

**Psalm 40:1-16 Numbers 23:27-24:13, 25 Acts 11:22-30 St. John 15:12-16**

Sons and Daughters of Encouragement

One of my all time favorite characters is a gloomy donkey by the name of Eeyore. (I found this wonderful little book entitled, "Living with Eeyore" written by Elizabeth Baker.) I'm not sure why I like Eeyore so much, but for some or other reason I find his dark and dismal diatribes and his obstinate objections and his sour self-examinations rather humorous. Take this quote as an example:

"Eeyore, the old grey Donkey, stood by the side of the stream and looked down at himself in the water. 'Pathetic,' he said. 'That's what it is. Pathetic.' He turned and walked slowly down the stream for twenty yards, splashed across it, and walked slowly back on the other side. Then he looked at himself in the water again. 'As I thought,' he said. 'No better from this side.'" Sounds like a conversation I have with my bathroom mirror every morning...

But being around an Eeyore for any length of time can be downright draining. I once knew a chap who constantly had a thundercloud over his head with lightning bolts coming out of his ears...he, like Eeyore, had a perpetual reservoir of gloom and doom...he consistently saw the negative; he always pointed out the flaws in others, he dug in his heels when new ideas were suggested and he generally complicated all relationships (especially on the Vestry!)...when people saw him coming, they would quite literally scatter or find someone else to talk to. It really was quite sad. Especially since the dude claimed to be the recipient of what the Bible calls the 'joy of our salvation'. Now, of course, we all have our ups and downs from time to time...life in a fallen, broken world is always going to be a bit of a roller coaster...sometimes we are right on top of it all and

life is beautiful...the next minute we may be plunging into the depths of some unknown abyss not knowing whether we will ever come back up again for air. I know...been there, done that. Now, there's nothing wrong about being down in the chops from time to time, but to get stuck down there in the dark when we have the light of Jesus shining inside us is simply not right. And it just won't do to say like Eeyore, "We can't all, and some of us don't. That's all there is to it." "Can't all what?" said Pooh, rubbing his nose. "Gaiety. Son-and-dance. Here we round the mulberry bush."

You see, everyone who is a true Christian is called to shine out the light of Christ even though that might not mean that they bounce around all day long singing, "Jesus took my burdens and rolled them in the sea and now I'm so happy, happy as can be." That type of thing can get old very quickly too. Nor should we think that we need to always find the silver lining on every dark cloud...again, like Eeyore: "'It's snowing still,' said Eeyore gloomily. 'So it is.' 'And freezing.' 'Is it?' 'Yes,' said Eeyore. 'However,' he said, brightening up a little, 'We haven't had an earthquake lately.'" Dearest stick-a-flower-in-your-hair type person, sometimes there just aren't any silver linings and that's the time to hold on to Jesus tightly and trust that He Who is infinitely good will bring us through that dark tunnel into His glorious light. We have to find balance in our Christian lives, having joy without denying our sorrow and pressing on forward and upward regardless of sunshine or rain.

Now, I believe that the saint we remember today had such a balanced life. St. Barnabas. St. Barnabas was, interestingly enough a Jewish Levite from Cyprus (which in itself shows the guy's sense of humor – I mean, what's a Levite doing in Cyprus, tanning for the Temple?). He was one of the earliest disciples in Jerusalem and we first meet him in

Acts 4:36 where we are told, and I quote, that “Joseph, a Levite who was a native of Cyprus, called by the Apostles Barnabas (which is translated ‘son of encouragement’), sold a field (another weird thing about him as Levites were not supposed to be land owners, remember?) that belonged to him and brought the money and placed it at the Apostle’s feet.” The reason for the sale and donation was to support those new Jewish Christians who, for some or other reason, could not support themselves. And St. Barnabas trusted the Apostles to use this money wisely – no strings attached – no micro-management. It is like us entrusting money we have collected through self-sacrificial efforts to D.J. Fulton, our treasurer, for our fledgling, fragile yet growing new Diocese in the Kadapa District of Andhra Pradesh. And trusting that he will do what needs to be done with that money. So, right from the start, when we first meet the saint, he impresses us as someone who had a big heart for others...and someone who trusted others. (And if you know the book of Acts fairly well, you will recall that the very next story deals with Ananias and Sapphira, who wanted others to think they had a big heart – so they sold their property too, but lied about the amount so that they could keep just enough for themselves...after all, charity begins at home, right? Well, enough said...read it sometime...believe me, it really is much better than prime time television!) ‘Lost’ really should get lost.

But St. Barnabas was not only known for his generous giving to the Church. The next time we meet him in the book of Acts, we see that he was also an optimist and someone who believed the best about others. Look at Acts 9:26-27. “And when Saul (who, of course, became known as St. Paul) had come to Jerusalem, he tried to join the disciples; but they were all afraid of him, and did not believe that he was a disciple. But Barnabas

(dear old Barnabas) took him and brought him to the Apostles. And he declared to them how he had seen the Lord on the road, and that He had spoken to him, and how he had preached boldly at Damascus.” And then, after the Apostles had sent St. Paul back to his native town of Tarsus to chill out and make tents until the threats against him had subsided, it was again St. Barnabas who did not slip into the ‘out of sight, out of mind’ track, but went and sought out St. Paul to serve with him in Antioch. You see, St. Barnabas obviously had the knack of looking a little deeper than most people would to see something good in others...something that could grow if just nurtured and tended properly.

