

Community of Encouragement

sermon digest

August 2, 2015

Acts 15:36-41; Hebrews 10:19-25

carolyn dipboye

If we are honest (and it is good to be honest in church), I suspect all of us will acknowledge that we did not grow ourselves unaided. We recall those nurturing, supportive loved ones who surrounded us from our birth, prodding us, encouraging us, giving us reason to believe in ourselves and what we could become and do. I recall well those teachers in my small town who sought to reassure us, “*Anyone* can be President.” I believed them, and I suspect others in those classes did as well.

I count the good people who graced my early life and those who have always been there as I have matured as among the greatest blessings of my life, and I suspect you do as well. Without that “great cloud of witnesses,” as Hebrews speaks of them, I would not have found my way into ministry and much less into an ongoing education that opened my heart and mind to a wide world and a wideness in God’s love I would never have suspected. Without them, without *you*, I would never have continued in ministry and enjoyed its deep meaning.

I recall finding special voice for that sense of appreciation some months after my mother’s death as we sang the words of the familiar hymn “For the Beauty of the Earth.” Words I had never noticed gave perfect expression to just such gratitude. Still today, as I sing its words, I take note not just of its expression of thanksgiving for the natural beauty that surrounds us, but also for “the love which from our birth over and around us lies” and “the joy of human love, brother, sister, parent, child, friends on earth and friends above.”

This morning we will be focusing on such an encourager in the unfolding story of the earliest church. A native of Cyprus, born in all probability to a family which was a part of the diaspora, the scattering of the Jewish people following the Babylonian Exile or one of the numerous scatterings thereafter, this man whose birth name was Joseph, had returned to Jerusalem where he had become a respected leader within the budding Jerusalem church. The apostles, Luke, the probable writer of Acts tells us, gave him the name “Barnabas,” which, Luke goes on to say, “means ‘son of encouragement’” (Acts 4:36). The interesting thing about it, however, is that it does not. *Bar* does mean “son;” but *nabas* does not mean “comfort” or “encourager;” and no one has been able to come up with a satisfactory explanation for Luke’s interpretation. Surely he knew his own language. Surely he recognized the leap he was taking. What was his purpose in doing so?

The best explanation may be that Luke’s comment should not be read as a literal translation of the words, but as a statement about Barnabas himself and the sterling character by which he was known. As evidenced in the several stories Luke shares, Barnabas was an encouraging presence. As Luke unfolds his story, Barnabas repeatedly and consistently is one who extends blessing and encouragement to those around him. We first meet him when he sells a piece of property and brings it to the apostles for distribution to those in need. He then takes the momentous (and risky) step of introducing Saul, renowned for his earlier persecution of the church, to the suspicious apostles in Jerusalem and making a case for him as a legitimate believer, worthy of their trust. Later he enlists the suspect Paul’s help in strengthening the fledgling church in Antioch where believers, he says, were first called “Christians.” Barnabas successfully worked alongside Paul for a full year before the church commissioned their first mission into adjoining territory. When the church in Jerusalem met with fear the news that the gospel was spreading among Gentiles, he stood alongside Paul in making the case for the full incorporation of Gentile converts into the church. And finally, when Paul proposed the two of them make another trip into new territory, he stood up to Paul and insisted on giving the repentant John Mark a second chance in ministry, despite Mark’s having left their previous mission early.

If Barnabas’ name does not make sense linguistically, it does make sense viewed in light of the trajectory of his life. Not once, not twice, but repeatedly, Barnabas makes way for the newcomer. He reaches out to include those whom others stereotype and fear. He speaks in support of taking down the walls of distinction in Christ’s church and welcoming as full sisters and brothers those who have previously been outcasts. He practices the grace of the God he had met in Christ. He advocates forgiveness and a second chance for those who have erred.

We do not know what happened to Barnabas after he and John Mark part ways with Paul and strike out on their own. We know that he remained a significant enough presence in the church that a number of legends grew up around him. Some of the church fathers even attributed to him authorship for the book of Hebrews. That claim is pretty well unsubstantiated, but one can’t help but wonder if the passage we shared from Hebrews this morning enjoining Christians to “provoke one another to love and good deeds” and to be constant in “encouraging one another” may not have been something of a reminder of the revered Son of Encouragement, playing a role in attributing authorship to him.

