

“Curious Colleagues”

By Charles J. Scalise

If you're like me, “coming into focus” for worship on an early Monday morning in a strange city is not an easy task. Though “He watching over Israel slumbers not nor sleeps”, I often slumber even when I look like I'm awake. So, let's try to “come into focus” this morning by first spending a few moments in silent prayer, which I will close with a brief invocation.

Almighty and Loving God, We give you thanks and praise for this opportunity to worship and share together as your people and as colleagues one with another. Lord, we ask that this day will be a time of continued fellowship and special growth for each person present. Teach us the deeper meaning of partnership with one another in this great and challenging ministry you have given us. Now, “may the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, my strength and redeemer.” Amen.

I have been affiliated with our Association of Southern Baptist Campus Ministers for some time now. In fact, I can remember when this organization was some future dream we talked about at Ridgecrest and Glorieta. If there has been one common theme running through these years for us, I believe it is the theme of collegiality. We are members of this organization because we are colleagues. We share in that great, challenging, and frustrating work of campus ministry. Developing this sense of collegiality is one of the major purposes of our Association.

This morning I would like for us to consider some curious colleagues in the scripture. Now I know that some folks might think that we, as campus ministers, are curious colleagues, a rather odd group. After all, we are a pretty unusual and diverse bunch. However, you and I look rather bland and traditional compared to Barak, Deborah and Jael. This Old Testament trio from the book of Judges has much to teach us about collegiality.

When Sisera was told that Barak the son of Abinoam had gone up to Mount Tabor, Sisera called out all his chariots, nine hundred chariots of iron, and all the men who were with him, from Harosheth-ha-goiim to the river Kishon. And

Deborah said to Barak, "Up! For this is the day in which the Lord has give Sisera into your hand. Does not the Lord go out before you?" So Barak went down from Mount Tabor with ten thousand men following him. And the Lord routed Sisera and all his chariots and all his army before Barak at the edge of the sword; and Sisera alighted from his chariot and fled away on foot. And Barak pursued the chariots and the army to Harosheth-ha-goim, and all the army of Sisera fell by the edge of the sword; not a man was left.

But Sisera fled away on foot to the tent of Jael, the wife of Heber the Kenite; for there was peace between Jabin the king of Hazor and the house of Heber the Kenite. And Jael came out to meet Sisera, and said to him, "Turn aside, my lord, turn aside to me; have no fear." So he turned aside to her into the tent, and she covered him with a rug. And he said to her, "Pray, give me a little water to drink; for I am thirsty." So she opened a skin of milk and gave him a drink and covered him. And he said to her, "Stand at the door of the tent, and if any man comes and asks you, 'Is any one here?' say, No." But Jael the wife of Heber took a tent peg, and took a hammer in her hand and went softly to him and drove the peg into his temple, till it went down into the ground, as he was lying fast asleep from weariness. So he died. And behold, as Barak pursued Sisera, Jael went out to meet him, and said to him, "Come, and I will show you the man whom you are seeking." So he went in to her tent; and there lay Sisera dead, with the tent peg in his temple.

So on that day God subdued Jabin the king of Canaan before the people of Israel. And the hand of the people of Israel bore harder and harder on Jabin the king of Canaan, until they destroyed Jabin king of Canaan.

Then sang Deborah and Barak the son of Abinoam on that day:

"That the leaders took the lead in Isreal,
that the people offered themselves willingly,
bless the Lord!

"Hear, O kings; give ear, princes;
to the Lord I will sing,

I will make melody to the Lord, the God of Israel."

Judges 4:12-5:3, Revised Standard Version

As you can see, Barak had some unusual women col-

leagues in the struggle against Sisera and the Canaanite oppressors. To say the least, Deborah and Jael were not traditional, submissive feminine types. They were women of leadership and action. Without his female colleagues, Barak would have failed in his mission against the enemies of Israel; in fact, he might never have even begun.

