ECS Sunday-Feast of St Barnabas

6.14.26

Today we're celebrating ECS Sunday, as part of a diocesan-wide invitation to honor the work of Episcopal Community Services. This might seem like de ja vu, because St Peter's already had the practice of honoring ECS every year. In March, ECS chaplain Kyle Evans came to preach and to speak about this Philadelphia-based Episcopal organization that helps people to rise from poverty.

So why are we celebrating today? This year Bishop Gutierrez invited all parishes to honor ECS on the feast of St. Barnabas, whose name has graced the resource center out of which ECS runs much of its services. Thursday was his feast day, so we moved his readings to today.

So that's the reason. But that reason gives us a special opportunity to reflect not simply on the work of ECS, but on the wider call of the church to be engaged in the welfare of others, and to consider how the work of ECS is a model for our responsibility as parish and individuals to reach out to people in our community who are vulnerable. St Barnabas, that steady companion of the Apostle Paul in the book of Acts, is a wonderful patron for this work.

Barnabas' real name was Joseph. He was a member of Isreal from Cyprus. He was one of those people about whom Jesus said "Blessed are they who have not seen but still believe." Living way out among his fellow Jews in Cyprus, Barnabas didn't have a chance to follow Jesus in person. But when he heard the story, he believed.

The author of Acts (4:33-35) wrote:

With great power the apostles continued to testify to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus. And God's grace was so powerfully at work in them all ***34*** *that there were no needy persons among them. For from time to time those who owned land or houses sold them, brought the money from the sales* ***35*** *and put it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to anyone who had need."*

Barnabas was one of those people – he sold a field he owned and gave the money the apostles. If one of you did that, I'd feel encouraged. And that's why the apostles named him Barnabas, which means "son of encouragement."

He would live up to his name, as one who advocated for Paul to the church in Jerusalem, and who became Paul's close friend and ministry partner, sharing the gospel with the gentiles, especially in Antioch. This is where today's Gospel picks up. Barnabas goes from major donor to chief evangelist, and is dispatched by the church in Jerusalem to Antioch where the gospel is taking hold. He soon seeks out Paul to help him with the work. "It was in Antioch that the disciples were first called "Christians,' our Scriptures tell us.

I'm particularly struck by the role that Barnabas and Paul play in responding to the famine in Judea, mentioned in today's passage from Acts. "The disciples determined that according to their ability, each would send relief to the believers living in Judea; this they did, sending it to the elders by Barnabas and Saul."

Now imagine walking on foot from Antioch to Judea, which is more than 280 away. It was a 15 day trek on foot in the ancient world. Imagine making that journey with large sums of money on your person. To get there in one piece without having been robbed so that your siblings in Christ wouldn't starve to death seems like one of the great unsung miracles of Acts. Perhaps this is what Jesus meant when he said "see, I am sending you out like sheep into the midst of wolves; so be wise as serpents and innocent as doves."

This kind of care for those in need was one of the chief hallmarks of Christians in the Roman Empire. It was strange and counter to how society worked at the time, where your loyalties were to your betters, your clan, or to the household of Ceasar. Generosity was not to be extended beyond that, especially to those outside of the fold. This kind of concern with feeding the hungry and healing the sick and tending to the needs of the poor gave Christians their early reputation in Roman society.

"'The kingdom of heaven has come near.' Jesus tells his followers in the Gospel of Matthew. "Cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, cast out Demons. You received without payment; give without payment."

And so Barnabas and Paul are only doing what a Christian of the time did, bringing famine relief to those in need 300 miles away.

I'm really struck by that distance. You would think in a place without highways or high-speed transit that the plight of people so far away would seem to be happening in another world. We have the means of closing a 300-mile information gap in an instant, in fact, and it's hard sometimes for us to be concerned for people in the next neighborhood. The city of Philadelphia might seem 300 miles away at times, or Norristown, for that matter. We wouldn't dream of walking there.

But the letters that Christian leaders wrote one another, those epistles that we hear from most every Sunday, kept this far-flung community in loving connection. It was part of the Christian character to proclaim the story of Jesus and to act like he did, reaching out to people that others wouldn't consider to be in the fold, creating communities of care, providing healing and acceptance. This has never been an add-on, politically liberal practice of the church, but a foundational one, one essential to the Christian identity.

This is why St Barnabas is such a good patron for groups like Episcopal Community Services, and a good role model for us. In one sense ECS is "place-based," providing a great deal of one-on-one assistance to people in the neighborhood that surrounds the Girard Ave area in the Haddington Neighborhood of Philadelphia. This might range from helping people find suitable housing, get groceries for the week, receive health care or after-school care for their children, get the government supports they qualify for.

When I visited ECS's St Barnabas resource center recently, I was impressed by the commitment to helping lives transform. In every room there is a chart that describes the path to prosperity, and the continuum of supports and goals that help people rise from poverty. The staff speak with passion and love about the people they help. The programs are mind-boggling in the issues they address. You can read more about them in the ECS literature that is available today. And there's coloring pages too if you're so inclined.

So we've come a long way from carrying the famine relief funds 300 miles in hidden money pouches. But we still carry the gospel in and to vulnerable people. It's in the spirit of that journey from Antioch to Judea, though, that I consider our call to support an organization that largely reaches out to people not from our neck of the woods. Because it bears our larger identity, Episcopal, Christian, we are invited to see ourselves as neighbors, and partners in the work. We are invited to contribute to the collection as donors, or the ongoing efforts, as volunteers and supporters.

And to be sure the work of ECS doesn't stop in Haddington. Their online programs for economic and housing consulting are open to people in need all over the region. In 2025 ECS estimates it touched 10,000 lives in their neighborhood and far beyond.

No matter when we hold ECS Sunday, the work of Episcopal Community Services happens year round. It's worthwhile to stop and to be thankful for those who teach us how to be generous and hopeful and committed to transformations that can take a very long time to witness. But that's what it means to be a son or daughter of encouragement. That's what is required of us who would follow the example of Barnabas and the Gospel of Christ.

Amen