

Sermon by Bishop David R. Strobel, June 11, 2005

Synod Assembly - 2005 June 11, 2005 – *Saint Barnabas*

Barnabas?

Exactly a week ago, in Worcester, Massachusetts, I was attending the New England Synod Assembly. There, I was treated to a wonderfully entertaining skit presenting the mission support portion of the synod budget. Mission support...budget...entertaining: aren't these oxymoronic? Well, not necessarily, given the New England Synod's creativity and sense of humor. The skit was based on the TV show, *Jeopardy*. And so, since imitation is the highest form of flattery and with hope that these next few minutes will be both a sermon and at least somewhat entertaining (another oxymoron!), I shall begin with a *Jeopardy* type answer:

The category is the ELCA, and the answer is *Out of 10,657, there are only five.*

How many of you would bet the house that you know the question? And the question is...

How many ELCA congregations are named "Saint Barnabas"?

In the midst of all our St. John's, St., Paul's, St. Peter's, and St. James', this is a curious statistic. What was it about St. Barnabas that makes us Lutherans so reluctant to name our congregations after him? Who was this guy?

Saint Barnabas, the Apostle

From Scripture:

His original name was Joseph, a Levite, a Jew, from the island of Cyprus, whom the apostles in Jerusalem named Barnabas, "the son of encouragement." He also sold a field he owned and gave the proceeds to the church.

When the church leaders in Jerusalem (the synod staff, so to speak) learned of the mission to the Gentiles being conducted by the church in Antioch, they sent Barnabas to investigate. He was impressed! And they were impressed by him: *he was a good man full of the Holy Spirit and of faith.*

To help in the mission to the Gentiles, Barnabas recruited Paul to come to Antioch (gave him the parish study booklet to study for a few days first). There they worked to-

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gether with the church in Antioch where for the first time the baptized were called “Christians.”

Paul and Barnabas together undertook the first missionary journey. In Iconium, Paul was mistaken for Hermes and Barnabas for Zeus. From this we might gather that Paul had a distinct tendency to talk too much (Hermes was the messenger god) and Barnabas had a regal bearing, and carried himself with nobility (sort of like George Washington).

Upon their return home some dissenters from Jerusalem came to Antioch to challenge the very idea of a mission to the Gentiles. The church decided to send Barnabas and Paul as voting members to the very first churchwide assembly in Jerusalem.

There they negotiated the compromise that acknowledged that the church had room for both Jewish and Gentile converts: In the words of Paul, *when James and Cephas and John, who were acknowledged pillars, recognized the grace that had been given to me, they gave to Barnabas and me the right hand of fellowship, agreeing that we should go to the Gentiles and they to the circumcised.*

Who was this Barnabas, whom we name Apostle and Saint, who was this Barnabas, whom we commemorate on this day, June 11?

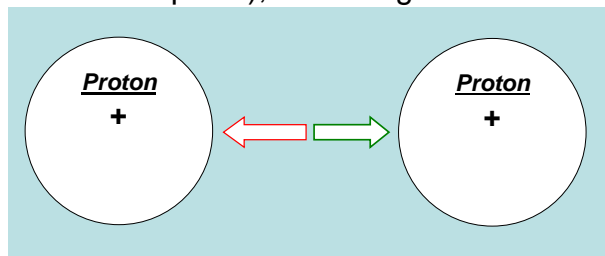
Barnabas, the gluon



Of all the apostles, he was preeminently the “go-between,” the mediator between Jerusalem and Antioch, between Jewish and Gentile Christians, between the traditionalists who followed James, the brother of Jesus, and Peter in Jerusalem and the revisionists at Antioch who followed Paul, between the mission to the Jews and the mission to the Gentiles. Mediator, go-between, peacemaker: this is who St. Barnabas was. This is the Saint we celebrate today. And, perhaps, this is why we Lutherans don’t name our congregations after him: we prefer the bold, strongly certain, “here I stand” kind of saint. Mediators, peacemakers, those who are empowered by the Holy Spirit to hold opposites together in the communion of saints, those whose stewardship is of the gift of community...surely we need them, but just as surely we don’t want to be named after them!

This being the festival of St. Barnabas, the mediator, the peacemaker (please note the olive branch he is holding in Botticelli’s St. Barnabas altarpiece), this being the festival of St. Barnabas, let us attend more closely to his stewardship of the gift of community.

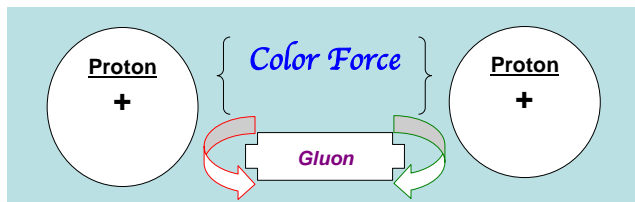
Many of you surely remember or have experienced what you learned in science class about electromagnetism: opposites attract; similars repel. This is true both in the large world of bar magnets and the subatomic world of protons, neutrons and electrons. Particles with opposite charges attract each other. Particles with similar charges



run away from, repel each other. This is an inviolable law of physics. But then there is the nucleus of atoms where protons – particles of similar, positive charge – are held together so tightly that only enormous forces can split them. How is this possible?

