

Homily, 5th Sunday of Easter, 2022—

The Scriptures this weekend re-introduce us to someone we hear about only occasionally—and then only during the Easter Season, which we're in now.

So, the past several Eastertime weekends, we've heard regular references to him in our Scripture readings, but no background on him, no real sense of who he is, or what he did, or why he could be important to you and me today.

Yet, he is critically important to us as Christians and, I think, to the times in which we live. I'm speaking of—St. Barnabas.

Today's Scripture from The Acts of the Apostles points to how important he is when it alludes to how St. Paul and Barnabas were partners—spiritual sidekicks—jointly spreading Jesus' message of goodness, purpose, self-sacrifice, and love.

In effect, what Barnabas originally does with Paul is...he takes Paul under his wing.

Sometime after Paul converted to Christianity, Barnabas steps up to act as Paul's mentor and guide because he's older than Paul and because he's been a Christian much longer. He also steps up to protect Paul from frightened, suspicious Christians because Paul had once led violent, Christian persecutions.

So, here's a little background on Barnabas: First, he is born into a wealthy Jewish family.

At some point—probably moved by hearing Jesus preach—he sells his estate, gives up his wealth, and becomes a Jesus disciple.

Later, after Paul arrives on the scene, it is Barnabas who introduces him to the Rock, otherwise known as Peter. Now, some scholars think Barnabas and Paul had known each other when they were younger and had studied together under the same Jewish teacher in Jerusalem.

That long-time connection must have helped them commit to one another to spread the Gospel because for several years, Barnabas and Paul work together as missionaries. We know from Scripture Barnabas is an energetic, inspired leader, and some scholars believe it is Barnabas who wrote the New Testament book called The Letter to the Hebrews. In the New Testament, that book is the only one not attributed to a particular author by name.

But unfortunately, Paul and Barnabas eventually have a falling out.

It's over Barnabas's cousin Mark, the same Mark who writes the Gospel of Mark. At the time, Paul has some doubts about Mark's dedication to the faith.

But by one account, when Barnabas is finally martyred, around the year 61, it's Paul who helps to care for him and to bury him, an example of Christian love bridging any differences they may have had.

Interestingly, Barnabas is not the name he was born with.

His given name was Joseph. But just as Saul eventually becomes Paul when he's baptized, Joseph receives a new name when he becomes a Christian. Barnabas means "Son of Encouragement." And encouragement is what he gives to the growing communities of Christians wherever he goes, and it surely describes what he offers to Paul, as well.

So great is his influence, in fact, that one Bible scholar has even remarked Paul would never have become a Christian leader and writer without...Barnabas.

Today, Barnabas is the patron saint of what is sometimes called the Florida of Europe. That's the island of Cyprus. It's also a country in the middle of the Mediterranean Sea, and it's where he grew up.

But there is another saintly role Barnabas fulfills today: As a result of the way he introduces Paul to the Christians—and manages to foster mutual respect when there's a lot of suspicion and mistrust about Paul—Barnabas is also the patron saint of peacemakers.

Can any one of us deny that we need this saint's intercession and spiritual support in the Holy Spirit now more than ever?

In the passage from St. John's Gospel we just heard, Jesus exhorts us to love one another as he loves us.

But in too many places today, that command is forgotten, or abandoned, or even mocked and spurned. Our world is scarred by cities and landscapes now synonymous with conflict and hate.

Kiev. Kharkiv. Mariupol...in Ukraine.

Or closer to home. Minneapolis. Kenosha. Washington, D.C., Buffalo, N.Y.

We live in a world hungry for peacekeepers—but they are far too few. Add to these the struggles and conflicts happening in other places too: in some of our families, in some of our marriages, in much of our politics. The troubles are everywhere... and so is the division and the pain.

We need "Sons and Daughters of Encouragement." We need to pray for more Barnabases to rise up and remind us of what too many have forgotten: That we are a faith founded on love. Jesus is our source of unending love. We are his emissaries—his missionaries. We are fed by the fruits of his redeeming love—love that was poured out on Calvary and which we celebrate now, during this Easter season, because it is a love that conquers death, a love that conquers hate.

And it is love, after all, that is our call as Christians expressed in three simple words:

Love one another.

Yes, LOVE one another.

That can be our hope and our prayer during this Mass and during these anxious days of ours. And another prayer could be this: That St. Barnabas might intercede on our behalf—to bless the world with new peacemakers.

That Barnabas—the one who built bridges between those who were persecuted, and the one who persecuted them, that is, Paul—might help build bridges in our own world, in our own time, to foster acceptance and peace.

That each of us might feel the encouragement of the Son of Encouragement, and be bearers and transmitters of Christian love to those around us.

To paraphrase a prayer attributed to another great saint of peace:

Where there is mistrust, let us bring trust.

Where there is hatred, let us bring healing.

Where there is rage, let us bring calm.

Where there is injustice, let us bring justice.

Where there is conflict, let us bring peace.

Peace. We need to be instruments of peace.

In a few moments, we will come forward to receive Jesus in the Eucharist.

This weekend, we can ask him for greater determination and greater resilient love, so we can carry hope with us as we leave this beloved church and parish family gathered this eve/morning and head into the world.

We can work to bring Jesus to others—in our lives, in our words. We can be missionaries to a world that too often has forgotten what it means to love.

We can—every one of us—we can strive...to be...Barnabas.

Please give it some thought...