

The Festival of St. Barnabas with the Rite of Confirmation for Brenna Hackbart and Sienna Reif

11 June, Anno Domini 2023

Acts 11:19-30; 13:1-3

Grace, mercy, and peace be to you from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

Beloved of God,

What a joy this day that we get to hear the Christian confession of Brenna and Sienna, two precious lambs of Christ. What a joy receive them at the Lord's altar that they may feast with us on Christ's holy Body and precious Blood for the strengthening of faith and love! They have studied the Holy Scriptures and been instructed in the chief articles of the Christian faith. They have been examined and absolved and have expressed their desire to receive the Lord's Supper. Glory to God in the highest!

Brenna and Sienna, our Lord Jesus Christ together with the whole Christian Church in heaven and on earth along with the angels, the archangels, and all the company of heaven, rejoice at the confession of faith you are about to make. Of course, you have believed these things before today. From the day you were washed in the waters of Holy Baptism, this was the faith given to you by the Holy Spirit. There, He drew you out of the devil's kingdom of lies and death and brought you into the gracious kingdom of God our heavenly Father. Since then, you have been growing in your understanding of this great treasure and in your trust of Christ by hearing His Word from your parents and pastors and Sunday School teachers and other faithful Christians.

Though not terribly common, it is quite appropriate that we should be remembering St. Barnabas today. St. Barnabas is an example of true enduring faith, an unwavering devotion to the true doctrine of Christ, and a deep love for Christ's church which drove him to make great personal sacrifice to provide for the preaching the Gospel throughout the world. There was nothing more important to Barnabas than salvation in Christ.

We actually hear quite a bit about Barnabas in the New Testament. And each time we hear of him, we learn something of the Christian life, things which we do well to consider - some to emulate and some to avoid. We first encounter Barnabas in Acts chapter 4 where Barnabas, whose original name was Joseph, sold a field and

in faith laid the proceeds at the feet of the apostles to give to any who were in need. This is one of the many reasons why the apostles gave him the name Barnabas which St. Luke tells us means “son of encouragement” or “son of exhortation”. This was only the beginning of his devotion to Christ and his complete willingness to, as we just prayed, “give generously of his life and substance for the encouragement of the apostles and their ministry.” He stands as a wonderful example to us, by the grace of Christ, of the cheerful and generous giving which springs from faith. As a child of God he recognized that all things that he had were given to him as a gift by His heavenly Father, chief among those being the assurance of his salvation by the Blood of Christ. The great mercy he had been shown moved him in love and mercy toward his neighbor.

You, Brenna and Sienna, as we all are, will be tempted to love the things in this world and make them your idols. You will be tempted to view the gifts of God as belonging to you for your benefit. You will be tempted to withhold your love and thus your gifts from Christ and your neighbor. The world is filled with glitzy and pleasurable things. And certainly the Lord invites you to appropriately enjoy His creation. But you cannot serve both God and money. Your heart cannot cling to both. Resist the urge to chase after either wealth or pleasure or the world’s approval in this life. Your flesh is deceitful and will even go so far as to try to convince you that God only wants you to be happy and to have what you want. That is a demonic lie that leads many a sad soul down the road of despair. Instead, let your highest treasure and greatest good be Christ - His forgiveness, His Word, your Baptism, His Body and Blood. These are eternal and give to you a joy and peace that absolutely nothing in this world could ever even hope to give you. When these are what you prize and seek after, then you will not be so easily dismayed when wealth, beauty, and even happiness are in scarce supply. Blessed are you when you meditate daily upon the Word of God which saves you and gives you life, even and especially when you suffer the world’s rejection and hatred because of it.

Barnabas is also known to us for a number of other things. It was Barnabas, judging not the man but his teaching, who recommended St. Paul to the apostles who feared this murderer of St. Stephen and former persecutor of the Church of Christ. Barnabas did not walk in fear but in faith and rejoiced at Paul’s conversion and confession and the mercy of Christ which had appointed Paul as the apostle to the Gentiles. Barnabas was then sent with Paul on the first missionary journey to Asia Minor to preach the Gospel to the Gentiles and bear witness to Christ’s salvation for all men. Barnabas continued to manifest an unyielding love of God’s Word as he and Paul time and again were confronted by false teachers and pagans

who sought to harm them or outright kill them in order to silence God's Word. His hope remained fully in the grace revealed in Christ and he and Paul served as constant encouragements to one another as they endured a laundry list of afflictions that would make most of us shudder. But nothing was more important to them than that the truth of salvation was proclaimed to all people everywhere. They would not yield an inch to false teachers who sought to rob consciences of the peace of Christ's cross, a cross which both would later be blessed to bear at their own martyrdoms, spilling their very blood as a testament to the world of Christ.

