

Barnabas: Son of Encouragement, August 25, 2002, Langley Mennonite Fellowship

By Wayne Northey

[texts: Acts 4:34 – 37; Acts 9:26 – 28; Acts 15:35 – 40]

I want to look at Barnabas through three lenses: A. Encourager, B. Risk-taker, C. Community-Builder.

A. Encourager

Barnabas' real name was in fact "Joseph". He was given the name "Barnabas", which means "Son of Encouragement", by his peers, the apostles, the text says because, obviously, he had a reputation as an encourager.

Remember the legal expert's question (Luke 10:25) "...*what must I do to inherit eternal life?*"? Jesus turned it around with, "*What is written in the Law? How do you read it?*" The text then says (Luke 10:27-28): *He answered: "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind"; and, 'Love your neighbor as yourself.'* "*You have answered correctly,*" Jesus replied. "*Do this and you will live.*"

Being an encourager is part of what is absolutely essential to our "living", if we are to live at all as God intends, in freedom. Acts of encouragement invariably take us out of ourselves and into the lives of others. That is the essence of finding our true selves: affirmation of the well-being of the other.

In Archbishop Desmond Tutu's classic, *No Future Without Forgiveness*, Tutu discusses the African concept of *ubuntu*: "*Ubuntu is very difficult to render into a Western language. It speaks of the very essence of being human.... It is to say, 'My humanity is caught up, is inextricably bound up, in yours.'* We belong in a bundle of life. We say, 'A person is a person through other persons.' It is not, 'I think therefore I am.' It says rather, 'I am human because I belong. I participate, I share.'... Harmony, friendliness, community are great goods. Social harmony is for us the *summum bonum* - the greatest good... To forgive is not just to be altruistic. It is the best form of self-interest. What dehumanizes you inexorably dehumanizes me. It gives people resilience, enabling them to survive and emerge still human despite all efforts to dehumanize them (p. 31)."

In the very first novel written on Canadian soil (I believe), by a French naval officer in the 18th century, featuring 175 letters between the principal characters, *Liaisons Dangereuses*, the Vicomte de Valmont is in the process of seducing a beautiful woman recently graduated from a convent. In one scene designed to catch her attention, he flamboyantly gives alms to a poor beggar. In his letter subsequently describing the action, he comments that his staged philanthropy actually made him feel good! Madame de Merteuil, his co-conspirator, sees this as a sign of weakness, a crack in his armour that continues to grow larger. If Archbishop Tutu is right, such care for the other is on the contrary the *only* hope of being truly human – as he reprises: "We are bound up in a delicate network of interdependence because, as we say in our African idiom, a person is a person through

other persons. To dehumanize another inexorably means that one is dehumanized as well... Thus to forgive is indeed the best form of self-interest since anger, resentment, and revenge are corrosive of that *summum bonum*, that greatest good, communal harmony that enhances the humanity and personhood of all in the community (p. 35).”

The opposite of encouragement is *condemnation*. Jesus specifically said he did not come to condemn (John 3:17), and told us not to condemn for it will boomerang onto ourselves: “Do not judge or you too will be judged” (Matt. 7:1) - Paul triumphantly wrote: “Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus, because through Christ Jesus the law of the Spirit of life set me free from the law of sin and death (Rom 8:1 & 2).”

Encouragement is ultimately an act of forgiveness by which all are set free.

As Tutu says elsewhere of non-retaliation: “Forgiving means abandoning your right to pay back the perpetrator in his own coin, but it is a loss that liberates the victim (p. 272).”

Ponder this excerpt from an interview with a contemporary Eastern Orthodox theologian: *I recall a televised discussion program in which we were asked what was most important in Christianity. Part of what I said was that the only way we can find ourselves is to deny ourselves. That’s Christ’s teaching. If you cling to yourself, you lose yourself. The unwillingness to forgive is the ultimate act of not wanting to let yourself go. You want to defend yourself, assert yourself, protect yourself. There is a consistent line through the Gospel -- if you want to be the first you must will to be the last.*

The other fellow, who taught the psychology of religion at a Protestant seminary, said, “What you are saying is the source of the neuroses of Western society. What we need is healthy self-love and healthy self-esteem.” Then he quoted that line, “You shall love your neighbor as you love yourself.” He insisted that you must love yourself first and have a sense of dignity. If one has that, forgiveness is either out of the question or an act of condescension toward the poor sinner. It is no longer an identification with the other as a sinner, too.

I said that of course if we are made in the image of God it’s quite self-affirming, and self-hatred is an evil. But my main point is that there is no self there to be defended except the one that comes into existence by the act of love and self-emptying. It’s only by loving the other that myself actually emerges. Forgiveness is at the heart of that.