Let us consider Barak's women colleagues—Deborah and Jael—in some more detail. What role did they play in the struggle to free Israel from Canaanite oppression? What do Deborah and Jael have to teach us about being colleagues to one another?

The first thing I think we can learn from this passage is that collegiality involves a call to action. Deborah calls Barak to action. Deborah calls Barak to action. In verse 14 she declares to Barak, "Up! for this is the day in which the Lord has given Sisera into your hand." In other words, "Get into gear, Barak! Why do you think God brought you and your army to the top of this mountain in the first place? Now is the time for action!" I like the way Matthew Henry describes the relationship: "She, as the head, gives the word; he, as the hand, does the work." That is quite a reversal of the chain-of-command approach that some Christians are advocating in our time! Josephus says that when Barak saw Sisera's army from the top of that mountain, his heart failed and he determined to withdraw, but Deborah animated him to make the descent and attack Sisera. Deborah animates Barak. She calls him to life!

That is what a good colleague does for us. He calls us to life! She calls us to our mission! Without colleagues calling us to action, we like Barak will quickly lose our spirit and become fearful when we see the enemy. We need our colleagues to call us to action.

Notice how Deborah's call is not what you would expect. After all, what business does the wife of Lappidoth—who's he?—have ordering a general to get 10,000 troops together and attack the enemy? Even if she is a judge, who does she think she is? Deborah's call to action certainly comes from an unlikely source. Imagine our WMU executive, Carolyn Weatherford, ordering the Pentagon around and perhaps you will catch some of the unexpectedness of the situation!

However, Deborah's call to action gets results. Barak attacks Sisera and wins. In fact, the attack turns into a rout. There are two reasons suggested in our story for Deborah's success here. First, she reminds Barak that God, not Barak, is the real leader of the host of Israel. As she states in verse 14, "Does not the Lord go out before you?" God is the true leader. Our role is to follow Him.

You can imagine Deborah comforting and challenging Barak something like this: "Now, Barak, when you charge down that hill, remember that God is always ahead of you. You're following Him. God's been in this situation long before you arrived, and He'll be here long after you're gone. Now is the time to get in on what God's doing!"

That is really quite similar to what I find myself saying to many of our colleagues, especially the new and nervous ones. "Now, new campus minister, when you charge onto that campus, remember that God is always ahead of you. You're following Him. God's been in this situation long before you arrived, and He'll be here long after you're gone. Now is the time to get in on what God is doing." My friends, please do not let us ever think we are bringing Christ to the campus. Christ is already there on campus, working through the power of the Holy Spirit. We are there to discover and get in on what God is doing.

There is a second reason in our story for the success of Deborah's call to action. Not only does she remind Barak that God is the real leader of the host of Israel, but she also calls Barak to act out his true character. Deborah reveals to Barak his true identity, his mission in life. You see, Barak's name means "lightning" in Hebrew. As with many Old Testament names, the essence of Barak's identity—the prophecy of his mission, if you will—was all wrapped up in his name. When Barak was sweeping down Mount Tabor like lightning, his hour had come. He was fulfilling the purpose for which he was born—the **blitz** (as the Germans say)—the lightning destruction of the foes of Israel. Deborah's call to action had revealed to Barak—the lightning general—his true character.

It has been my experience in campus ministry that, like Deborah, my colleagues—both from within and without our denomination—have called me to action in unexpected ways. Let me share with you two examples.

There is a woman in my state denominational office whom we'll call "Paula". "Paula" came to work with our state missions office on a temporary basis. We desperately needed someone to work with all of the hordes of mission volunteers—especially summer missionaries—who came to help our struggling churches in New England. Unfortunately not only do the churches have a struggle, but sometimes the mission volunteers have an even worse struggle. They suffer loneliness, culture shock, feelings of inadequacy, authority problems, etc. So after several months of commiserating long and loudly with "Paula" about this situation and playing that infamous game of "Ain't It Awful?", she called me to action. "Charlie," she said, "you know we've been talking about this problem for a long time. So why don't we do something about it? Why don't we set up support groups for all these new mission volunteers we have in New England this fall—US-2 workers, Mission Service Corps workers, seminary interns, semester missionaries?" That, my friends, was a colleague's call to action. Unlike Deborah and Barak, we haven't conquered all the enemies of the Kingdom yet, but we are a step closer with two functioning support groups for singles and couples this year.

