

October 13, 2019
II Timothy, II Kings 5
28th Sunday in Ordinary Time
The Rev. Dr. Mark W. Jennings

What is your favorite verse in the Bible? Or passage, or story? What is your favorite? When I was first dating Erin, she took me to meet a family that she had known growing up. She in fact had been sort of a nanny to their children while she was in high school. At the time we met Deeny and Chris had six kids running around and they all loved Erin and pestered her to sing for them, play piano for them, tell them a story, like she had when they were little. But Deeny and Chris kept pestering me with questions and I felt like this was an examination—was I good enough to be dating Erin? Finally Deeny asked me what my favorite verse in the Bible was. I thought about being a smart-aleck and saying the shortest verse in the Bible, “Jesus wept,” or the place in the Psalms where God tells Israel, “I will accept no bull from your house.” But I didn't. I said that currently the one that spoke to me was Micah 6:8, “for what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God.” What would yours be? Today, I might say differently. I might say the story of the Prodigal Son, because that speaks to me so much about the nature and the love of God. What passages in the Bible speak most to you? Or what passages would it be very difficult to live without? What if we didn't have the Prodigal Son, or the Good Samaritan. I'd hate that. What if we didn't have the chapter about love in I Corinthians 13, or the passages from Romans proclaiming that nothing in all creation can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus. What if we didn't have the Christmas story? No holy family searching for a place to stay, no angels or shepherds on the hillside, no baby being born in the manger. What if we had no story of the coming of the Spirit at Pentecost, no reason to wear red one Sunday in the late spring? How much poorer we would be. But it almost could have been that way. Except for one person, that many of you haven't heard of.

One of the verses that is perhaps not my favorite, but one that has haunted me for many years is the one from II Timothy, where Paul says to Timothy, “Get Mark and bring him with you, for he is useful in my

ministry.” Get Mark and bring him. Now it's not because of the name. It's because I wonder what happened. You see, Paul has never really been my favorite person in Scripture, but through his ministry the world was certainly changed. But evidence is that he probably wasn't the easiest person to get along with. You all remember that St. Paul in the beginning is referred to as Saul, his Hebrew or Aramaic name. And in the beginning he was the greatest enemy the early church had. He felt that this new sect of Christianity was a threat to his traditional Jewish faith and so he help persecute the early Christians. The first Christian martyr, St. Stephen, was stoned to death in Jerusalem, and Saul was there, holding the cloaks of those throwing stones let they get overheated with their righteous work. Soon after that Saul left for Damascus with letter to the authorities there to arrest the Christians of Damascus. And it was on the road to Damascus that he had his conversion experience. A light came from heaven and he heard a voice saying, “Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?” But instead of punishing him, Jesus simply told him that he wanted Saul on his side. And Saul never got over it. Saul, now called Paul, begins preaching in Damascus and making converts for the new faith. And he himself begins to be persecuted. Eventually he goes back to Jerusalem and do Peter and the disciples welcome him with open arms. Not a chance. They don't trust this guy. This could be an elaborate set up to get them all arrested. They think this Paul should just disappear. Except one man. We know him by the name of Barnabas. We don't know much about him but we think his real first name was Joseph and he was born in Cyprus. But Luke tells us that he goes by the name of Barnabas, “son of encouragement.” True to his name, when Paul is alone and untrusted in Jerusalem, it is Barnabas who goes and takes him under his wing and decides to trust him. He takes him to the other disciples, who on the word of Barnabas, decide to believe him. Soon after that, the Church in Antioch, one of the most important cities in the ancient world, needs some leadership and so the disciples send Barnabas to lead that church. And Barnabas decides to take Paul with him. And it is at Antioch that these followers of Jesus are first called Christians. And it is from Antioch that the church decides to send out a couple of evangelists to tell the story of Jesus to others in the Roman Empire, so of course they send Barnabas,

and Paul. But if you read the story of the first missionary journey, it is told as Barnabas and Paul, Barnabas and Paul did this, traveled here, preached here, Barnabas and Paul. But then somewhere along the line, it begins to change. It becomes Paul and Barnabas, Paul listed first. And it becomes Paul's first missionary journey.

