

**2 Pentecost, 2006, June 18
St John's
Fr. Alan Sutherland**

There is one thing that we all possess and that is a name. In fact we all possess more than one name. Our first names were given to us by our parents and that identifies who we are.

Our family name we inherited or married into and that tells us to which family we belong.

I would guess that along with our given names and our family names, at some stage in our life, we have been given a nickname. These are usually given to us by our family or friends, or even someone who does not like us and they usually have something to do with a characteristic that we have.

To give a nickname though is not a modern practice. In fact it was very popular in biblical times.

This past Monday we celebrated the life of one of the most important, and one of my most favorite, people in the early church. His name was Barnabas. Barnabas was his nickname yet his real name was Joseph. Barnabas means son of encouragement.

I guess that Barnabas was just that kind of guy. He was a leader in the church in Antioch where these followers of Jesus were first called

Christians. Barnabas was good friends with Paul. Now Paul was preaching the gospel, yet, because he had not actually been with Jesus during the ministry of Jesus and because he had been a persecutor of Christians, and now was claiming to be an apostle, Paul was summoned to Jerusalem to be interrogated by Peter, James and John . Paul was treated pretty shamefully and Paul almost left the church. But it was Barnabas that encouraged Paul to stay and the rest we say is history.

Barnabas had a reputation.

Whenever people faltered or failed, whenever people were ignored or rejected, Barnabas would seek them out and encourage them.

Barnabas looked out for those who were lost.

I believe that what we need in the church today is an army of Barnabases.

I believe that we live in a world where the greatest disease is loneliness.

I believe that the whole church is often seen today, not as a place of reconciliation, but a place of retaliation.

And I also believe that the church exists in a world that is full of people crying out for someone to care, someone to have time for them, someone to love them.

I believe that the church is often the place that people come to find all that.

And when they come I hope they find it here.

Many people do but sometimes something happens.

Someone is missing for a few weeks and what happens is out of sight, out of mind. Eventually people are forgotten. The church has lost countless numbers of good people because of this. You know you are gone for a few weeks and no one from the church calls and says, 'we missed you.' It tells you that no one did. No one was expecting them, no one was looking for them.

You know it only takes one or two kind words to encourage somebody in their Christian faith. Our words and actions can mean so much both within and without of these walls.

Who St John's is as a Christian community is reflected in what we say or do as individuals.

The words that we say can be strong words of nurture, gentle words of encouragement, tender words of love, deep words of care, which build and encourage faith and community.

Yet sometimes our words can break down relationships, can undermine a sense of

community, undo the trust and faith that we ought to share as community.

You know I believe it is much easier to be children of discouragement, peddlers of gossip, to be judges of character, to be a complainer of all that is wrong with everything. It is much easier to be a child of all those things than a child of encouragement. A Barnabas.

Sometimes it is us who aid, and sometime it is us who are the cause for people getting lost from the church or not getting involved by what we say or what we do.

Our primary task as a church is to bring people in to faith, not to make Episcopalians or Anglicans out of them but to help them become Christian.

There are not many people who are shamed into a true faith. There are not many people who are frightened into a true faith.

Most people are drawn into a true faith by someone who really cares for them, who cares for the church, and who really cares for the lord we proclaim.

If we were to give ourselves a nickname in terms of what we say and what we do as individuals for Christ or the community of faith we call St Johns, what would that nickname be?

I hope that all of us could make the claim to

**being called Barnabas, men and women, sons
and daughters, all of us, people of
encouragement.**

Amen