You may also recall that the reason why St. Barnabas left Jerusalem for Antioch in the first place was to deal with the great influx of Gentiles in that city...which only goes to show that he was a man without prejudice...a man, St. Luke describes as good, full of the Holy Spirit and of faith. But that faith extended beyond a faith in Jesus...indeed, St. Barnabas also had faith in other people. And so people were naturally attracted to him and, perhaps partially because of his disposition, many people were added to the Lord in Antioch. He didn’t have to say like Eeyore, “One can’t complain. I have my friends. Someone spoke to me only yesterday.” No, Barnabas had many friends simply because he was a friend to many...even when it meant putting his reputation at risk by being a friend to those whom others esteemed lower than themselves, for whatever reason, whether it was racial prejudice, a shady past, or a tender temperament.

But perhaps the most important thing for me to do in today’s sermon is to point out an unfortunate contrast between St. Barnabas and the protégé in whom he had invested so much faith, namely St. Paul. A few chapters later in the book of Acts, once St. Barnabas

and St. Paul had returned to Antioch after helping out their famine stricken brethren in Jerusalem, and having taken young man by the name of John Mark with them, the church in Antioch believed that the Holy Spirit was prompting them to send the two out into the world as missionaries. So, here we see another side to this amazing saint – a concern for those who had not yet heard the liberating Gospel of Jesus – and here we also see that the Church ought to send out their best into the Mission field, not their left-overs. Be that as it may, when they did sail for Cyprus, John Mark was with them. No, it seems that he may have been under St. Barnabas’ tutelage as they were cousins...so, there was a bit of mentoring and discipleship going on here. However, for some or other reason, John Mark decided to abandon the group in Pamphylia to return to Jerusalem. Maybe the harshness of travel got to him, or perhaps the food was not up to his Kosher standards, or maybe St. Paul pushed the young man too hard, or maybe he had met a nice Pamphylian girl and wanted to introduce her to Mama...who knows...but this abandoning of his post on the eve of battle, as it were, stuck in St. Paul’s mind and when the two veterans later decided to return to visit the churches they had founded on that first missionary journey, he flatly refused to give John Mark a second chance. Now, one would have thought that a chap who had experienced the graciousness of St. Barnabas’ character would have imbibed a bit of that graciousness...after all, there was a time when no one believed in St. Paul except St. Barnabas. And, from what we read in Acts, St. Barnabas not only saw the good in people, but he also seemed to have a pretty good judge of character to boot. So, he stuck to his guns and St. Paul shot back from his trench and this brought about a sad split between the friends as St. Barnabas took St. Mark to Cyprus and St. Paul took St. Silas to Syria and Cilicia. It seems that St. Paul simply could not bring himself to think

of a better tomorrow for St. Mark...like Eeyore's classic statement: "I shouldn't be surprised if it hailed a good deal tomorrow. Blizzards and what-not. Being fine today doesn't mean anything."

But really think about this for a moment, would you? If it wasn't for St. Barnabas, we may never have had a St. Paul...we may never have had a St. Mark...we may never have had a Gospel written by St. Mark...many 1<sup>st</sup> Century Christians may never have heard the Gospel...so many things we simply take for granted today may never have been unless this saint of a man saw something good beneath the gruff or not so gruff exteriors of people like St. Paul and St. Mark...not to even mention the Gentile believers in Antioch and everywhere else he went as a missionary of Jesus.

Dearest beloved brethren, you have no idea of how much it means to people (clergy and laity alike) when they have someone cheering them on to achieve what others, or even they themselves, may not yet see. That's why I believe it is so important for us to back the new Bishop-Elect Jaya Rao in Kadapa, as he needs all the encouragement we can muster. Now, to St. Paul's credit, he did admit that he was wrong and that St. Barnabas was right concerning St. Mark and he had to eat crow at the end of his life. I have had to eat my fair share of crow as well in the past when I have tended to be an Eeyore instead of a Barnabas and I am sure many of you can say the same.

So, let's learn a little lesson here today from both Eeyore and St. Barnabas, especially as we come to the Table of the One Who saw the best in a rough and tumble group He called His disciples...the One Who saw the potential in each one of us when He called us to follow in His footsteps, regardless of His knowing that we would, no doubt, let Him down along the way. So, as you come to partake of the One you claim to follow...the

One Who loved you even while we were up to no good...the One Who believed in you as much as, if not more than He was asking you to believe in Him...ask Him to help you as you leave here today to become known as a little St. Barnabas...that each one of us might strive to be a son or a daughter of encouragement...to build up others, especially those who seem to have few redeeming qualities about them, and so be the one to polish the dull diamond into a many-faceted stone that will reflect the dazzling beauty of our common Lord and Savior.

“If there is an dazzling beauty to be extracted...which I doubt...and don’t blame me if it rains.”

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