June 29, 2014 – 3rd Sunday after Pentecost

© 2012 Michael Mornard

**“Somebody has to do it”**

A teaching on Barnabas

In the movie version of Lerner and Lowe’s “Camelot,” Sir Launcelot first meets King Arthur on May Day during a picnic in the meadow. Looking around, Launcelot says in bafflement, “Knights picking flowers?” To which Richard Harris’ Arthur answers, as only Richard Harris can, “Well, SOMEBODY’s got to do it!”

When I look through the book of Acts and read about Barnabas, that is what comes to mind. No, not knights picking flowers, nor King Arthur. Rather, I look at Barnabas, who he was, what he did, and in my mind’s eye I hear him sigh softly, shake his head, and say, “Well, somebody’s got to do it.”

What do we know about Barnabas? Why is he worth talking about? King Arthur was the star of his show, but Barnabas seems to be the eternal “supporting actor.” We never hear him speak in his own words; everything we know about him is told by someone else. Yet we see him throughout the first half of the book of Acts – doing what somebody has to do.

“He sold a field that belonged to him, then brought the money, and laid it at the apostles’ feet.” Why? Well, somebody had to do it. We are told that there was not a needy person among them, and “everything they owned was held in common.” In a close knit community, it’s natural and easy to reach out to others. However, I’m not going to talk about Barnabas’ giving, but, rather, **how** he gave.

“…and laid it at the apostle’s feet.” And when the Hellenists complained that their widows were being neglected in Acts 6, what did Barnabas do? Well, he did not go before the apostles and rebuke them. He had laid the money at their feet, and had allowed the community to use it. He didn’t try to use his contribution to influence anyone, even though his contribution was large enough that Luke thought it worth specifically mentioning.

What this shows is Barnabas’ humility. He gave because “somebody has to do it,” and gave his contribution to the community and trusted in God to guide the community. In this day and age of struggling churches, this is thought provoking. I will go out on a limb here[[1]](#footnote-1) and suggest that these two passages together could provide a powerful teaching for those in the church whose first response to hearing something they don’t like in a sermon is to threaten to withdraw their pledge. We are called by Jesus to live together in community in a new way, to “love one another as I have loved you.” Nothing in there says we all have to think identically; that is not love, that is narcissism. Yes, we have to learn to love and live in community with people we disagree with, sometimes very strongly.

Why? Why do **we** always have to be the reasonable one, always the one who stays silent? Why us?

Well, somebody’s got to do it. “Let there be peace on earth, and let it begin with me.”

We next see Barnabas in the story of Saul in Jerusalem where the disciples, with good reason, distrust the recently converted Saul. Barnabas speaks for him convincingly. Acts does not record how Barnabas knew of Saul’s change of heart, but he believed in Saul. Note how Barnabas behaves, however; he does not remain silent, nor does he suggest “half measures” as we might think of, granting Saul limited amounts of acceptability or a closely watched relationship. Barnabas speaks out for what he feels is right, no halfway about it. He has sufficient reputation among the disciples to be called “Son of Encouragement,” and he chooses to lay his reputation on the line for the sake of a believer, even one who once had tried to destroy the Church. Why? Why risk so much for one single convert?

Well, somebody’s got to do it.

How often do we do this? How often do we remain silent when what is required is to speak up? Most of the time we don’t even recognize what we’re doing; we think we’re being cautious, being prudent, being wise. We don’t even recognize the fact that what we are actually responding to is fear. In our better moments we might recognize an element of this and say, “I’m afraid of the harm this person could work.” But is that really it? Are we afraid of Saul doing harm, or are we actually, deep in our hearts, more worried about being wrong? I think when we’re truly honest with ourselves we will discover that in the final analysis, we fear more for our reputation.

“Perfect love casts out fear.” This applies not only to the perfect love of God through Jesus Christ for each of us, it also applies to the perfect love of Barnabas for Saul, willing to believe Saul’s testimony, willing to see Saul with the eyes of grace and love rather than fear, willing to speak out in favor of his own former persecutor.

