

When the apostle Paul walked from Philippi in northern Greece down to Athens about the year 50, he likely walked through the town of Chaeronea, where a 4-year old boy named Plutarch lived. Plutarch grew up to be a great historian and about the time that Matthew wrote his gospel at the end of the first century, Plutarch wrote a book about Theseus, the mythical founder of Athens, which contains a famous thought experiment known as the “Ship of Theseus.” The premise is that as a ship ages, the planks and sails need to be replaced. Plutarch asks: If the ship on which Theseus sailed has been so heavily repaired that nearly every original part has been replaced, is it still the same ship — and, if not, at what point did it stop being the same ship?

This same brain teaser could be asked about a congregation like St. Barnabas, which appropriately uses a sailing ship as its logo. Thirty years ago this week, there were 202 adults and children who were the charter members of the congregation. Today, only about 30 of them are still here. In fact, St. Barnabas has now passed the point where it has more former members than current members. We currently have about 900 people on our roster, but just over 2,000 people have been members of the congregation for some portion of these thirty years.

So, is St. Barnabas the same congregation today that it was thirty years ago? The answer is both “no” and “yes”, and philosophers will tell you that this is because the word “same” has multiple definitions. St. Barnabas is not the same congregation as it was thirty years ago because it is a different group of people living in a different context. Yet there is a continuity in a congregation that makes it proper to speak of a congregation as an individual, and in that sense it is the same congregation. A congregation exhibits some of the characteristics of an individual — it is born and then proceeds through the stages of infancy, childhood, adolescence, young adulthood, maturity.

It is interesting to think of St. Barnabas as a young 30-year old man or woman. At the age of 30, one has some history and hopefully has learned a few things, both from good experiences and from mistakes. At the age of 30 one has learned that joy and sorrow are both normal parts of life.

But the age of 30 is also often a time of taking on more and more responsibilities and entering into positions of leadership. This was true of three important individuals in the Bible. Remember Joseph, the favorite son of Jacob, whose brothers beat him up for being so obnoxious and sold him into slavery in Egypt? Eventually, things turned around for Joseph and he became an important official in Pharaoh’s court. The book of Genesis notes, “Joseph was thirty years old when he entered the service of Pharaoh king of Egypt. (41:46)

The most important king in the history of Israel was David, who started as a shepherd boy and defeated the Philistine Goliath. The book of 2 Samuel notes that “David was thirty years old when he began to reign [as king], and he reigned forty years.” (5:4)

The gospels tell us very little about Jesus’ childhood and adolescence. They begin their accounts when Jesus is baptized and begins his public ministry. Luke notes that “Jesus was about thirty years old when he began his work.” (3:23)

For Joseph, David, and Jesus, age 30 was the beginning of the most significant period of their leadership and ministry. From this viewpoint, the first thirty years are not all that important. What is most important is the next thirty years.

However, there is an important reason for taking some time to review the past. In a *Newsweek* article back in 2008, author Jon Meacham wrote, “It is true that living in the past...can be bad for the mind and the soul, preventing us from engaging in the battles and causes of our own time. But when we are at our best, history and heroes enable us to look ahead, not backward. We are the sum of the stories we tell ourselves, and those stories are necessarily rooted in our experience, and by how we choose to interpret the experiences of others. These mechanics of memory create a new, present reality that then determines the future...What we choose to remember is critical, since the narratives that play in our heads shape everything.”

As we take note of our first thirty years today, I want to lift up five moments of our history that are important for us to “choose to remember,” for these five moments have shaped our past and will continue to shape St. Barnabas’ future.

The first moment to remember is our birth story. 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. 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 20 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, and many of them were children. The LCA put up \$570,000 for the land and the building, putting their trust in us that we would grow and become a self-supporting congregation, which we did

So memory moment #1 is that St. Barnabas is here only because of the LCA's commitment to mission. 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, and why St. Barnabas continues to make a priority to contribute to synod benevolence (mission support) and churchwide ministries like the World Hunger Appeal and Lutheran Social Service.

Memory moment #2 goes back to 1992, when the council made the decision to make St. Barnabas known for high quality liturgical worship. Many congregations make the choice to offer multiple styles of worship, traditional & contemporary, but congregational leaders recognized that St. Barnabas does not have the resources to be all things to all people and that with many great neighboring congregations offering a variety of worship options, they decided to focus our energy on doing one thing well instead of several things "just okay." Their decision in 1992 is why St. Barnabas has communion at every worship service and why St. Barnabas uses eight different settings of the liturgy to provide variety to our worship life, and why we invest in talented musicians like Mary Newton, David Kolden and Jeff Whitmill to enhance our worship.

