

Faith in a Footnote

For several weeks this summer, we are spending time in the book of Acts with some of the people who help build and shape the early church, not the marquee names like Peter and Paul, but some of the supporting cast, the ones who show up in the lists of names, or even in the footnotes. Last week we heard about Stephen and the first deacons. This week brings us to Barnabas, whom we first meet at the end of chapter 4:

Joseph, whom the apostles nicknamed Barnabas (that is, “one who encourages”), was a Levite from Cyprus. He owned a field, sold it, brought the money, and placed it in the care and under the authority of the apostles.¹

So Barnabas is a Levite from Cyprus, which sounds oh so bible-y, doesn’t it? As you may know, to be a Levite means he is a leader in the community, part of the leadership that is “devoted to God and [the people] Israel’s well-being.”² He is also from Cyprus, so he is part of the Jewish diaspora, Israel’s descendants and converts who were scattered over generations of being enslaved, deported, and shuffled around the ancient world. And he has been given a nickname, not a term of affection like—Red, Elle Belle, or others I’ve been called through the years. Instead in calling Joseph “Barnabas,” the disciples recognize his gift of encouraging the faithful and invite him to claim that encouragement work as a vocation of sorts, a holy job with and for the people of God.

The fledgling community grows and quickly runs afoul of the powers that be in Jerusalem. As we learned last week, the disciples need help doing all that is before them so they urge the community to tap people to help. Stephen and others are chosen as the first deacons. Stephen boldly testifies to the power of the risen Christ. Outraged by his preaching, a crowd stones him while Saul, later to be known as the Apostle Paul looks on. This stoning, we are told, marks the beginning of intense persecution, and, “Everyone except the apostles was scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria.”³ [Read Acts 11:19-26]

On the heels of his dramatic conversion on the road to Damascus, Paul heads to Jerusalem to try and join forces with the disciples. They want nothing to do with him. They cannot believe that this one who was one of

¹ Acts 4:36-37, CEB

² Robert W. Wall, “The Acts of the Apostles,” *The New Interpreter’s Bible*, vol. X (Abingdon: Nashville, 2002), 97.

³ Acts 8:1b, CEB

their most dreaded persecutors could possibly be chosen by God to join them in their work. And for some reason, it is Barnabas who brings Paul to them and speaks on his behalf, recounting Paul's story to them and telling them "about the confidence with which Saul had preached in the name of Jesus in Damascus."⁴ They listen to Barnabas, and they welcome Saul into their community.

When I hear that Barnabas means "one who encourages," it's hard for me not to imagine a cheerleader of sorts, an optimist who gives pep talks when things look dreary. But Barnabas expands my understanding of what it is to encourage, especially as a Christian vocation. He is not simply patting folks on the back or urging them to cheer up. It is something deeper. He travels extensively alongside Paul, and preaches alongside him, too. He is the one to bring Paul where he needs to be. He urges faithfulness and builds bridges. Eventually, Paul and Barnabas will part ways, but without Barnabas's seeing Paul for the changed man he is, without his bringing Paul to Antioch the church might not be the church. Yes, God can do amazing things, but at least from what I read in Acts, Barnabas is as essential to the story as Paul is, whether we remember his name or not.

I recently read a story about a World War II hero whose name did not show up in my history books:

In May 1944, a 23-year-old British secret agent named Phyllis Latour Doyle parachuted into occupied Normandy to gather intelligence on Nazi positions in preparation for D-Day. As an agent for the British Special Operations Executive (SOE), Doyle...secretly relayed 135 coded messages to the British military before France's liberation in August. She took advantage of the fact that the Nazi occupiers and their French collaborators were generally less suspicious of women, using the knitting she carried as a way to hide her codes...