Not only have my calls to action come from colleagues within our denomination like "Paula", many of my most important and unexpected calls to action have come from colleagues outside of Southern Baptist life. When I was a first-year campus minister at Yale, William Shockley, the brilliant physicist and lousy geneticist, was making waves on the campuses of our nation with his racist theories of inherited intelligence. The racial tension on campus was tremendous. On a visit the year before, Shockley had been unable to speak on campus. Students had shouted him down. This year the administration was determined—by force if necessary—that free speech would be practiced on campus. It seemed likely that violence would occur. I was caught in a quandary. While opposed to Shockley's theories and sympathetic to the students—especially the black Baptist students—who were attacking him, I could not condone a violent disruption of Shockley's right to free speech. So I was stuck. It looked like there was nothing I could do; like Barak, I just sat on top of that mountain trembling. Then the call to action came. A Roman Catholic nun, whom we will call "Sister Rachel", suggested, "Why not have the Christian students who are opposed to Shockley plan

an ecumenical worship service stressing the equality of all people in God's sight as an alternative to attending and trying to disrupt his presentation?" Her suggestion was a call to action—constructive, effective action. Shockley spoke that year without major disruption, and I participated in one of the most memorable worship services of my career. "Sister Rachel," like Deborah, was an unexpected colleague who called me to action.

Besides a call to action, our passage shows that collegiality also involves a confrontation of the enemy. Let us look for a moment at the enemy—Sisera. He was a proud general of Jabin, the oppressive Canaanite king. Sisera was the kind of general who trusted in his weapons, his armaments. In that sense, he was probably not unlike many of our military leaders today. Since he had the advantage in the military hardware, he thought he had the upper hand and would surely win the victory. Sisera's military hardware, as we learn in verse 13, was his nine hundred chariots of iron. These iron chariots, which often had sharp scythes attached to the wheels, were devastating against an army of footsoldiers like Barak's Israelites. Israel had no iron chariots. Barak and his men had only their hand-held weapons and their faith in God. It was like a preview of David and Goliath!

Now, if you remember, many of those psalms which are attributed to David describe the Lord as a God of thunder, a God of the storms. Perhaps this story is one of the reasons why Israel used this image, this picture of God. As best we can tell, what happened to Sisera was something like this: an unexpected, unseasonal thunderstorm flooded the valley of the Kishon River, causing all of Sisera's chariots either to be swept away or stuck in the mud. It was almost like a rerun of the defeat of Pharaoh when Israel crossed the Red Sea! As the next chapter, Chapter 5, poetically describes the event in verse 26, "The torrent Kishon swept them away, the onrushing torrent, the torrent Kishon. March on, my soul, with might!"

So, Sisera's military hardware—those chariots of iron in which he had placed his trust—was the source of his defeat. There is a sermon here for our time about the danger and the ultimate futility of trusting in military might for security, but I won't preach it this morning. It will suffice to remind you of Psalm 20:7: "Some boast of chariots, and some of horses;

but we boast of the name of the Lord our God.” Now look at Sisera. See him there with his chariots stuck in the mud and so many of his men swept away by the torrential river. What does the great general do? He flees on **foot**—oh irony! He runs away to save his own skin, deserting his own army. When the chips are down, the enemy reveals his true and selfish colors. He flees to save his own life and then, irony or ironies, is killed with an iron tent peg when he sleeps. As Matthew Henry declares, “he that thought to destroy Israel with his many iron chariots is himself destroyed with one iron nail.”