Memory moment #3 starts in 1998, a year after building this sanctuary. The congregation embarked on a process of discerning how it could use its building and resources for ministry, to serve the surrounding community. The result was something we called Ministry Initiative 2000. The focus statement we ended up with stated, "Building beyond our education and worship ministries, the people of St. Barnabas Lutheran Church will bring God's love to the surrounding community by intentionally developing our building and grounds to creatively offer a 'menu of opportunity' to gather for mission. The vision is to put our building in service to the community morning, afternoon, and evening, seven days a week."

Ever since, St. Barnabas has made its building available to non-profit groups in the community at no charge – scout groups, home owners associations, math & reading classes. Ministry Initiative 2000 was the basis for opening our building to house the Que Tal Spanish program in 2006, hosting Families Moving Forward, and for starting the St. Barnabas Center for the Arts and Family Resource Center. We share our building out of a sense of Christian hospitality, being good stewards of our building and grounds to benefit the wider community.

Memory moment #4 took place in 2004 when St. Barnabas faced a crucial decision. We needed to expand our building, but the question we faced was whether we should it expand based on traditional formulas of what we could afford, or should we expand based on a vision of what the congregation would need in the future? It was a million dollar question. We could expand the main level for \$1 million, or we could add a lower level for \$2 million. There was no middle ground, and if we didn't build the lower level at that point, we would never be able to add it later. Under the theme of "A Covenant with Tomorrow", the people who were members in 2004 voted to take on an enormous debt to erect the building we have today. Some of you were part of that visionary commitment 13 years ago. Those who have become part of St. Barnabas since then benefit from their vision and partner with them in continuing to pay down the debt on the building, this tool for ministry.

The fifth and final memory moment begins in 2011 when the Church Council gave its blessing to explore how the Jordan property might be used for ministry that would benefit the wider community. We started looking at the possibility of having someone build an 8-bed residential hospice. A task force was formed, which over a period of five years visited other hospices, did market research, formed a 501(c)3 corporation named Jordan Crossing, and found a partner in Grace Hospice who will operate the hospice. Last year the members of St. Barnabas voted to

lease the land to Jordan Crossing for 20 years for \$1/year, a huge gift, since we had paid \$400,000 for that property in 2003. Since then Jordan Crossing has received all necessary approvals from the City of Plymouth and the only thing still remaining to do is to raise \$3 million to build and furnish it. Today, I am thrilled to share with you that we have received a verbal commitment for a first gift of half a million dollars. That still leaves us \$2.5 million to go, but it is a huge first step, and the hospice is a possibility only because of the vision for mission that is embodied in this congregation.

I hope in the coming weeks you will take time to look closely at the anniversary wall in the Ministry Center. Many stories are represented in those photos and bullet points. But there is an important unspoken metaphor in that display. The thirty years fill the entire wall, but then comes a corner that leads to a blank wall. As we mark our first thirty years, what is most important is not what lies in the past, but what lies in the future, when we turn that corner and move into the blank wall.

Seventy years from now, when this congregation marks its centennial, it is possible that some of the children who will sing for us in a few moments will be here for that celebration, but most of us will not. Like the Ship of Theseus, our planks in the St. Barnabas ship will have been replaced by new planks, the talents and abilities of future members will continue to build on the foundation provided by past members. But the stories this community chooses to remember and tell each new generation will shape its future, and St. Barnabas will continue to be a congregation that values its partnership with the wider church, that makes great worship a priority, that shows radical hospitality to the wider community, that is willing to take risks for the sake of ministry, and is willing to dream big dreams.

In a few minutes the kids will sing for us, and I want you to hear the profound message in their simple song. When we sing that we have the “love of Jesus” in our hearts, hear that phrase not as that “we love Jesus,” that Jesus is the object of our love, but rather that Jesus’ love is the source of our love, the foundation of what motivates us. We have the love of Jesus. That unbounded love is what underlies St. Barnabas’ mission statement, “Sent by Jesus, we set our sails to be filled by God’s Spirit, inspiring us to praise, grow, and serve.”