She first deployed to Aquitaine in Vichy France where she worked for a year as a spy using the codename Genevieve. Her most dangerous mission, however, began on May 1, 1944 when she jumped out of a U.S. Air Force bomber and landed behind enemy lines in Nazi-occupied Normandy. Using the codename Paulette, she posed as a poor teenage French girl. Doyle used a bicycle to tour the region, often under the guise of selling soap, and passed information to the British on Nazi positions using coded messages. In an interview...she described how risky the mission, noting that 'The men who had

⁴ Acts 9:27, CEB

been sent just before me were caught and executed. I was told I was chosen for that area [of France] because I would arouse less suspicion.'... Coded messages took a half an hour to send, and the Germans could identify where a signal was sent from in an hour and a half, so Doyle moved constantly to avoid detection. At times, she stayed with Allied sympathizers, but often she had to sleep in forests and forage for food. During her months in Normandy, Doyle sent 135 secret messages conveying invaluable information on Nazi troop positions, which was used to help Allied forces prepare for the Normandy landings on D-Day and during the subsequent military campaign. Doyle continued her mission until France's liberation in August 1944.⁵

So a 23-year-old woman, a knitter who looked like a French peasant girl helped stop the Nazis by finding creative ways to get important information where it needed to go. The article mentions that she underwent special training and learned how to climb into windows after scaling walls, but her true gift was her ability to carry out this crucial mission in plain sight, never asking for glory or attention. In fact, no one really knew her story until she started sharing it about 15 years ago with her family in New Zealand where she settled after the end of the war. Like Barnabas, she had no desire to get the glory. She simply wanted to be of service to a cause that was far bigger than anything she might do on her own.

Clearly Barnabas is valued and trusted by the early church community. In him they see one who has the courage and the passion to help the church to grow beyond the bounds of Jerusalem. He is not from the inner circle. He never knew Jesus personally, and yet he is captured by the Good News of Jesus Christ and commits himself to doing his part in its being shared far and wide.

At the end of our passage we read that it is in Antioch where the community is first labeled as "Christians." Scholars tell us that this label arises initially as a putdown, and that Luke—the writer of Acts—is using the term to draw a distinction between these far flung faith communities and the home church in Jerusalem. But as one who understands herself to be Christian, I find something else there as well. Because I, too, am a beneficiary not just of Paul's witness or Peter's preaching, but of Barnabas's courage and devotion too. I am Christian not because I have seen Jesus, or because I have gathered with the inner circle in Jerusalem.

⁵https://www.ameightygirl.com/blog?p=25020&fbclid=IwAR1Q6WlIIQhEw_QHuOB2hWXnHBi9VV8DFEvvSMDcezysroG2rJzu69qZmdM

No, I am a Christian because—through the work of the Holy Spirit and the grace of God—I have been prodded, challenged, and encouraged by other believers who have trusted the witness of other believers. They have shared that faith with me through some sort of holy, cosmic ripple effect that stretches beyond time and across generations. Without them I would not be here.

I am fairly certain that many—if not all—gathered here today also consider yourselves to be Christian. I've seen more than a few of you wear that name with humility and gratitude out in the world. But in Barnabas I am reminded that simply claiming the title of Christian is not enough. Barnabas, this leader in the community of the first Christians is said to be “good man, whom the Holy Spirit had endowed with exceptional faith,” but so often he is only a footnote, and I think he would be ok with that.⁶ Because being a Christian is not about my getting the credit. It is not about my name being highlighted in the history books or getting first billing on a movie marquee. It's really not even about my name being on a marquee at all. Instead it is about how I live and move and act in the world while wearing the name of Christian. It's about carrying out our mission in plain sight. Because being a footnote is not the same as being a bystander. You and I know that there are some who claim the same Christ we do who want us to wield his name like a bludgeon, determined to silence and scare. I do not see that kind of witness in Barnabas or in the church in Antioch. Instead, those first Christians tell me that my being a Christian calls on me to stand up to those who spout fear and hide behind old notions of who counts and what is holy. It calls me to question whose voice God is calling us to listen to. It calls me to act for what is right, what is just, what is merciful, what is true by Christ's standards, not my preferences. It calls on me—to use our God-given gifts—whatever those gifts may be—to witness to the life-giving, life-saving power of the risen Christ whether I am in Jerusalem, central Pennsylvania, Antioch, Northern Virginia, or anywhere else in God's good world. And then by the grace of God, maybe others will look at us and call us Christians, too.

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

⁶ Acts 11:24, CEB