So, that is Sisera, the enemy. Now, let us look at Jael. Jael is certainly a curious and unusual person for me to hold up to you as a colleague. After all, she is a murderess. She murders Sisera in cold blood. I think we would all generally agree that treacherous murderers do not make for good colleagues in the ministry. Nevertheless, I do think Jael can teach us a few things about confrontation of the enemy, if we take the time to try to understand her. First of all, Jael is not an Israelite; she is a Kenite sympathizer of Israel. As verse 17 informs us, the Kenites and Israel’s enemies, the Canaanites, were supposedly at peace. Jael’s husband, Heber the Kenite, and Sisera’s king, Jabin of Hazor, were officially at peace. By the way, in case you were wondering whether this “peace” was an equitable one, just remember who had the 900 iron chariots! In short, Jael represents an entrapped and cruelly oppressed people. She was hoping that Israel and Israel’s God would deliver her powerless people. Then suddenly an unprecedented opportunity comes into her hands. Sisera, the enemy himself, comes knocking at her tent door. He is completely exhausted, soaked with sweat after his flight on foot, and famished. Jael invites him in, offering nomadic hospitality. She covers him with a rug which was more like a fly net to keep all the flies and mosquitoes away from his sweat-soaked, mud-caked body. He asks for a little water, and she gives him a skin of milk or curds—something a lot like our yogurt. Then comes a critical moment; in verse 20 Sisera asks Jael to lie for him. “And he said to her, ‘Stand at the door of the tent, and if any man comes and asks you, ‘Is anyone here?’ say, No.’ ” Notice that Jael does not agree to this request. This was the “last straw” for Jael. In fact, some interpreters believe it is only at this moment that she finally decides to murder Sisera.

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In any case, Sisera soon collapses into an exhausted sleep, probably aided by the warm milk or yogurt. Jael picks up an iron tent peg and nails him into the ground. You can just feel her vengeful hatred as she drives that peg all the way into the ground. Jael's murder of Sisera represents the violent reaction of a cruelly oppressed person. There is one other great irony here. In the ancient Near East, it was considered "woman's work" to pitch the tents. So Jael easily found her murder weapons among her household tools—sort of like our kitchen butcher knife murders today—and Jael was very experienced in the use of that hammer and tent peg! What was commonly viewed as "woman's work" in that day proved to be the way for Israel's final victory over its great enemy.

Jael was an oppressed, entrapped woman who confronted the enemy. She is a curious but murderously effective colleague of Barak. Perhaps she can teach us to look for some of our own colleagues among the oppressed. After all, the scriptures frequently remind us that God is on the side of the oppressed, even if He does not always approve of their methods. Jael also teaches me that confrontation of the enemy is part of the test of collegiality. A good colleague confronts the enemy with you when confrontation is necessary.

One of the most important political lessons I have learned as a campus minister concerns the symbolic and practical importance of space on campus. In academic communities we call this issue "turf," and I'm not just talking about the athletic fields! The space you have on campus symbolizes your place in the "pecking order". At Yale, with rare exceptions, the campus ministers were frequently in the basements! What made matters worse was the persistent threat that we would soon even be kicked out of the basements. In fact one year the Hillel office—complete with its rabbi and kosher kitchen—was consigned to a remote building in an unsafe neighborhood, all due to a post office expansion. The rabbi called the experience the second Babylonian exile and, following lengthy negotiation, another basement space was found. A couple of years passed and—surprise, surprise!—the rabbi received a letter from the Provost conveying the news that he should expect to be moved again. Meanwhile, the Episcopal chaplaincy, which also occupied basement space deemed unsuitable for student habitation but okay for chaplains, was informed that moving day would soon arrive. The time had come for decisive collegial

action. The enemy—in the person of certain highly placed and hostile administrators—needed to be tactfully confronted.

