



making God's love visible in downtown Memphis

Finding His Saint
All Saints' Sunday
November 6, 2022
The Rev. Paul McLain

In the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. *Amen.*

Maggie and Matthew, parents of Baby Patrick who we will baptize today, met for a time of baptismal preparation earlier this week. They were joined by Patrick's godparents, Brittany and Jonathan. Matthew asked if each child or adult being confirmed in the Episcopal Church takes on the name of a saint as in the Roman Catholic tradition. While that is not something we do formally, an informal spiritual practice that many do find helpful is discovering a particular saint who serves as a guide to help inform and deepen one's journey in Christ.

One saint that Patrick may wish to consider is Barnabas. His original name was Joseph of Cyprus, but when the early apostles recognized his gift for encouraging others, they changed his name to Barnabas. Barnabas means 'son of encouragement.' Barnabas lived into this name first by selling a piece of land that he owned. He took the money that he received and laid it at the feet of the apostles. It was used to meet the needs of the community. Barnabas teaches us that the gift of encouragement first comes out of the gift of generosity. And this generosity is larger than land or anything material. It is a generosity of spirit – a spirit that wants to see others succeed and prosper.

In his Sermon on the Plain in our Gospel passage from Luke today, Jesus calls the crowd and us not merely to tolerate those we perceive as enemies, but to love them. He goes on to say, 'do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you.' Jesus invites us to a spirit of generosity that sees beyond temporary hostilities. He invites us to use our gift of imagination to see any we consider as enemies through the eyes of God. He invites us even to see our enemies as saints.

After Saul of Tarsas, a fierce persecutor of Christians, had his conversion experience with Jesus on the road to Damascus, he returned to Jerusalem to preach and to serve Jesus. But the Christian community there remembered him as their ultimate enemy, the one who sought to kill them. And they would have nothing to do with him. In fact, they were still afraid of him and wanted him completely barred from their emerging new life together. It was Barnabas who, inspired by God and with God's help, had the faith to re-introduce Saul to the community. Barnabas told them that Saul's conversion experience was genuine. He told them about the deep inner work in confession, in learning, in obedience that Saul did after his conversion experience in Damascus. Barnabas told them about Saul's many gifts that he was now placing at the feet of Jesus. Because the disciples in Jerusalem trusted Barnabas, based on his endorsement, they now trusted Saul.

This is the beginning of the story of how Saul became Paul, the writer of most of the New Testament and the greatest missionary of all time who led the growth of Christianity throughout the world. Barnabas, vouching for Saul, is the reason we, in this place across the globe from Jerusalem, are celebrating the Christian faith today. Barnabas teaches us that encouragement involves taking a risk – perhaps even taking a chance on someone you vowed you would never again trust.

When news reached Jerusalem that the first Gentile converts to Christianity joined the community in Antioch, the original apostles were again wondering how they can possibly accept old enemies into their fold. To whom do they turn to investigate this new development? They turn to the man they trust. They turn to Barnabas. Barnabas went to Antioch and encouraged this emerging community to remain faithful in their devotion to Jesus. He also uncovered their gifts and he discerned that Paul was God's chosen leader for inspiring and forming these new saints in Antioch. Barnabas went to Tarsus, found Paul, and brought him to Antioch. And the community grew in numbers and in depth of faith such that it was the first to be given a new name – Christians.

Encouragement involves looking for and recognizing the gifts of other people. Even gifts they have no idea they possess. Encouragement then involves matching those gifts to the needs of others.

The relationship between Barnabas and Paul was not perfect. They had differences over how far and fast to move with the inclusion of Gentiles. They differed on the participation of young Mark, cousin of Barnabas, in their missionary efforts. Paul and Barnabas agreed to part ways for a while, with Barnabas taking Mark under his wing.

While we do not know if Barnabas and Paul reconciled, we do know that Paul in his later years referred to Mark as his co-worker, and wrote, 'If Mark, cousin of Barnabas, comes to you, welcome him.' Perhaps this was Paul's final tribute to Barnabas by mentoring and encouraging Mark, a former adversary, just as Barnabas had done for him.

During our Baguette Brothers Bible study Thursday, one of the brothers described the Beatitudes, today's Gospel passage about blessings and woes, as the building blocks for forming our Christian identity. Jesus is letting followers then and today know exactly who we are. In the Beatitudes Jesus hands down to us, we identify with the poor and with those who have experienced or are experiencing loss and grief. When we are reviled and hurt, we even somehow find blessing within that, and we persevere, with God's help. We keep going. We keep encouraging. We keep loving.

Just as young Patrick's baptismal gown has been handed down from generation to generation for 200 years, our Christian identity of loving, even and especially loving our enemies, has been handed down from generation to generation for 2,000 years.

We do not know who young Patrick will someday select for his touchstone saint. We (will, are about to) pray for him to be given an inquiring and discerning heart, so, we are confident he will make a wise and thoughtful choice. Perhaps it will be Barnabas. Perhaps it will be the saint of his given name, Patrick, who went back to Ireland, the land of his enemies who had once enslaved

him, and became their patron saint. Or perhaps it will be baby Patrick's great-grandfather Fred, who entered the nearer presence of God on Friday. Fred Goldsmith's ingratiating smile and kind presence made every person who passed by our front desk feel welcome, feel encouraged, and feel part of a loving, reconciling community.

We cannot wait to see who will be young Patrick's saint, and to see the saint that he is and will become. *Amen.*