As we were leaving a venerable old rabbi with a shining face called us over. “That line, you know, comes from the Torah, from Leviticus,” he said, “and it cannot possibly be translated love

your neighbor as you love yourself. It says, "You shall love your neighbor as being your own self." Your neighbor is your true self. You have no self in yourself.

After this I started reading the Church Fathers in this light, and that's what they all say -- "Your brother is your life." I have no self in myself except the one that is fulfilled by loving the other. The Trinitarian character of God is a metaphysical absolute here, so to speak. God's own self is another -- His Son. The same thing happens on the human level. So the minute I don't feel deeply that my real self is the other, then I'll have no reason to forgive anyone. But if that is my reality, and my only real self is the other, and my own identity and fulfillment emerge only in the act of loving the other, that gives substance to the idea that we are potentially God-like beings. Now, if you add to that that we are all to some degree faulty and weak and so on, that act of love will always be an act of forgiveness. That's how I find and fulfill myself as a human being made in God's image. Otherwise, I cannot. So the act of forgiveness is the very act by which our humanity is constituted. Deny that, and we kill ourselves. It's a metaphysical suicide.

Barnabas the Encourager knew how to forgive to be human.

B. Risk-taker

Barnabas was also a risk-taker.

Barnabas the Encourager was the first to forgive Saul for his persecution of the Christians, and to take a risk not only in personally befriending Saul when Saul could have had Barnabas arrested, but Barnabas took a risk in alienating his own peers in introducing Saul/Paul to them.

A Scottish Quaker philosopher, John Macmurray, claims that our entire lives are lived out on a continuum between fear and love, the two most dominant emotions of our existence. Elizabeth O'Connor wrote that Jesus came to save us from our fears as much as from our sins.

Jesus repeatedly said: "Do not be afraid!", and we repeatedly fear, nonetheless. A wry commentator said it is not the Ten Commandments that give him trouble, it is the Eleventh: "Do not be afraid".

This command however is an invitation to *freedom*. Freedom is the crowning achievement of Christian spirituality, what it means to be human: (Gal 5:1) *It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery.*

A close cousin to fear is worry or anxiety. This is a more generic kind of apprehension.

Fear has a specific object, whereas anxiety is less focussed and more inchoate. The writer of the Peter letters says:

(1 Pet 5:7) *Cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you.*

This is a fairly simple, comprehensive, and straightforward admonition! It is just incredibly difficult to do!: *Cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you.*

In Barnabas' risk-taking, his role as Encourager and Risk-taker converge, in line with the text in I John 4:18-21:

There is no fear in love. But perfect love drives out fear, because fear has to do with punishment. The one who fears is not made perfect in love. We love because he first loved us. If anyone says, "I love God," yet hates his brother[or sister], he [or she] is a liar. For anyone who does not love his brother[or sister], whom he [or she] has seen, cannot love God, whom he [or she] has not seen. And he has given us this command: Whoever loves God must also love his [or her] brother[or sister].

Notice, incidentally, that this passage dismantles any legitimization of punishment and retribution, saying they belong to the world of fear, which perfect love simply displaces. *That perfect love drives out punishment is the pithy breathtaking message of this text!* This has huge implications in a world awash with a "War on Terrorism", and a society fixated on retributive punishments for crimes.

In the end, says Graham Greene the novelist through one of his characters, we all want to be saints. We all wish to transcend fear and death which circumscribe all our endeavours. In the end, we all aspire to know perfect love, which enables complete risk-taking, fearless opposition to evil, injustice, and personal sin. We all yearn to move beyond the reach of debilitating fear for our own well-being to perfect love of God and other.

Love, which biblically means *the indefatigable embrace of the other*, says anthropologist and lay theologian René Girard, is the only true *epistemology*: the one and only basis for authentic human knowledge and existence.

Sister Helen Prejean, author of *Dead Man Walking*, after whom the award-winning movie was made, puts it this way:

To me the overriding thing about life is to live in the presence of God - which is the presence of love and compassion - and not to break the link between God and myself, between God and us. I know when I am living in that presence I'm poised. I'm present. I'm confident. When I'm not connected with God's presence and compassion, I am discombobulated, flitting around like a bird. As horrible as it was, I felt that presence and compassion throughout this whole affair [of visiting on Death Row]. And I still do....

The essential connection, of course, is to the compassionate God. Most often that connection is made through human beings. Jesus is our model for that. He did it first. He did it best. And his followers have tried to make his compassion present down through the ages. That's what I believe I have tried to do. I hope that God chooses to comfort me in this way when my time comes, and, if that happens, I will be grateful. (Excerpted from "The Sorrow Only God Can Touch: an interview with Helen Prejean, SSJ", *Praying*, No. 61, July-August 1994, pp. 29 & 36.)

Barnabas the Risk-Taker.

C. Community-Builder

Finally, Barnabas was a Community-Builder.

