

Commentary on the Gospel for Wed, Jun 11th 2014

Many years ago, in the shadow of the Colorado Rocky Mountains, I was making a weekend retreat for those discerning a life as a Jesuit priest. “C’mon, Kyle,” you might ask, “you really thought you could make a decision with life-long implications in just three short days?” A fair question! The truth is, I had been discerning between a vocation as a husband or that of a priest for nearly seven years.

This retreat was one more tactic in my playbook with God. I honestly figured I would walk away with yet another layer of murkiness around this difficult decision.

To this day, I cannot remember the Jesuit who was assigned to me as my spiritual director for that weekend, but I owe him greatly. He said, “You have clearly done all your homework. You have made your lists of pros and cons. You have listened to what other people think you should do. It’s time for you to decide. Your deepest desire is God’s deepest desire for you.” Like the crisp, autumn air surrounding me, those words cleared my head and my heart. That priest didn’t espouse some long-winded dissertation on discernment. He did something much more profound and pastoral - he encouraged me.

Today the Roman Catholic Church celebrates the life of St. Barnabas - the name given to a contemporary of Jesus who was a Jewish convert to Christianity. That name “Barnabas” means “son of encouragement.” (Acts 4:36) If we pay attention to what is happening in today’s first reading, it is easy to see why he was bestowed with such a title.

We encounter Barnabas as he has been sent by the disciples in Jerusalem to go investigate what they are hearing about a community of Jesus’ followers in Antioch, some 300 miles to the north. Imagine how powerful their reputation must have been if it traveled that distance upon sandals and burrow backs! And what is the first thing Barnabas does when he arrives? “He rejoiced and encouraged them all.” (Acts 11:23) I love that!

And it only gets better. Once Barnabas realizes there is more faith formation to do in Antioch, he lives up to his new name yet again. He travels 300 miles round trip to Tarsus and back to encourage another Jewish convert named Saul to help him out. This is the same Saul who the early church kept at a distance out of fear and mistrust. Not Barnabas. He sees Saul’s potential and encourages him to spread the faith with him. Look at the incredible impact that encouragement had on our faith today as we continue to draw wisdom from Saul, otherwise known as St. Paul.

I encourage you to read more about St. Barnabas if you haven’t already. His story is inspiring. A great synopsis with Scriptural references can be found here:

<https://suscopts.org/resources/literature/185/st-barnabas-son-of-encouragement/>

May we all honor the life of St. Barnabas today (and everyday) by making it a point to encourage another. The teenager at the grocery checkout stand, the custodian in our workplace, our boss, a member of our extended families who is ostracized, someone who looks up to us...let's find that person today in need of an extra dose of courage, hope or support and keep the spirit of St. Barnabas alive with our words and actions.

Kyle Lierk