All of you have experienced helium balloons. The nucleus of the helium atom has two positively charged protons held together so tightly that your balloons, for days, defy gravity! Was gibt?

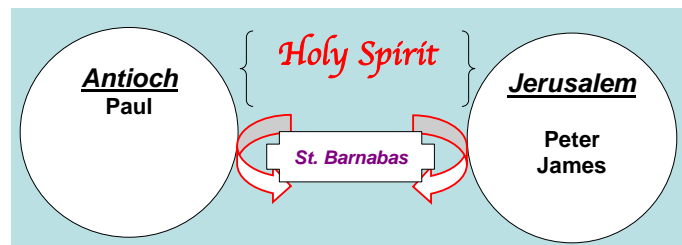
To answer this fundamental question of physics – a question so fundamental that life would not be possible without the seeming contradiction it asks about – we turn to quantum chromodynamics. (Now please don't run to the lavatories or read what you've purchased at Augsburg-Fortress.)



Physicists tell us that, yes, protons should run away from each other, but they are held together by one of the strongest forces in nature: aptly named, the “strong force.” This force which binds

nuclei together is a result of the “color force” which is generated by the quarks which make up protons and neutrons...the color force which is mediated by particles which physicists have named “gluons”: the primal glue which makes us and the world we know possible.

May I suggest that Saint Barnabas was a “gluon” mediating the color force of the Holy Spirit that held together the early church and its single-minded heroes like Paul and James and Peter. Barnabas was the one through whom the early church experienced St. Paul’s admonition to the Colossians: *Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony.* Through Barnabas, the gluon, the binding force of love held together the very different communities of Jerusalem and Antioch. The Holy Spirit’s gift of community was powerfully present to the earliest church, but that gift was exercised and nurtured by real people, saints, like Barnabas.



Barnabas the Ligament

I shall freely admit that the church as the nucleus and Barnabas as the “gluon” is a construct of my imagination. St. Paul provides us with another metaphor, his very own apostolic, enduring and always relevant image of the gift of community: the body of Christ.

My question: How is such a body held together? St. Paul answers in the 4th chapter of Ephesians:

But speaking the truth in love, we must grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and knit together by every liga-

ment with which it is equipped, as each part is working properly, promotes the body's growth in building itself up in love.

According to my image, Barnabas is a gluon holding the church together. According to St. Paul he is a ligament with which the Holy Spirit knits together the body of Christ, building it up in love.

At my age, I understand ligaments all too well. To do their job, they need to be strong but flexible. You certainly don't want them to tear or harden. Flexibility is what is desired when it comes to ligaments, to keep the body moving with purpose and freedom.

And Saint Barnabas was precisely that: a ligament, a ligament flexible and strong enough to accommodate Jerusalem and Antioch, Peter and James with Paul, the mission to Jewish Christians with the mission to the Gentiles.

A contemporary image of holding different things together through flexibility: a gluon, a healthy ligament. Helen Parr, Mrs. Incredible, Elastigirl: flexible, loving, strong, a mother holding her family together...

Bishop Payne, Margaret, good friend, what a wonderful image of what the church asked you to do as the chairperson of the Sexuality Task Force. As you watch the movie – an absolute classic for our times – your task was truly that of Elastigirl: holding together a fractious task force with an impossible mission.

Thank you!

St. Barnabas as our Saint:

Ligaments in the body of Christ; gluons in the church, stewards of the gift of community: Isn't this what we are called, equipped and sent to do? Within our congregations...as leaders **among** our congregations; as a synod – all 294

of our congregations – to be gluons, ligaments, Elastigirls with the ELCA, our companion synods, our full-communion partners, with the communion of saints – the one holy, catholic and apostolic church. Consider our sea container project as a gluon mediating the Holy Spirit's strong force of love between our synod and the South Central Diocese of the ELCT.

To be sure, we are anointed in baptism to be as single-minded and hard-headed as Saints Paul, Peter and James. However, our singlemindedness and hardheadedness are generating a polarization in our ELCA, which mirrors the political and cultural landscape of today. It is essential, therefore, that as the church we do not forget Barnabas, saint and apostle, who models for us that absolutely essential quality of our discipleship: to be within the body of Christ a healthy, flexible ligament, a powerful gluon of unity holding things together that otherwise would fly apart, an Elastigirl stretching with divine flexibility to hold things together. We are anointed in our baptism to be saints who understand in the depths of our souls that the gift of community is precisely that: a gift of the Holy Spirit entrusted to our care and to our faithful stewardship.



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