**Courageous Faith: Barnabas**

**Acts 9:26-31; 2 Corinthians 5:17-20**

Rev. Nancy S. Lynn

World Communion Sunday

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Way back in 1933, a Presbyterian pastor named Hugh Thomson Kerr had an idea he called World Wide Communion Sunday.  He hoped, that by focusing on Christianity as a global faith, his congregation would be reminded of their interconnectedness with other congregations around the world. The idea was picked up by the wider Presbyterian Church and then, in 1940, by the National Council of Churches, which began promoting it to churches around the world.  When asked how the idea grew from one church to the global Christian community, Kerr’s son said, “The concept spread very slowly at the start. People did not give it a whole lot of thought. It was during the Second World War that the spirit caught hold, because we were trying to hold the world together. World Wide Communion symbolized the effort to hold things together, in a spiritual sense. It emphasized that we are one in the Spirit and the Gospel of Jesus Christ.”

Since then, World Communion Sunday has given us a chance to celebrate Christian unity and ecumenical cooperation.  Despite our many differences, on this day, congregations large and small, in Chicago skyscrapers and one room huts, along rivers or set in the mountains, speaking Spanish, Korean, English or Swahili gather at the Communion table to take the bread and the cup and give thanks for Christian community.

Of course, we all know that Christianity is a world religion.  Yet, it can be easy to forget just how widespread our siblings in faith are around the globe.  According to a Pew Research study, the 10 countries with the largest Christian populations are found in 5 different continents - Europe, North America, South America, sub Saharan Africa, and Asia.  In the same study, they counted Christians in more than 200 countries around the world.    Who would have thought that a dozen disciples of a Jewish rebel 2,000 years ago would start a religion that would spread to so many people and so many places?  Of course, that might never have happened if it weren’t for the courage of one man we almost never talk about - a disciple named Barnabas.

 We are in the third week of a sermon series entitled “Courageous Faith” in which we are looking at different people in the Bible - some widely recognized, others a bit more obscure - and the courage they found to do what God called them to do in the world.  Our premise is that we are living in a challenging time, and God calls us to be courageous. Faith fuels courage and courage fuels faith.  Two weeks ago, we looked at Abraham and the courage to leave what is familiar and embrace something new.  Last week, we talked about two midwives, Shiphrah and Puah, who had the courage to do the right thing despite the risk to them.

 Now, this week we are jumping way forward in time.  While the first two stories came from the beginning books of the Bible, Barnabas appears much, much later in the book of Acts, which tells the history of the early Christian church. So, for those of you who may need a quick refresher... after Jesus’ resurrection, his disciples began to share his gospel of love and justice, and the movement called The Way began to spread quickly.  At first, they focused their attention on teaching and preaching in Jerusalem, but the Pharisees, and others who believed in a strict interpretation of Jewish law, were angered by followers of The Way.  They did not believe that Jesus was the Messiah and were threatened by his teachings.  So they began arresting, persecuting, and sometimes killing Christians.

The first to be martyred was Stephen, who was sentenced to be stoned to death. Two important things happened after Stephen’s execution.  One was that many of the apostles and followers of The Way left Jerusalem and resettled in Judea, Samaria, and Syria.  The second was that one particular Pharisee by the name of Saul began a campaign to wipe out the Jesus movement completely.

You may remember from a sermon a couple of months ago, that Saul was on his way to Damascus to arrest and persecute Jews there, when he encountered the risen Christ.  Saul became a believer and was baptized and Jesus announced, “This is the agent I have chosen to carry my name before Gentiles, kings, and Israelites.”  In response to this calling, Saul began to teach about Jesus in the synagogues in Damascus.  So many people responded to him, that soon the former persecutor became the persecuted.  The Jewish authorities developed a plot to kill him. To save his own life, Saul escaped from Damascus and went to Jerusalem.

