

2 Samuel 1:1, 17-27  
Psalm 130  
2 Corinthians 8:7-15  
MARK 5:21-43

## **Out of Hardship – Mission**

I bring you greetings in the name of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ from your Bishops George and Sylvestre and all the members of their staff who love serving the many congregations of our Diocese of New Jersey. My name is Lee Powers, and I serve as Bishop Councill's Canon to the Ordinary. My job description is pretty simple; I do whatever he asks me to do so he can be able to do the ministry of your Bishop. One of the best parts of what I do is this: meeting the great people of our Diocese in our 160+ congregations.

I am grateful to your long serving recent rector, Fr. Frank Hubbard, for his invitation to me to worship with you today and for the privilege of preaching the Gospel. I don't get to do that as often as I did when I was serving as a parish priest. In the late 1980s and 1990s I served your neighboring churches in South River and Spotswood, and presently Nancy and I live in Cranbury. So it's great to visit with our neighbors.

Today I would like to focus on our second lesson from Paul's letter to the Corinthians. I find in this section of 2 Corinthians a word and exhortation that can be of help to us in the church today.

Let me begin with some background. You are aware that Paul was previously called Saul, and that he was a Pharisee who actually persecuted the church. He would get arrest warrants from the Jewish leaders in Jerusalem and would travel to towns to find believers of the "Way" and bring them before the council. He even held the coats of those who stoned Stephen to death after his confession of faith in our Lord Jesus Christ.

It was while Saul was travelling to Damascus to arrest Christians that Jesus revealed himself to Saul and called him to a new ministry of witnessing to the Gospel. Let's keep that in mind when we say our community is changing and there aren't people here who want to hear the Gospel: that they are Muslims or Jews or Hindus or people who have no faith at all. How many times have you heard people use that as an excuse for not witnessing to the Gospel? Yet perhaps the greatest evangelist and saint of the church was formerly a Jewish religious leader determined to stop the spread of Christianity.

After his conversion, Paul spent seventeen years in Arabia and Damascus, being taught the faith. The apostles in Jerusalem preached to the Jews and the church grew there, until a persecution arose and the believers scattered to other areas. Initially they preached in the local synagogues to Jews, but eventually some began to share the good news with pagan Gentiles, and some of them came to believe in the Gospel and accept Jesus as Lord.

The apostles in Jerusalem sent Barnabas to check out what was happening in Antioch. He was encouraged and got Paul to join him in strengthening the church in that city in Syria.

In Acts 11 we pick up the action: “So it was that for an entire year they met with the church and taught a great many people, and it was in Antioch that the disciples were first called ‘Christians.’ At that time prophets came down from Jerusalem to Antioch. One of them named Agabus stood up and predicted by the Spirit that there would be a severe famine over all the world; and this took place during the reign of Claudius. The disciples determined that according to their ability, each would send relief to the believers living in Judea; this they did, sending it to the elders by Barnabas and Saul.”

Here is Barnabas, your patron saint, at the very beginning of the life of the church, recruiting a gifted teacher, encouraging the new believers, and committing to gathering a collection for the relief of the suffering church in Jerusalem. In Acts 13, the action continues: “Now in the church at Antioch there were prophets and teachers; Barnabas, Simon who was called Niger, Lucius of Cyrene, Manaen a member of the court of Herod the ruler, and Saul. While they were worshiping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, ‘Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.’ Then after fasting and praying they laid hands on them and sent them off.”

This was the beginning of the mission to the Gentile world, from which were founded the churches in Cyprus, Galatia, Philippi, Thessalonica, and Corinth. Yet this might never have happened if there hadn’t been a famine in the world, a famine that was especially severe in Judea and Jerusalem.

In Galatians 2 Paul described the beginning of this effort: “After fourteen years I went up again to Jerusalem with Barnabas, taking Titus along with me. I went up in response to a revelation. Then I laid before them the gospel that I proclaim among the Gentiles, in order to make sure that I was not running, or had not run, in vain. . . . When James and Cephas and John . . . recognized the grace that was 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. They asked only one thing, that we remember the poor, which was actually what I was eager to do.” (2:1-2, 9-10)

With this background, today’s passage to the Corinthians begins to make more sense. Let me read the first nine verses of Chapter 8 to set the stage for today’s passage: “We want you to know, brothers and sisters, about the grace of God that has been granted for the churches of Macedonia; for during a severe ordeal of affliction, **their abundant joy and their extreme poverty** (read again) have overflowed in a wealth of generosity on their part. For, as I can testify, they voluntarily gave according to their means, and even beyond their means, begging us earnestly for the privilege of sharing in the ministry of the saints – and this, not merely as we expected; they gave themselves first to the Lord and, by the will of God, to us, so that we might urge Titus that, as he had already made a beginning, so he should also complete this generous undertaking among you. Now as you excel in everything – in faith, in speech, in knowledge, in utmost eagerness, and in our love for you – so we want you to excel also in this generous undertaking. I do not say this as a command, but I am testing the genuineness of your love against the earnestness of others. For you know the generous act of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that by his poverty you might become rich.” (2 Corinthians 8:1-9)

Out of hardship came mission. A couple of prophets in Antioch told the church that a severe famine would strike the world, and that it would be particularly severe in Judea, where

the infant church was just beginning to grow and spread the gospel, while being persecuted, hunted down, and stoned to death. And when the Holy Spirit said to the church in Antioch that it wanted them to give up their gifted teachers and pastors so that the good news could be taken to the pagan Gentiles; they didn't say, "We need them here." They laid hands upon them, prayed and sent them off.