We also see this again in the case of “John called Mark,” in 15:36-41. Saul, now Paul, does not want to travel with Mark who deserted them. Barnabas speaks in favor of Mark, and eventually Barnabas and Mark go a different way from Paul. Barnabas is not mentioned after this. But what we see here is consistent with his actions towards Paul earlier; Barnabas proclaims what he sees as truth regardless of what it costs him. He has been with Paul since Jerusalem, traveling extensively at a time when travel was expensive, dangerous, and lengthy. Yet just as he would not back down in Jerusalem in the case of Paul, he will not desert Mark. He forgives Mark who deserted them even as he forgave Paul – Saul, who persecuted them.

Why? Why would anyone do that, especially so unreservedly, especially with someone who had publicly proclaimed his aim to destroy the Church, or who had deserted him in difficult times? Why take the risk of being so totally forgiving?

Well, somebody’s got to do it.

One last story of Barnabas. He and Saul were in Antioch, and Barnabas is counted among the “prophets and teachers,” in Acts 13. He is called for by name by the Holy Spirit and commissioned and sent with Saul to Cypress. In Cypress Saul rebukes the magician Bar-Jesus and declares that he will be blinded by the hand of the Lord. This happens, and from then on Saul is known as Paul – and “Barnabas and Saul” become “Paul and Barnabas.” And it is as “Paul and Barnabas” that we see Barnabas for the rest of his story, until that last fateful parting when Barnabas goes with Mark. Sometimes Luke tells us that “Paul and Barnabas” spoke well, or preached, or were urged to speak. Often times, however, it is Paul alone who is mentioned, and it is ultimately Paul, in his letters to the Churches, who lays down the foundational elements of Christian theology in writing.

How did Barnabas feel about this? It is an old saying that “the master’s greatest achievement is when the pupil surpasses him.” In our 21st century postmodern world, however, the usual reaction to that is “Yeah, sure.” It is a natural human tendency to want to be in charge, to be the top person, to be looked up to. It is difficult to see someone rise above us. How difficult would it be for Barnabas, who had spoken up for Saul in the first place? How natural, how easy for Barnabas to think, “You owe me!”

The ability to avoid this, the ability to not be determined to be “on top” no matter what, is humility. It is this humility we are called to remember in Philippians 2, in the famous kenotic hymn to Jesus who “emptied himself, taking the form of a slave.” Barnabas was given this Grace, to empty himself out for the sake of the Gospel and let the once-despised Saul be greater than him.

Because, once again, “somebody had to do it.”

We do not live in 1st Century Roman-occupied Palestine. Yes, there are certainly parts of the world where, even today, being a Christian truly is physically dangerous. Most of us, however, will never be in these places. We will not be put to the same literal tests and dangers that Barnabas and his pupil and protégé, Saul who became Paul, were put to.

But we can remember Barnabas and his quiet determination to do what has to be done, because “somebody has to do it.” We can give, give of our time, talent, and treasure, and do not grumble about how our gifts are used. We can give in this way to be an example of love-based giving like Barnabas, because “somebody has to do it.” We can speak the truth as we see it, even when it would be easier to remain silent – or safer, either for ourselves or for our reputation. We can be like Barnabas who testified for the converted Saul he knew, because he knew what he saw as the truth, because “somebody has to do it.” We can forgive – not out of a sense of moral superiority, or with reservations, but to forgive completely, freely, and out of love. We can forgive utterly, as Barnabas forgave Saul who persecuted him or Mark who deserted him, because “somebody has to do it.” We can work to be leaders in our faith communities, and we can work to discern and teach others to be leaders in our stead, to be greater leaders than we are, giving of ourselves unhesitatingly. We can teach to the utmost of our ability as Barnabas taught Saul, taking joy when the pupil outshines the master, because “somebody has to do it.”

We may never be faced with decisions and consequences of the magnitude that Barnabas faced in the early years of the Church of Christ when there was grave concern that the Word of Christ would fade away. Even in our modern day and age, however, we would do well to follow the example of faithful, steadfast Barnabas. Like him, let us pray that we too should be able to step up when we see what needs to be done, and be the one to say, “Well, somebody has to do it. And I’m the one who’s here.”

1. Because… well, somebody’s got to do it. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)