

KNOWING WHEN ENOUGH IS ENOUGH

August 29, 2010

Texts – 2 Samuel 19: 31 - 39
Philippians 1: 3 - 11

It's an odd Old Testament lesson we have this morning. The name of Barzillai the Gileadite of Rogelim is not frequently mentioned in United Church of Christ pulpits. Gilead (where our story takes place) is a rugged, mountainous region east of the Jordan; Rogelim the name of a town long since gone from the face of the earth. Barzillai was its prince – a man of considerable wealth and strength. His name literally means, “made of iron.” Listen to his story in its full context.

“And it came to pass,” we read in 2 Samuel 17, verse 27,

“when David came to Mahanaim, that Shobi son of Nahash from Rabbah of the Amonites, and Machir son of Ammiel from Lodebar, and Barzillai the Gileadite from Rogelim, brought beds, basins, and earthen vessels, wheat, barley, meal, parched grain, beans and lentils, honey and curds, sheep, and cheese from the herd, for David and the people with him to eat.” [2 Samuel 17: 27-29]

During the war of succession which followed the death of King Saul, in other words, Barzillai was one of those who came to David's rescue when his cause faltered and he seemed destined for defeat. The intervention was timely and critical, enabling the young King to prevail against his enemies.

Now it is time for “pay back.” David's forces have been victorious on the field of battle; he is on his way to claim his throne in Jerusalem. Barzillai has come from Rogelim to escort him part of the way. *“Come over with me,”* David says to him, *“and I will provide for you in*

Jerusalem at my side.” [2 Samuel 19: 33] And Barzillai replies,

“How many years have I still to live, that I should go up with the king to Jerusalem? . . . Why should the king recompense me with such a reward? Please let your servant return, so that I may die in my own town, near the graves of my father and my mother. But here is your servant Chimham (Barzillai’s son); let him go over with my lord the king; and do for him whatever seems good to you.” [vv. 34, 36-37]

That’s all we know about Barzillai the Gileadite of Rogelim. He’s just a footnote really in the epic tale of Israel’s history. That he was an actual person living in the Gilead region of the Middle East three thousand years ago I have no doubt – who, after all, would bother to make this up? What purpose would it serve to do so?

That said, Barzillai the Gileadite of Rogelim has something to teach us, anonymous and long forgotten though he be; I know I have found him a useful instructor. “There is nothing I like better than conversing with aged men (and women),” Socrates once wrote; “For I regard them as travelers who have gone (on) a journey which I too may have to travel (literally, “go”), and of whom it is right to learn the character of the way, whether it is rugged and difficult, or smooth and easy.” Barzillai the Gileadite is such an experienced traveler.

He was owed a reward, this story from long ago says. His courage and generosity had literally rescued David from an almost certain defeat. But we read here that he graciously declined the King’s offer. Sensitive to the limitations placed upon him by age, and content with the rewards and achievements which life had already showered upon him, he knew when enough is enough. In the autumn of his life, Barzillai was wise enough to say “No Thank You,” and to urge the King to transfer his gratitude and generosity onto his successor.

There is a time for each of us (isn’t there?) when “enough is enough.” Some of you

remember Thelma Norton, my friend and mentor who was our Parish Visitor for almost thirty years. “There comes a time,” she was fond of saying . . . “there comes a time.” It is the same message I hear from Barzillai the Gileadite from Rogelim.

And so my dear, dear friends – the time has come for me to follow in Barzillai’s footsteps, and to take my old friend Thelma’s advice. I have decided to retire from the active ordained ministry of the United Church of Christ on January 15, 2011. My last Sunday as your Senior Minister will be January 9, 2011.

The Church Newsletter, which is dated September 1st, is in the mail and will arrive in your mailboxes tomorrow. It contains my official letter of resignation, which our Board of Trustees will be asked to vote to receive when they meet on September 14th. It also includes a letter from Adrienne Carr, stating her intention to return to her position as our Associate Minister on the 1st of December and indicating that she does not want to be considered for the position of Interim Senior Minister nor for the position of your next “settled” Senior Minister. She likes what she does and she wants to continue doing it. (Sort of sounds like another Barzillai the Gileadite of Rogelim!)

Donna and I officially began our life with you on September 1, 1992. Today marks the completion of eighteen years together. It has been a great honor to serve First Church for these years. I am proud of what we have accomplished together and grateful for all the love and support you have showered upon Donna and me. I can think of no better church to have been called to serve, and I say that after almost forty years as a preacher and teacher of the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

So what happens next? I’m glad you asked! We are part of the United Church of Christ. When the Trustees meet on September 14 the Reverend Dr. Lynn Bujnak will be with us. She is the Executive Minister (also just called ‘the Conference Minister’) of the Vermont Conference of

the United Church of Christ. (Some of you may remember her from when she was our guest preacher last November.) Lynn is an experienced and gifted leader; prior to joining us as Conference Minister two years ago she served in the national setting of the United Church of Christ on our Church Life & Leadership Team, which is responsible for overseeing the way churches and ministers find each other.

Lynn will be the person working with us to find both an Interim Senior Minister to take my place on a temporary basis in January, and a “settled pastor” who will become my permanent successor. According to our By-Laws and Constitution, it will be the responsibility of our Deacons to work with Lynn to find an Interim minister who can be with us for 12 to 18 months, and it is the duty of the Trustees to appoint a Search Committee to look for our new permanent Senior Minister.

We are a Congregational Church, which means that while we are part of a wider fellowship of churches – the United Church of Christ – we reserve for our members the authority to call or dismiss our ministers. Whoever follows me in this pulpit will do so only after the Search Committee has presented them to you and you have been given the opportunity to meet them and vote upon them. The first step in that long process will begin at this month’s Board of Trustees meeting with Reverend Bujnak. As is true of every standing committee or board of this church, that meeting will be open to all members. If you have any interest at all, I encourage you to plan to come and participate with your voice (although not with vote).

I expect my announcement this morning is a surprise (perhaps a shock) for many of you. I am sorry for that. Suzanne McKegney, our Church President, has known about all of this for some time. The same is true of Tyler Atwood, our Past President, Carl Herzog, our President-Elect, and Pat Heise, our Treasurer. We met together with Dr. Bujnak two weeks ago to talk through all of this. If you’ve got questions or concerns I encourage you to seek any one of them

out, or talk with me directly.

I began with some reflections from that seasoned traveler, Barzillai the Gileadite from Rogelim. Let me end with a few thoughts inspired by another traveler, Saul of Tarsus. *“I thank my God in all my remembrance of you,”* he says to his friends in Philippi, *“always in every prayer of mine for you all making my prayer with joy, thankful for your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now.”* [Philippians 1: 3-5] I have felt, do feel, and will always feel that way about each of you. But then Paul says – *“and I am sure that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ.”* [v. 6]

Some, upon learning of my decision to retire, have been very kind in their words of appreciation for what we have been able to accomplish in the past eighteen years. I am very grateful for such words. What I know in my heart of hearts, however . . . and what you know just as well . . . is that the ultimate source of all of our blessings is God. Whatever “good work” has begun – be it in our individual lives, or in the life of our fellowship, or in the life of the community . . . all of this is God’s work, not our own, and we can be sure that he who began a good work in us will bring to completion at the day of Jesus Christ.” May that day quickly come. Amen.