Like them, in this world, and increasingly so in this country, we will be confronted with the anger and hatred of the world who wants nothing to do with Christ and His Word because they are direct assaults on everything the world loves and holds most dear. You will be tempted to withdraw from this confession in order to avoid suffering, in order to avoid ridicule and keep friends and perhaps even family, in order to keep jobs, maybe even to keep your life. The devil will use everything important to you as an avenue to get you to forsake Christ and to make another confession. Your own flesh will be tempted to listen to the devil's lies which promise you happiness and a life of ease. Many will try to convince you that the Bible can't be trusted, that it is just the work of men whose ideas and beliefs are outdated and need to be replaced with more modern sensibilities. You will hear many who claim to speak for Christ. But when measured against the clear testimony of God through the prophets and apostles, they are revealed to be liars who sow the devil's leaven of lies in order to lead you away from the pure and holy faith which the Holy Spirit causes you to confess today. But the devil, the world, and your own flesh all together promise things that they can't deliver and if you allow them to deceive you, you will only find yourself filled with despair.

It is hard to believe, and certainly no parent wishes it for their child, but you, in your brief lifetimes already are witnesses to an exponentially increasing hostility against God and His Word. Governments around the world delighted in the opportunity to keep Christians away from hearing Christ's Word and receiving the Lord's Supper. Unbelievers and even some who would like to think they are Christians obsess over the ability to kill the unborn, the elderly, and those who suffer physically, mentally, and emotionally. The lie that male and female are at best social constructs and at worst nothing at all is forced upon you every time you turn on the television, scroll through your social media, or walk into a store. Do not be deceived. Pick up your Bibles and see what God has said about these things. You can trust Him. You can trust what He has said. Though all men be liars, God

is true. It doesn't matter how loud the world howls or how nice its arguments sound, they are still wrong. And they are wrong unto eternal death.

I don't say these things to frighten you. I say them to you because you need to be aware of them so that you are not led astray by them. You have nothing to fear because you belong to God. You are His dear and beloved children who are covered and shielded by the Blood of Jesus. In Christ and through Christ you are already victors over the the devil and world and even your own flesh. God is faithful to you. He has promised to you His unwavering devotion and love. He has pardoned all your iniquities and written your names in the Book of Life. This is what you have come to know and believe, not from the feelings in your heart or according to a formula that you figured out, but through the testimony of the Blessed Trinity given to you in Holy Scriptures. Truly, it wasn't me or your parents who were teaching you. We were only mouthpieces. It was the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of Truth, the Comforter. He is the one who taught you the Ten Commandments so that you might know God's holy and perfect will and so that you might recognize and confess your sins. He is the one who lifted your eyes to see Jesus, the Son of God and the Son of Man who laid down His life to atone for your sins. It is the Holy Spirit who is at work in you to will and to do the good works that He has prepared for you. He is the one in Holy Scripture who showed you the faithfulness of God to His people even in the midst of their sin and rebellion. He is the one who teaches you to cry out to God and He is the one who Comforts you and strengthens you in the midst of trial and temptation. No treasure in the world can compare to what Christ gives you by proclaiming to you the truth, by revealing to you His Holy Name and inviting you to call upon Him in every hour of need, in the midst of every temptation, under the great weight of persecution and affliction and promising the help of Almighty God who upholds all creation by His righteous right hand.

Brenna and Sienna, look around you right now. Look around this room. Who do you see? You see a room full of people who share a common faith with you, who confess the very same things you will confess today. You see sinners like yourselves who wrestle against temptation, who suffer failure and disappointment, who need help, who pray and who need your prayers. Some of these saints have endured hard and heavy crosses and can attest to God's great faithfulness. The rest will and will need your encouragement and you theirs. You see a room full of people who rejoice as Barnabas did in Antioch, seeing the gracious work of God in you. You see a room full of people who will encourage you to "remain faithful to the Lord with steadfast purpose", even when it is the hardest thing in the world to do. Why? Because they love the Lord and they love you and there is nothing more

in this world that they want than to see you gathered with them around the throne of Christ in heaven. There is nothing they will not sacrifice - reputation, wealth, even life - that you might remain with Christ and His Church forever. They are your Barnabases, your sons of encouragement who will pray for you, who will speak the truth to you even when it isn't what your flesh wants to hear, who will help you in every time of need. The world will not do these things. Neither will unbelievers. Think of these dear saints in this way as you kneel shoulder to shoulder with them and receive with your mouths Christ's Body and Blood which He has shed for you for the forgiveness of your sins. Draw near to them that you may all be help to one another. They are Christ's gift to you even as you are Christ's gift to them, Barnabases to encourage them in the faith when the battle wears upon them, when temptation threatens to overthrow them, when doubts arise in the face of persecution.

