

**St. Barnabas Lutheran Church  
25th Anniversary****Pastor Wayne Peterson  
October 14, 2012**

*Now the whole group of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one claimed private ownership of any possessions, but everything they owned was held in common. With great power the apostles gave their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all. There was not a needy person among them, for as many as owned lands or houses sold them and brought the proceeds of what was sold. They laid it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to each as any had need. There was a Levite, a native of Cyprus, Joseph, to whom the apostles gave the name Barnabas (which means "son of encouragement"). Barnabas sold a field that belonged to him, then brought the money, and laid it at the apostles' feet. (Acts 4:32–37)*

*Now in the church at Antioch there were prophets and teachers: Barnabas, Simeon 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 their hands on Barnabas and Saul and sent them off. (Acts 13:1–3)*

Twenty-five years is a pretty long time. For many of our young people, it is their entire lifetime. My daughter is in Ohio this weekend playing in an Australian Football tournament. Before she left she emailed her schedule to me and ended with a P.S. that said, "YAY, St. Barnabas! Been around since forever!" For Kaity, St. Barnabas has been here forever.

For others of us, twenty-five years is long enough that our memories of that time are kind of fuzzy. We remember some things clearly, but most details are sketchy, if not completely forgotten. Even for those of us who are now in our 70's and 80's, twenty-five years is a significant portion of our lives. St. Barnabas officially started out with 202 charter members -- 132 adults and 70 children – the youngest being 4-day old Ashley Haugstad. On the history wall in the Ministry Center you can look at that original charter statement and see the signatures of the charter members, or in some cases, their fingerprints if they were too young to sign their name. Today St. Barnabas is a community of over 900 people, but in these twenty-five years, almost 1800 people have been part of the congregation for some period of time. St. Barnabas has touched a lot of lives. From this vantage point, it is appropriate to pause from our daily routine and remember and give thanks for twenty-five years of Christian ministry at St. Barnabas.

From another point of view, however, twenty-five years is nothing – the blink of an eye. On Friday evening I was at a dinner at Gustavus Adolphus College as they concluded the celebration of the college's 150th anniversary. Now that's a significant anniversary! But even that is but a passing moment compared to the congregations I had the opportunity to visit in Europe during my sabbatical, where the newer congregations are three to four hundred years old and some can trace their beginnings back over a thousand years. The story of Samuel we read this morning goes back over 3000 years. Twenty-five years looks pretty inconsequential compared to that!

So while a 25th anniversary isn't that big a deal in the whole scheme of things, it is worthy of some attention on our part, and the way I'd like for us to do that this morning is to reflect on the question, "Why are we here?"

This question can be understood in two ways, and I'd like to have us think about it in both ways. The first way to understand the question "Why are we here?" is to ask, "How did we come to be? What led to there being a St. Barnabas Lutheran Church in Plymouth, Minnesota?"

The answer to that question is: St. Barnabas is here because there was a denomination called the Lutheran Church in America whose congregations pooled their resources and made it a priority to start mission congregations in growing communities. Congregations like my home congregation in Cokato, like St. Phillip the Deacon and Mt. Olivet here in Plymouth, and thousands of other congregations around the country sent a portion of their offerings on to their synod and the national church to do ministries none of them could do on their own. They employed a man named Fred Marks to be mission director in the upper Midwest and it was Fred who, back in the early 1980's, identified northwest Plymouth to be a prime area for a new congregation. Next these congregations from across the country guaranteed a salary for a pastor/developer for two years, purchased a parsonage in the community, and provided other start-up costs and support to get a new congregation started.

That's where I entered the picture as pastor/developer, moving to Plymouth in August, 1985. We started holding worship services that November and for the next 22 months worshiped in the theater at the Radisson Inn Plymouth on 494 & 55, now called the Kelly Inn. We would have been there even longer were it not for the congregations of the Lutheran Church in America stepping in once again, first to purchase this 7½ acres of property and then to approve an "early building program", a fairly rare tactic because it involved some risk. The LCA erected our first small building before we were an official congregation. In fact, we only had 120 names on our charter when we moved into the building in August, 1987. The LCA put out \$570,000 for the land and the building, putting their trust in us that we would grow and become a self-supporting congregation.

The strategy worked well, for in the two months from August when we moved into the building until October, when we officially organized, we grew from 120 to 202. Within six months we were self-supporting and we have shown steady growth through these twenty-five years.