John Mark, likely the author of the Gospel by the same name, was a cousin or nephew to Barnabas. He travelled for a time with Paul and Barnabas on their first missionary journey. But there was obviously a real falling-out between Mark and Paul, so serious that John Mark left and returned home before journey's end, and later Paul and Barnabas had a falling-out of sorts upon Barnabas' wish to have Mark rejoin them for a second journey. Barnabas and Mark went their separate ways as a result, and Paul recruited a new companion, Silas, to continue on with him.

The inference of the story is Barnabas' willingness to give John Mark a second chance, over against Paul's more hard-line approach. From several mentions of John Mark in Paul's Letters, it is obvious that the issue was not Mark's turning away from the faith.

From the Eastern Orthodox and I John quotes, the essence of being human is *neighbourliness*. That is, being fully human means ever working towards creating community. This is Archbishop Tutu's *ubuntu*: "A person is a person through other persons." Community is the loving, caring, compassionate acceptance, inclusion, and attempt at making friends, of all we have significant interaction with.

In the end, if we do not embrace this kind of community-building, we do not embrace God. Bud Osborne, a Vancouver East End activist and poet, in a workshop at the Arts & Peace Festival a few years ago said: "*God is community.*"

If God is not found in our peacemaking approach to the other, God is simply not found! The inexorable logic and leaven of the Gospels are what one author, James Alison, calls the subversion from within of the "apocalyptic imagination" by the "eschatological imagination". This entails the pruning away from the image of God of all violence, of all alienation and exclusion from and of the other.

A Latin saying speaks to this: *extra ecclesiam nulla salus* – "outside the church there is no salvation". Outside love of the church, the sisters, the brothers, the community, outside our passionate commitment to the other, there is no salvation, no freedom. Likewise: *extra finitimum nulla salus* – outside [love of] neighbour, there is no salvation. Likewise again: *extra hostem nulla salus* – outside [love of] enemy there is no salvation.

The greatest error of modernity and of post-modernity is to believe we can love our neighbour without the staying power of love of God. The greatest error of much Christianity is to believe we can love God without referencing the other.

If our lives are not characterized by active embrace of the other, by community building, by peacemaking, salvation is a legal fiction, church is a sham, and "God" is an unknown, for all our God-talk.

Father Chacour was confronted for several months by the cold, unforgiving hearts of his parishioners. Then:

On Palm Sunday of his first year as pastor of Ibillin, Elias looked from the front of the church at the stony faces before him. One of the brothers, a policeman, sat in the front row with his wife and children. Hymns were sung, but without any spirit. There were readings from the Bible, and then a sermon. 'The congregation endured me indifferently,' Elias recalls, 'fulfilling their holiday obligation to warm the benches.' But before the service ended, he did something no-one, perhaps not even he himself, had anticipated. He walked to the back of the church and padlocked the door.

Returning to the front of the church, he told his parishioners, 'Sitting in this building does not make you a Christian. You are a people divided. You argue and hate each other. You gossip and spread lies. Your religion is a lie. If you can't love your brother whom you see, how can you say that you love God who is invisible? You have allowed the Body of Christ to be disgraced. I have tried for months to unite you. I have failed. I am only a man. But there is someone else who can bring you together in true unity. His name is Jesus Christ. He has the power to forgive you. So now I will be quiet and allow him to give you that power. If you will not forgive, then we stay locked in here. If you want, you can kill each other, and I'll provide your funeral gratis.'

Ten minutes passed, but for Elias they seemed like hours. At last the policeman stood up, faced the congregation, bowed his head and said, 'I am sorry. I am the worst of all. I have hated my own brothers. I have hated them so much that I wanted to kill them. More than any of you, I need forgiveness.'

He turned to Elias. 'Father, can you forgive me?'

'Come here,' Elias replied. They embraced each other with the kiss of peace. 'Now go and greet your brothers.'

The four brothers rushed together, meeting halfway down the aisle, and in tears forgave each other.

'In an instant,' Elias recalls, 'the church was a chaos of embracing and repentance.'

Elias had to shout to make his next words audible. 'Dear friends, we are not going to wait until next week to celebrate the Resurrection. Let us begin it now. We were dead to each other. Now we are alive again.' He began to sing, 'Christ is risen from the dead. By his death he has trampled death and given life to those in the tomb.' The congregation joined in the hymn. Unchaining the door, Elias led them into the streets.

'For the rest of the day and far into the evening, I joined groups of believers as they went from house to house. At every door, someone had to ask forgiveness for a certain wrong. Never was forgiveness withheld.' (Making Friends of Enemies, Jim Forest, pp. 45 & 46)

Barnabas the Community-Builder.

Conclusion

Hopefully these reflections on Barnabas as Encourager, Risk-taker, and Community-Builder will encourage us to "go and do likewise".

Amen.