Spirituality
Pencil Preaching





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“You are the salt of the earth” (Matt 5:13).

History gives top billing to the big stars, but it is often the supporting players who enabled their greatness.

St. Barnabas, the apostle whose name means “son of encouragement,” was one of these key agents in the early church, directly responsible for integrating Saul of Tarsus into the Jesus movement after his conversion.

Acts tells us that after Saul was christened “Paul” by his life-changing encounter with Jesus on the road to Damascus, he disappeared for a time to Arabia and then back to his home city of Tarsus to absorb the Gospel. He was apparently not immediately welcomed by Christians because he had persecuted the church. If Barnabas had not gone to Tarsus to find him and bring him back to Antioch, Paul might have been a footnote instead of the Apostle to the Gentiles. Set apart by the Holy Spirit, he and Barnabas became partners in ministry.

Barnabas brought Paul to meet the leaders of the mother church in Jerusalem and later accompanied him to convince these same leaders that Gentile converts should not be burdened with circumcision and the Law. This decision was critical to the rapid expansion of the Gospel into the Mediterranean world.

Today’s Gospel describes disciples as the salt of the earth. Mark 9:49 adds that “Everyone will be salted with fire.” Appropriate to this post-Pentecostal time, one interpretation of this mysterious phrase is that disciples will be preserved by the fire of the Holy Spirit. This was true of Barnabas, whose gift was to season others with encouragement. Not too little, not too much, salt improves food, company, conversation and friendship. Barnabas, overshadowed by Paul, taken for granted, invisible and imperceptible, nevertheless enhanced the life of the church in every way.

Acts 11:24 describes Barnabas as "a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and of faith." This also describes Abbot Barnabas Senecal, OSB, now emeritus in residence at St. Benedict’s Abbey in Atchison, Kansas. For over a decade Barnabas’s photos and poems graced the back cover of Celebration magazine, NCR’s liturgical resource, bringing beauty, inspiration and good taste to its editor and its readers. Happy Feast day, Barnabas.

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