

Faith Mennonite Church  
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Stories of God's People  
**Barnabas: Generosity, advocacy, collaboration, conflict--and God's grace!**

*Acts 4:32, 36-37; 9:26-28; 11:19-26; 13:1-3; 15:36-40*

When I was a child, the church I grew up in had a two-week Bible school each summer. For 10 mornings in June we would learn Bible stories, memorize Bible verses, sing songs, and play group games. On the final day we had a picnic in the park and an evening program in which each class would make a presentation of something they had learned. It was usually the time of year when a small gnat, which we call “no-see-ums” were hatching and finding their way through the church’s window screens. I have a not-so-pleasant memory of scratching at bites while some youth older than I was tediously tracing on a map the three missionary journeys of Paul. I’m not sure of the lasting value of that route knowledge, but I have always remembered that Barnabas was Paul’s companion on the first trip and that, after a falling out between the two of them, Silas became Paul’s new companion.

Not until this summer have I given Barnabas much thought since those early Bible school days. I was surprised at how many times he is actually mentioned in the book of Acts—and how quickly he vanishes, after his conflict with Paul. Although Barnabas gets more New Testament page time than many of the other persons whose stories we have gotten to know this summer, we’re still left with a fairly barebones narrative that leaves us with questions and allows us to imagine what all was going on.

In an Old Testament class that I took at St. Catherine University, now emerita Professor Chris Franke encouraged us to look for the story “behind” the text, “within” the text, and “in front” of the text. The story behind the text is all that we can learn about the historical setting, the concerns of the times when the text was written or edited. Sometimes this comes from other places in the Bible; sometimes from extra-biblical sources. The story within the text is best understood when we examine the writing style, do word studies, trying to understand exactly what the writer was intending to communicate. And the story in front of the text is what emerges when we bring the ancient story to bear on our current stories. Yes, it’s important to know what the story meant in the first century, but what meaning—no doubt different—can it have for us today?

I’d like to briefly review the story of Barnabas within and behind the text and then we’ll have some time to work with the story in front of the text, doing a conflict-solving exercise as we engage with this story.

Our readings this morning summarized the highlights of what we know about Barnabas. His given name was Joseph and he was descended from the priestly line of Jews, the Levites. He evidently grew up in a family that was part of the Jewish diaspora outside of Palestine, living in Cyprus. We don’t know how long he lived in Jerusalem, but in the very first mention we find him selling land which suggests he’d been there for some time. Barnabas was known for his encouraging ways and his generosity. These two characteristics, coupled with the fact that he had probably gone through the experience of feeling like an outsider when he first came to Jerusalem, may explain why he was quick to offer hospitality to Saul when Saul first came to Jerusalem following his conversion. While others feared Saul and questioned whether his conversion was authentic, Barnabas advocated for his acceptance and paved the way for Saul to begin preaching about the Way of Jesus in the city where he was known as an enemy of this Way.

The story in Acts moves quickly from a time when the church was growing and living in peace in Jerusalem, to a moment of persecution after Stephen was martyred. The persecution, we read, led people outside of Palestine, and as they went they shared the news of Jesus—initially just within the Jewish community. But then word comes back to Jerusalem that some followers from Cyprus and Cyrene are going beyond the Jewish community in their witness. Since Barnabas is originally from Cyprus, he was probably a natural candidate for the Jerusalem apostles to send out to take stock and help give leadership

to this new experience. Just as Barnabas trusted Saul's conversion, he now trusts what he finds and experiences in Antioch where the church has spread beyond the Jewish community. He even goes to look for Saul to bring him to be part of the church there. It is within that church in Antioch that Saul and Barnabas are called to begin traveling to other parts of Asian Minor to share the good news of Jesus.

When we read all of the parts of Acts referring to Barnabas, we learn that a cousin of his, John Mark, became a traveling/mission partner on that first trip. (John Mark was from Jerusalem, the son of a "Mary," who hosted church gatherings in her home.) We also learn that Barnabas and Paul traveled together to Jerusalem for the "Jerusalem conference" (Acts 15) which concerned the matter of how Gentile Christians should be received in to the church. Did they need to go through Jewish initiation practices, such as circumcision, or was their confession of faith and commitment to a changed life sufficient? While Barnabas and Saul seem to be of one mind in advocating for the inclusion of Gentiles in the church at the Jerusalem conference as recorded in Acts 15, Paul's letter to the Galatians sheds a somewhat different light. In the second chapter of Galatians, Paul describes how Barnabas was influenced by the the duplicitous behavior of the apostle Peter who visited the church in Antioch:

*But when Cephas [Peter] came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face, because he stood self-condemned; for until certain people came from James, he used to eat with the Gentiles. But after they came, he drew back and kept himself separate for fear of the circumcision faction. And the other Jews joined him in this hypocrisy, so that even Barnabas was led astray by their hypocrisy.*

These verses help us catch a glimpse of the story behind the text in which Barnabas lived. Imagine this fledgling church finding its way. It was founded around Jesus, whose teachings were about a kingdom or "reign of God" that Jesus described in parable and metaphor rather than in terms of organizational structure. Jesus, a Jew, had lived and taught almost exclusively within the Jewish milieu, but after the coming of the Spirit at Pentecost, the church begins to take on a universal nature. The key question and conflict seems to have been: how do we balance the weight of tradition that has rested in Jerusalem, the heart of Judaism, with these new expressions of the Spirit in far flung places? Where does authority rest? How can we keep some sense of unity of understanding as the church develops? Which practices are essential and which can be determined in each setting?

It is very possibly this behind the text story that is at the heart of the conflict between Saul/Paul and Barnabas regarding whether John Mark will travel with them on a second journey. In Acts 13:13 we learn that John Mark dropped out of the first journey and returned to Jerusalem. Was he simply homesick at the time and did Paul now sees him as not dependable? Or did John Mark feel the need to report on Saul and Barnabas' missionary activities to leaders in Jerusalem, leading Paul to think that he didn't fully support the mission to the Gentiles? We cannot know with certainty, of course, but there seems to be good evidence for the latter interpretation.

But there is one more part to the story. While we find no further mention of Barnabas in the New Testament record after his parting of ways with Paul, we do find several mentions of Mark in the greeting section of several of Paul's later letters. In his letter to the Colossians, Paul mentions "Mark, cousin of Barnabas" and orders them to "welcome him." In his letter to Philemon he includes Mark among "my fellow workers." And in 2 Timothy, Paul asks that Mark be brought to him for "he is useful to me." It seems that at some point Paul and John Mark were reconciled, and perhaps by extension, Barnabas was also included in this reconciliation. The grace of God prevailed.

So our task this morning is to do a bit of problem solving/conflict resolution around this story. On the scripture page in the bulletin you'll find a guide for discussion. This invites you to be imaginative, taking what you've heard this morning, and thinking of ways Paul and Barnabas might have resolved their conflict. I invite you to do this work in pairs or groups of three. As always, you can spend time in individual reflection if you prefer, or move to a table to use some of the visual response materials.