Barnabas saw, as you will, the turmoil that the devil churns up within Christ's Church here on earth. He was present at the Jerusalem Council during which time those who falsely taught the necessity of circumcision had to be rejected and condemned. These were friends and relatives who had been deceived but the teaching had to be rejected because it was contrary to Christ and contrary to salvation. There was certainly a great deal of infighting as truth and falsehood locked horns. Barnabas had a front-row seat to the ugly side of the church which the devil has certainly used to draw some Christians, sadly, to reject Christ. But Barnabas' trust in the word of God prevailed as he loved nothing more than the truth and did all he could to speak it clearly and refute error. You too, will see a church that looks broken and weak, torn apart by in-fighting. You will see a church that suffers and struggles to remain faithful. Do not be offended by its outward weakness nor be deceived by the seeming success of falsehood. Remember, each of us as Christians looks the same way - weak, broken, and struggling. Love nothing more than what God has spoken and encourage those who dare to speak it even the midst of great opposition and at great personal risk.

Barnabas would later be an example of that weakness as well as he had to receive Paul's rebuke. He had been led astray by Peter's hypocrisy in Antioch, when out of fear of the circumcision party, Peter suddenly began to distance himself from the Gentiles. Praise be to God, Peter and Barnabas were brought to repentance and restored to Christ. But none are above temptation. None of us are so strong that we do not need to confess our sins. Momentarily, Barnabas allowed himself to betray the Gospel because of Peter's office. He sinned. But he was restored by the very Gospel he had just denied. Praise God that even in these great examples of faith we see our weaknesses still present in them and God's mercy to keep them in the true

faith. If you ever fall into sin or error, remember that Peter and Barnabas were forgiven. God is always pleased to receive back a repentant sinner and cover that sinner with His forgiveness.

The final time we see Barnabas in Scripture, he is doing perhaps the hardest thing there is to do - he was standing up to a beloved friend - no one less than the Apostle Paul. About what? About mercy and the forgiveness of Christ. Barnabas, driven by the great mercy that had been shown him, desired to allow John Mark - the Evangelist St. Mark - to rejoin them on the second missionary journey. But Paul, wrongfully and contrary to the Gospel He proclaimed, resisted and held Mark's prior weakness against him for turning back during the first journey. Paul would later acknowledge his error and repent. We know this because in Colossians, Philemon, and 2 Timothy, Paul commends Mark and even asks that he be brought to him because of his usefulness in ministry. What an excruciatingly difficult time that had to have been for Barnabas! Not only did he have to resist the persecutions of the world, but now he was having to resist Paul's error. He rightly had mercy on Mark. He was quick to forgive and would not stand by as his brother in Christ's reputation was damaged. Barnabas was not dismayed by the office of Paul. He took his stand on the Word of God and rightfully so.

Brenna and Sienna, do not allow yourselves to be overwhelmed by offices or titles among men. Do not be a respecter of persons, as Scripture teaches. Do not allow friendship to take priority over truth and the Word of God. Paul was wrong and Barnabas rightly stood up to him for the sake of the Gospel in the same way Paul had rebuked Barnabas and Peter for the sake of the Gospel. This faithfulness cost Barnabas dearly - his friendship with Paul - but that cost was nothing compared to the surpassing joy of knowing Christ.

Today, the whole church rejoices and hell shudders because two more of Christ's children confess His Name boldly before men. There is further cause for rejoicing as this past Thursday, Dony Reaves, who is homebound due to an affliction of migraines, made this same confession. The Gospel of repentance and forgiveness which the apostolic band was sent out to proclaim continues to bear fruit. May God grant each of us eternal faithfulness to Gospel of Jesus Christ and that we may perpetually be to one another and to the world, sons of encouragement, to the glory of God our Father and His Son Jesus Christ, who with the Holy Spirit, live and reign, one God, now and forever. Blessed be His holy and saving Name.

In the Name of +Jesus.

Pastor Ulmer

(We stand.) The peace of God which passes all human understanding keeps your hearts and your minds through faith in Christ Jesus our Lord.