

A reading from the book of Acts 7:55-60

But filled with the Holy Spirit, he gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. 'Look,' he said, 'I see the heavens opened and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God!' But they covered their ears, and with a loud shout all rushed together against him. Then they dragged him out of the city and began to stone him; and the witnesses laid their coats at the feet of a young man named Saul. While they were stoning Stephen, he prayed, 'Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.' Then he knelt down and cried out in a loud voice, 'Lord, do not hold this sin against them.' When he had said this, he died.

Hear what the Spirit is saying to the Church. **Thanks be to God.**

Reflection

It is unfortunate that we often only get snippets of stories. For example, if we only know from what is read in church, all we could say about Stephen is that he upset some people and was stoned as Saul watched. In fact, Stephen was one of seven specially chosen to serve those in need. The apostles prayed and laid their hands on this group. Filled with the Holy Spirit, Stephen proclaimed the Good News boldly. His message annoyed leaders who conspired against him making the claim that he was teaching in contrast to Moses and the Law. With wisdom and passion, he spoke about how Jesus fulfils the Law and Moses. They didn't listen. They chose to silence him, violently. Stephen is the first known Christian martyr.

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We are first introduced to Saul in this moment. That people laid their coats at his feet reveal the extent to which he was already viewed as a leader among those opposing the evolving group of Christians. He was a man to be feared. Righteous in his own mind, he wanted to stop the followers of Jesus because he believed this group were actively undermining Jewish traditions and polity.

Holding that story in one hand, we turn to today's Hazardous Saint. His story begins in the Book of Acts where he is introduced as a Levite, a native of Cyprus, named Joseph. When we first meet Joseph, he has sold a field and laid the proceeds at the feet of the apostles. Inspired by his

faith, and generosity the disciples to give him a new name, Barnabas, meaning son of encouragement. (Acts 4:36-37)

Reading through the Book of Acts, we next hear of Barnabas after the death of Stephen and Saul's experience on the road to Damascus that left him changed and with a new name, Paul. Still, the apostles, knowing Saul's active persecution of the community, feared him. Barnabas, however, took the time to meet Paul face to face. He could see a change in him. He trusted that God was somehow working in Paul and so, with courage and faith, he introduced Paul to the apostles standing firm on the idea that he was a man transformed by the Good News of Jesus Christ.

Soon after we learn that Barnabas moved to Antioch to lead the fledgling church in that city. Barnabas invited Paul to join him, serving as a mentor to this newly transformed man. The two made a good team. In time, they went out from Antioch, and began a great missionary journey through the cities of Asia Minor and Greece where, together, they passionately proclaimed the Good News.

Over time we see a switch in the stories told about this pair from Barnabas and Paul to Paul and Barnabas. That Paul eventually becomes first in this pairing suggests that Barnabas was not only an advocate and mentor to Paul, he was also humble enough to allow Paul's gifts to blossom and provide leadership for their work. In short, Barnabas, the son of encouragement, created spaces where Paul could flourish and become the apostle we know him to be. Paul honours this by mentioning his partner, Barnabas in several of the letters he wrote to church communities. Some of these letters continue to be read and studied as epistles in the Bible.

Sadly, Paul and Barnabas eventually parted ways. One version of the debate says they had a falling out over Mark, who wanted to abandon the mission. Paul's letters suggest that Barnabas sided with Peter when conflict arose about equal treatment for pagan converts. Whatever the turning point, there is no evidence to show whether the two were ever able to reconcile.

Today, Barnabas, son of encouragement, is the Hazardous Saint that continues to teach us about generosity. In him, we are challenged to share our treasures – to sell our fields with the expectation that the proceeds will be used to serve God. In him, we are challenged to share our talents – to

be bold in proclaiming our faith by word and example, including through making space for the gifts of others to grow, be nurtured, and blossom. In him, we are challenged to share our time – to make space to do God's work in our lives in ways that help to make disciples. In what ways can we say we embody such generosity? What more can we do?

In our desire to be generous with our God-given gifts of time, talents, and treasures, let us pray as we sing (SNC) 24 I Have Called You By Your Name