way to The Inn. I met her there. Norm had not been communicating for a day or two. I came to his side and something happened. We had a wonderful conversation – he poured out his life story with the church – a pastor who asked his father, an elder, to tell Norm not to ask questions in catechism, and so on. It was a very meaningful time. I prayed with him and left.

That evening a message from Barbara was on our answering machine. I wasn't clear about what she was saying. In the morning I called her. As she began I interrupted – "Barbara, what are you telling me? Did Norm die?"

Yes, Norm had died some time after I left. It was as though he made his last and good confession and passed into Light Eternal. He expressed his gratitude for the "Grace Note" that marked our worship over the past few years.

And, of course, he would, for is there any word that describes this wonderful couple more than *Grace*? And to the end of her long and beautiful life Barbara Dee kept the Grace Note alive and well. My last really good conversation with her was at Rest Haven, in which she was very much herself. We talked about our past times together, about how fortunate we were to have lived in the ambience of Grace, to have found God all-embracing and all-inclusive.

Thinking about what I would say today, I reviewed the great women of Scripture; none measured up! But then one of my favorite biblical characters came to mind and immediately I knew I had a match for Barbara – Barnabas! Have you ever taken a magic marker to your Bible as I have to Acts and traced the story of Barnabas? I find it quite amazing how his story in Acts reflects the qualities and character of Barbara Dee.

In Acts 4 we read of that early Jesus-Jewish community which held everything in common. Enter a Levite from Cyprus named Joseph. But soon the community gave him a new name, Barnabas, which means "Son of Encouragement." Obviously there was some magic about him – a bit like meeting Barbara, I suppose. They were taken with him. His first recorded deed was to sell a field and give the proceeds to the community.

Those in the Temple leadership were not happy about the growing vitality of the Jesus Jewish group. Persecution ensued and we meet Saul, full of rage at the community. You know the story: he affirms the stoning of Stephen and then goes

on his way to Damascus to ravage the community. But he has a vision; he hears a voice and sees a light. Saul is converted and, instead of arresting the Followers of the Way, he preaches, proclaiming Jesus as the Son of God. For that he became the enemy and his life was in jeopardy. Back to Jerusalem he attempted to join the disciples but they were afraid of him. And we read of Barnabas' first act of grace – he brought Saul/Paul to the apostles and told how Saul was transformed from persecutor to preacher of the Lord.

As the story goes on, we will see this was characteristic of Barnabas – full of grace, sensitive, believing a person can change, trusting what he saw.

The persecution of the Jesus People scattered them abroad. Antioch became a center and there an amazing thing happened – the Jesus Jews spoke the Good News to non-Jews! And, amazingly, the Gentiles believed! Now what to do? The General Synod leaders in Jerusalem got nervous. They decided to send an envoy to check out this new development. And, by the Grace of God, they sent Barnabas. He came to Antioch and the Acts account tells us,

When he came and saw the grace of God, he rejoiced...for he was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and of faith.

So Barbara-like! No big theological dilemma – he saw the Grace!

Paul had returned to his home in Tarsus and Barnabas sought him out and together they ministered for a year to that community in Antioch where the disciples “were first called ‘Christians’”!

After a year there, the Antioch Church commissioned Paul and Barnabas to go on the road telling the Good News, which they did with great success. They had taken a young believer, John Mark, with them. Half way through their journey he left them, we know not why.

Their success created a major crisis for the Church leaders – the General Synod as it were. Could one come into the Grace of God through the Good News of Jesus without becoming a ritualized Jew? How about food laws? How about circumcision?

They called a Council – church historians call it the first major church council. There Peter told his story about his Cornelius experience – how, while he was speaking, the Holy Spirit “fell” on the household of this Roman Cornelius. Then Paul and Barnabas told their story – “The signs and wonders that God had done through them among the Gentiles. The evidence was overwhelming – something of global significance was happening and challenging the deepest foundations of Jewish faith, now focused on Jesus.

The “General Secretary “of the “General Synod,” James, ruled in favor of recognizing God’s Grace among the Gentiles, who could come to God through Christ without going through Moses.

Wouldn’t Barbara Dee have been clapping her hands, pumping her fist, saying, “Yes!”

After the Council’s decision Paul said to Barnabas, “Let’s retrace our steps and visit the communities we gathered on our first journey.” Barnabas said, “Great, I’ll invite John Mark.” Paul said, “No way. He deserted us!” Barnabas responded, “He was young. He has really grown up. He’s a great leader!” Paul said, “No way!” The argument was sharp. They parted ways, Barnabas taking John Mark.

Who was right?

Barnabas, full of grace, of course. He saw deeply into persons. He was sensitive, kind, compassionate, loving. (Don’t you see Barbara Dee in him?)

And he was proven right. Check Paul’s letters – in the personal greetings at the end of the letters, Paul mentioned Mark in Colossians, Philemon, and in II Timothy 4:11 Paul writes, “Get Mark and bring him with you, for he is useful in my ministry.” Obviously John Mark lived into Barnabas’ intuitive sense of the quality of his person. Again, Barnabas, full of grace, hope, and sensitivity saw what Paul had missed. Barbara would not have missed what Paul missed and Barnabas saw.

Scholars tell us Acts was written to smooth over the tensions and divisions of the early Jesus movement. There I find a portrait of Barnabas. The big names are Peter, James, and Paul but I sense Barnabas was the key. He trusted Paul’s conversion, he saw God’s Grace in Antioch, he made his witness at the Jerusalem Council and he gave John Mark a second chance.

Barbara Dee loved deep issues of Bible, theology and issues before the church in the evolving of cultural expression. Would she not have loved to make her witness to St. James! Would she not have stood up to Paul and hugged Barnabas?

She was our Barnabas – full of faith and the Holy Spirit, full of grace and sensitivity, full of compassion and love – and all with her beautiful smile. Barbara’s open mind, warm heart, loving presence – inclusive, embracing, enlivening, and enhancing the humanity of all she met...

Can you imagine a world created in her image!

I can! I do! And she makes me want to work to that end!