And that’s where the courage of Barnabas comes into the picture.  Barnabas was a Cypriot Jew whose given name was Joseph.  The disciples, however, called him Barnabas because it means one who encourages.  This tells you right away a little bit about his character. Like Saul, Barnabas spoke Greek and had grown up in the Jewish Diaspora.  Though Jerusalem was the center of Judaism, they each had experienced a wider world and life living among Gentiles.  This makes them natural allies. When Saul arrives in Jerusalem, hoping to join up with the other disciples, they turn him away.  They don’t trust him - after all, he was their greatest persecutor!

Barnabas is the one to step in and intercede.  He is trusted by the others, so he takes Saul to the apostles and elders of the church he shares with them the story of Saul’s conversion.  He describes Saul’s preaching and teaching in Damascus.  With Barnabas there to vouch for him, Saul is accepted among the Christ-followers in Jerusalem, and eventually he becomes the man we call, Paul, the great evangelizer.

Paul spent the rest of his life traveling, teaching, and preaching about Jesus.  It’s estimated he traveled more than 10,000 miles to carry Jesus’ teachings across Asia Minor.  He became the apostle who would reach out to non-Jews and help them see the beauty of Jesus’ teachings.  Where once he was a strict adherent to Jewish law, he advocated for the Gentiles and convinced the rest of the apostles that Gentiles should not have to be circumcised to become part of the movement.  Paul did more to help the new church grow into new places and embrace new people than any other of the first Christians.  And all because of Barnabas.  All because Barnabas stepped in to mediate, to break down the invisible wall between Paul and the disciples who feared him.

As we move closer and closer to November, our country seems ever more divided between Republicans and Democrats, those who wear masks and those who don’t, those who seek to dismantle systemic racism and those who protect it, and so on.  These divisions exist not only in our communities but in our denomination as we argue over the full inclusion of LGBTQ individuals in the church.  These invisible walls separating us from each other have become commonplace.  They are built with bricks of distrust, fear, hatred, and bigotry.  Our country and our denomination are badly fractured.  Yet, God’s vision for humanity is one of wholeness and peace.  So, no matter what happens in the coming months, as Christ-followers we will eventually be called by God to begin the work of healing - to approach those invisible walls and gently, thoughtfully start to remove some of the bricks.  Just as Barnabas did.

Ours is a faith that is built on love - love expressed in many different ways.  Jesus showed his love through healing, through teaching, through challenging and uplifting, and through advocating for justice.  All of this he did to teach us the way of reconciliation - reconciliation with God, with each other, with the individuals and institutions that have harmed us.  That does not at all mean that we let go of our values or beliefs - simply that we seek to restore relationship.

I believe that choosing to work toward reconciliation at any level is some of the most courageous work we can do as Christians.  That is true whether you are inside the conflict like Saul and the Jerusalem disciples or you are stepping in from the outside to help, like Barnabas.  It takes courage to enter into conversation when there is animosity, fear, anger, or hurt.  Yet, if we who follow the Prince of Peace can’t find that courage, who will?

In his second letter to the Corinthians, Paul tells us that we are ambassadors for Christ and God has given to us the ministry of reconciliation. Right now, at this moment, in the life of our country and in the life of our denomination, the restoration of relationships may feel very far off - sometimes even impossible.  But that does not mean we give up or walk away from this calling on our lives.  Rather, we look at where we can start in our own lives if not in the church or country.

Perhaps you have some things that you need to make right between you and God. Some behavior or belief that you see stands between you and a full and right relationship.  Perhaps you know of a conflict in your family or an old wound that is festering within yourself or between others.  Perhaps you are nursing animosity toward people you don’t even know because you think you know what they believe.  There are so many places in our lives that need healing.  How we practice reconciliation now can help us to build the skills, compassion, and courage for the work that lies ahead.

So, yes, today we celebrate World Communion - the reality of our interconnectedness and the ideal of our unity.  May this day remind us of the courage of Barnabas not to try to fix the problem or make it go away - but to engage, to start the conversation, to make the walls visible and begin to learn what is necessary for the first bricks to come down.

May it be so.  Amen.