Mutual encouragement is fundamental to the church’s identity and mission. The importance of the task of encouraging one another in faith and mission receives repeated notice as one reads through Acts, the epistles of Paul, and the other epistles. Perhaps it had to do with the dangerous circumstances within which the first century church lived and moved; but more, perhaps it says something about the nature of the church’s life and mission in any and every age. If the church is about something more than merely mirroring the culture in which it lives, if, indeed, the church is commissioned to challenge culture and call attention to

those places where we are comfortable with situations of division, abuse and injustice, the church is a place where we are discomfited as well as comforted.

There are those in our society who take great pride in distancing themselves from the “institutional” church. And frankly, there are points at which it is tempting. We are embarrassed at the far too many times the church has either been silent or blessed the inequities of the cultures in which it has ministered and flourished. We are embarrassed by the Johnny-come-lately depiction of the church as reluctantly tagging along behind critical social changes rather than leading them. We are embarrassed by the seemingly incessant haggling in the church over issues of lesser importance even as it swallows camels. We are tempted to either abandon the church altogether, or at least to keep it at a respectable arm’s length, lest we become identified with its foibles.

As we put Grace Covenant together, we were aware of the church’s shortcomings. Many of us had known the pain of confrontation or at least disappointment in the church that tempted us to escape to a safe distance of disenchantment and even disdain. If you look closely at our Covenant and the repeated notes we have sought to sound as a church, however, you will see an effort not to find a hiding place, but to build a community that lives up to our highest sense of calling. We were—we *are*—seeking to be what Christian ethicist Paul Lehmann called the “*ecclesiola in ecclesia*, the little church within the church, the leaven in the lump, the remnant in the midst of the covenant people, the *koinonia* in the world” [*Ethics in a Christian Context*, 72].

Be sure that the claim is not that we are the *only* people of God, the *only* true church. To be sure, the church and any other religious people have perhaps never made a more dangerous assumption. Self-righteous pride and disrespect and violence toward those beyond one’s select group are sure to follow. The claim or perhaps more properly, the exerted *effort* to live faithfully as God’s covenant people is, Lehmann affirms, the *starting point*. It is not about the presumption that we have God isolated in our corner, but the commitment to live out of our encounter with the God who comes to us in Christ. It is about seeking to live in accordance with the open welcome we have received in Christ and the recognition that Christ’s church should live out that welcoming embrace in its reception of others and in the priorities it makes as it lives out its daily life in the world.

The church in everything it is and does is called to live *from* grace and *toward* grace. The Christian life and our relationship to one another and the church’s relationship to the world is not about *presumption*. It is about *grace*. “Be a people of encouragement,” the writer of Hebrews says (and the example of one called Barnabas says). “Do not neglect to gather to one another and *for* one another. Provoke, prod, *irritate*, *pester* one another [the word used here is very strong] to love and good deeds.” Such insistent action can, of course, have a negative connotation; but here it has the positive sense of disturbing the apathetic or fearful to action. It is strong but seemingly necessary as it addresses a community the writer of Hebrews has previously chided as inattentive, neglectful, and drifting [*New Interpreter’s Bible*, 12:121].

The church, Lehmann and others observe, becomes a laboratory—a place to investigate, to seek to identify and live out what it means to live from the grace of God we have encountered in Christ and toward the hope-filled goal of the church and all creation of finding its oneness in the God of love.

So hear this, Grace Covenant Church: Who we are to one another and who we are in our individual *and congregational* relationship to the world matters. We are “members of this body of Christ by the bond of covenant—our solemn commitment to God and to one another.” With one another, we seek to get it “right”—right not in the sense of a rigid dogmatism in which we all walk in lockstep, but in the sense that together we live from grace and toward grace. We encourage and prod one another as we seek to understand what faithfulness means for us in our place and time. We will, as we have covenanted with one another, care for one another and for God’s creation. We will be “an ecumenical church, joining hands with other people of faith and all people of good will to bring healing among God’s children.” And we will “cast our vision to the ends of the earth in celebration of the universal presence, love, and revelation of God to the whole human family.”

It’s a tall order, but someone has to do it—better, someone has to stretch every fiber of their being to live toward it. Why not us?