These two missionaries, Barnabas and Paul, went on to found the church in several cities, which churches grew and prospered and eventually sent other missionaries to Asia and Europe, who eventually sent missionaries to the colonies across the ocean. All this got its start in the midst of a famine and suffering, during which the new young churches gave generously, from their abundant joy and extreme poverty, to relieve the suffering of the mother church in Jerusalem. St. Paul exhorted the Corinthians to finish the work: *"It is appropriate for you who began last year not only to do something but even to desire to do something – now finish doing it, so that your eagerness may be matched by completing it according to your means."*

May I now bring things forward to our time and speak to you from my heart. This past Wednesday night the Restructuring Committee of the Diocese of New Jersey met to come up with recommendations to Diocesan Council on how we can face the financial emergency that is forcing us to have to consider reducing service to the congregations of our Diocese. Six years ago a dynamic priest of our Diocese named Frank Hubbard exhorted our Convention to adopt and support a proposed Fair Share formula so that we could elect and equip a new Bishop to lead our Diocese back to health and a revived sense of mission. I remember his closing comment: "We want to send our Bishop out with a Mitre and a Bible, not with a tin cup." As I think of those powerful words, I look at the history of this wonderful church which he came to serve in 1984. This great parish grew out of a mission to 'the Sand Hills' neighborhood undertaken by the rector of Trinity Church, Princeton, assisted by the Dean of the New Brunswick Convocation and the rectors of parishes in Plainfield, South Amboy and New Brunswick. The cornerstone was laid on St. Barnabas day in 1872. Until 1900 families at this mission received the ministrations of a priest who also served Rocky Hill, Hightstown and later St. Paul's Church in Monmouth Junction. "Assisting the clergy were lay members of the St. Paul's Society of Princeton College. This pattern of missionary priests, vicars and lay readers continued through the 1950s." Parish status was granted in 1975 and this present church building was consecrated in 1976." In 1984 the Rev. Frank Appleton Hubbard was appointed Vicar, and led this church to becoming a parish and for twenty-five years he preached the gospel faithfully and built up this wonderful community. Bishop Cancell was pleased to celebrate his ministry with you.

Now your Diocese is facing a famine. Your Bishop will indeed soon be going to the churches of our Diocese with a tin cup. Next year's budget of \$4million will need to be cut by about \$750,000 as prior year's surpluses are exhausted, a special gift to allow Bishop Romero to be called in 2007 is used up, and the DIT dividend cut reduces our income from trust funds invested to support the mission of our Diocese. Bishop Cancell will again be serving your Diocese alone as Bishop Romero retires in less than a year and cannot be replaced. Staff who leave, such as Canon Elizabeth Geitz and Michael Wilkes, are not being replaced. Others may have to go also.

Our Diocese is facing a severe testing that will require extreme contraction, unless . . . . What do I mean by "unless"? I mean unless a spirit of missionary zeal and thanksgiving

helps to revive and invigorate our congregations in support of our mission and ministry in Christ's name.

Presently, our congregations give a total of \$2.7 million dollars from over \$30.2 million dollars of their income. That represents about 9% of parish income given for our common ministry of supporting our Bishop and the ministries our Convention urges us to do. This level of support is 63% of the amount requested by the Fair Share formula that the Convention adopted in 2002. Bishop Council will be making a video and sending it to Vestries asking our congregations to accept at least 75% of their Fair Share asking as a minimum level of commitment. If this request is honored, another half million dollars will be given to offset the \$750,000 projected reductions I mentioned before. That just might make it possible for Bishop Council to have another Bishop assisting him in ministering to the 160+ congregations of our Diocese.

May I now say what this challenge will mean for St. Barnabas Church? Your parish income in 2007 was \$231,000, resulting in a Fair Share request of \$32,000 for 2009. You have made a commitment of \$4,000, which is less than 2% of your parish income, and 12% of the amount requested. If you find it in your hearts to join us in this effort of reviving mission and ministry and supporting our Bishop, your Vestry will be able to work with all of you to bring your Fair Share commitment up to the \$20,000 - \$24,000 range.

I leave that challenge with you. I know you are facing hard times. All of our churches are struggling now. And yet I think of those persecuted, starving saints in Jerusalem who sent their best missionaries to Antioch, and eventually others to Galatia, Philippi, Thessalonica, Colossia, Laodicea, Ephesus, Corinth, and Rome, and they eventually sent others to Asia, Europe, New Jersey and Sand Hills. They did this out of "their abundant joy and extreme poverty." Out of hardship came a church. Out of death comes new life.

"For you know the generous act of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that by his poverty you might become rich." He became poor by leaving heaven to come to earth so that he could walk into the home of the leader of the synagogue, touch the hand of his dead daughter, and say "Little girl, get up!"

I hope our Lord's example will inspire us to act and say: "Diocese of New Jersey. Rise up!" God bless you and thank you.

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