So to the question “Why are we here?”, I want to remind you of the great debt we owe to thousands of Lutheran congregations around the country. We are here only because of their commitment to mission, to bringing the ministry of Jesus Christ to new communities. Two and a half months after our organization day, the Lutheran Church in America merged with two other Lutheran denominations to form the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, which St. Barnabas is part of today. The ELCA is not a perfect denomination. Like all human institutions, it has its inner squabbles and disagreements. But the fact that there is a St. Barnabas is evidence of the importance of congregations working together to do ministries that none could do on their own and is why we at St. Barnabas highly value our relationship with the Minneapolis Area Synod and the ELCA. It is why we are taking the first 10% of our 25th Anniversary offering and giving it to help a new mission congregation get started.

The other way to understand the question “Why are we here?” is in the sense of “What is our purpose for being?” -- “What is our mission?” I’d like to answer that by going back to something I said on August 30, 1987 when we dedicated our new sanctuary, a 40x40 room that no longer exists but was situated where you walk into the Ministry Center today. I spoke of a Dennis the Menace cartoon that morning. Dennis was riding in the car with his folks, and as he watched the buildings go past, he suddenly pointed and said, “Look, Dad, there’s another building with a ‘plus’ sign.” And in the distance, one could see a roof with a plus sign perched atop it. We call that “plus” sign a cross.

Dennis was more perceptive than he realized when he made that statement. The cross atop our building physically does look like a plus sign, but it also announces to everyone who drives past that this is no ordinary building. It is a building filled with people with a special purpose, a building filled with people that can add something to our lives, a building with a “plus”.

The cross is a rich symbol, at the same time comforting and disturbing. The cross is comforting because it is the clearest sign we have of God’s love for us. Even in our moments of doubt and pain and hurt, we can look at that cross and be reminded that God’s love for us is so deep that it surrounds us even when we’re in the pits. That God would become human in the person of Jesus and willingly submit to the most humiliating of deaths shows us that there is no limit to the bounds of God’s love for us. The cross is a sign of God’s love, a sign of comfort and assurance.

At the same time, the cross is challenging and disturbing. The selfless love Jesus demonstrated on the cross is the same love he expects those who bear his name, the name “Christian”, to demonstrate in their relationships with others. We don’t earn the name “Christian”. It was given to us when we were baptized and the cross was traced on our forehead. And so the cross becomes a challenge. We are challenged to live like him whose name we bear. We are challenged to bring the ministry of Christ to this community; a ministry of caring, compassion, and justice.

We read a couple of passages from the book of Acts about Barnabas, the apostle for whom our congregation is named. Barnabas provides a great example for this community to emulate -- someone passionate about sharing the gospel of Jesus Christ, one who encourages others in their discipleship, a faithful steward of his financial resources, and a leader in the Christian community.

That last characteristic of Barnabas, being a leader in the church community, is one that I would challenge us to live into. It is time for us to drop the mindset that St. Barnabas is the new mission congregation in Plymouth and embrace the mindset that St. Barnabas is a congregation in Plymouth that is all about mission. We have the resources and talents to do great things for God here in the western suburbs and the Minneapolis Area Synod. The purpose of our dream to finish the Lower Level is not to simply do something nice for ourselves, but to expand the resources we have for doing Christian ministry in this community. The purpose of our dream to use the east end of our property for a residential hospice is not to draw attention to ourselves but to offer ourselves as a partner in a community resource that will provide ministry in the coming years to hundreds of people and their families at the time of death.

This congregation can be a leader in the mold of the original St. Barnabas. Not just in the next twenty-five years, but in the next fifty and a hundred years. This leadership is not going to be focused on me or Pastor Jacqui. I can say with a high degree of certainty that neither of us will still be serving as pastor here when St. Barnabas celebrates its 50th anniversary. This congregation will become a leader when each and every person who becomes part of this community embraces the mindset of leadership and begins thinking of himself or herself as part of a congregation that demonstrates leadership.

St. Barnabas, the congregation, will emerge as a leader when the men, women, and youth of the congregation encourage each other to be like the original Barnabas. Other congregations will look at St. Barnabas and observe, "Wow, they are on fire over there in that congregation. Their worship life, their education programs, their spirit of hospitality, their service to the community, their generous stewardship, their concern for the work of the wider church – it's all so...inspired!"

I look forward to the day when others are saying those things about St. Barnabas Lutheran Church. We're not quite there yet. After all, we are just 25 years old. But that day is coming, and I sense it's going to come pretty quickly now. After all, we are already 25 years old and we are ready, following the example of Barnabas, to live into the role of leadership and show by our deeds that we are all one in mission.