But something happened on that first missionary journey. They didn't go alone, just Paul and Barnabas. There were a few others who went with them. One of them was a young man named John Mark. And sometime during that journey something went wrong. Maybe he got homesick, maybe it was just more work than he wanted, maybe he was just discouraged, anyway partway through the journey, John Mark left Paul and Barnabas and went back home. Paul and Barnabas finished their journey, having made numerous converts and they went back to Antioch in triumph and reported back to the church there. Soon they begin to make plans for another missionary excursion, this time longer and farther than the first one. But there is a problem. Barnabas wants to take John Mark with them. Paul says absolutely not—he abandoned us once, we're not going to take him again. And they argue about this. And Barnabas won't give in, he wants to take him. Paul won't give in either, he'd rather take a man named Silas. So Barnabas and John Mark leave by themselves and we don't have any real idea what happens to them. Meanwhile, Paul and Silas go off to a wildly successful journey to Asia Minor, to Ephesus and Colossae, and Galatia and eventually they cross into Europe, to Philippi and Thessalonica and Corinth and even Athens. And they start churches wherever they go and later, to encourage them, Paul begins to write letters. And on their way they meet a young physician by the name of Luke and he begins to be a follower of Christ and a follower of Paul. Paul eventually makes his way around much of the Mediterranean world and eventually to Rome itself. There he is arrested and put into prison. But he doesn't stop writing those famous letters, some of which the churches saved and we have them today. And near the end, probably when he knew that he was not long from being executed for his faith. Paul writes a letter to a young leader in the church by the name of Timothy. He gives Timothy a lot of advice, but it is also a personal letter. He urges Timothy to come to Rome to visit him before Paul dies.

And then he says, "Get Mark and bring him with you. He is useful to my ministry." Get Mark and bring him. Is this the same Mark that Paul was so angry with fifteen years before because Mark abandoned him and Barnabas? We think perhaps so. But what happened to change Paul's mind? Well, I'd guess that Barnabas happened. Without Barnabas, we might not have had a more mature disciple, John Mark who is not only useful to Paul, but who befriends the apostle Peter and goes on to write a story of the life of Jesus that we call the gospel of Mark. Without Barnabas, perhaps Paul himself never gets an introduction to the disciples in Jerusalem and he goes back to Damascus and fades into obscurity. Without Barnabas, we have no gospel of Mark, no letters of Paul, no gospel of Luke because Paul was not there to tell him the good news. Without Barnabas we have no manger story, no Prodigal Son, no Corinthian chapter about love, and so many other things. Without Barnabas, the church and the world would be a poorer place. Because Barnabas could encourage. He encouraged Paul, and Mark, and probably so many others.

Sometimes history changes because of the simple faithful actions of people that we don't even know. Without the unnamed servant girl who tells her mistress about the prophet who is in Israel, does Naaman ever get healed? Without Barnabas, do we have much of a New Testament? Without Rosa Parks, is Martin Luther King just a preacher in Birmingham?

Of course the question then is, what about us? Barnabas was called the son of encouragement. Is that us? Are we children of encouragement? Do you encourage others? Do you ever say, "Good job. That was wonderful. Can I help you? You are truly gifted, keep this up. You have a lot of people behind you, and I'm one of them. You give a lot of yourself, take a break, let me do some." Do we encourage each other? Next week we're going to start a program called "Secret Saints." We may do a decent job encouraging each other when we see each other, but what about when someone is out of sight. What about when those youth that we invest in, leave for college or the military or someother endeavor? Do they hear from us? We're going to match up our youth who are graduated with members of the church who for the school year will anonymously send them notes, care packages, or whatever, to encourage

them, to let them know we care. We'll do sign up starting next week, but whether or not you decide to participate as a Secret Saint, we are all called to be like Barnabas. To encourage, even when it seems crazy, to say a good word. Who knows what effects it might have? Small actions can have great effects. Look at Barnabas.