The Jewish rabbi wrote a public letter to the Provost, who happened to be ethnically but not religiously Jewish. In this letter he requested more and better office space for Hillel rather than a beginning of the third Babylonian exile. Meanwhile several members of the Corporation—Yale’s board of trustees or governors—were graciously informed that the University was planning to kick the chaplains off campus again. It turned out that several of these Corporation members were Episcopal priests—one was even a bishop—and several were active, religious Jews—one was even on the Hillel Board. Can you guess what happened? Suddenly, the University dropped all plans to move the chaplains—“wonder of wonders, miracle of miracles”. Several weeks later the President commented to the university chaplain that we really “called out the troops” on that issue. The chaplain smiled and graciously replied that we hadn’t even begun to contact the alumni yet! We had won!

Did we use political power and our religious clout to confront a common enemy? Yes! We won an important victory because we pulled together as colleagues—Israelites and Kenites, Barak and Jael—even though we certainly did not agree on many other issues. My friends, as Southern Baptist campus ministers, we must make common cause with our collegial allies as we struggle against the “divide and conquer” strategy of some in power who seek to expunge faith from the academy. To be effective in this struggle, we must also discover our allies, God’s allies, who are also in power. Sometimes, like Jael with her hammer and tent pegs, our help may be found in unexpected places with curious colleagues.

Now there is one final lesson that our curious colleagues teach me in our scripture passage this morning. Not only does collegiality involve a call to action and not only does collegiality involve a confrontation of the enemy, but collegiality also involves celebration before God. Good colleagues lead us to celebrate our victories before God. Christian colleagues encourage one another to respond to God’s grace with gratitude. In verses 1-3 of Chapter 5, Deborah leads Barak in celebration. “Then sang Deborah and Barak . . . that day: ‘That the leaders took the lead in Israel, that the people offered themselves willingly, bless the Lord! Hear, O kings; give ear,

O princes; to the Lord I will sing, I will make melody to the Lord, the God of Israel.' ” As you know, this song of celebration is called the Song of Deborah. It is one of the oldest and most important pieces of poetry in the entire Bible. Deborah begins her celebration with a ‘hallelujah’—“bless the Lord.” The song is in praise of God, not in praise of Barak. It celebrates God’s covenant with His people, not just Barak’s victory. The song’s major purpose is to give God the glory: “To God be the glory, great things He hath done” would be a rough Baptist translation!

Verse 2 gives two basic reasons for Deborah’s rejoicing. Deborah celebrates not just because Israel won the battle but because “the leaders took the lead in Israel” and “the people offered themselves willingly”. “The leaders took the lead in Israel.” They did not pass the buck. They did not say, “Oh, the opposition is too strong for us.” The leaders took the lead and Deborah celebrated. My friends, if we could only learn this lesson not only on our campuses, but also in the life and political turmoil of our denomination, then we would have cause to celebrate. There’s been too much buck-passing and crying “wolf” and not enough leadership—wise, compassionate political leadership—in the life of our denomination in recent years. We desperately need leaders who will be Christian statesmen and women and not just program-promoting administrators or pulpit-pounding orators. May God help us!

Besides the leaders taking the lead in Israel, the other reason for Deborah’s celebration is “that the people offered themselves willingly.” Offering yourself willingly to God is the secret of true biblical community. As Christians, we might think of it like this. Imagine a large wagonwheel with the hub in the center and the spokes branching out to the rim. If Christ is the hub at the center of the community and you and I are the spokes, then the closer we are to Christ, the closer we are to one another. That is the secret of true Christian community—a focus on Christ not on one another. In my view that is the kind of community we are sorely lacking at this point in our history as Southern Baptists. If we are going to be part of Christ’s church, we need to start focusing on Christ by willingly offering ourselves to God. Good colleagues, like Deborah, invite us and lead us to celebrate our faith with them.

When I was in seminary, I spent a long, hot summer struggling through the rigors of CPE (Clinical Pastoral Education).

In our CPE group, which worked together as chaplains for a major medical center, there were two Dutch Catholic students. One of the Dutch students, whom we will call "Gerhard", was having a difficult time. He was a rather shy, quiet fellow. He was unsure of his vocational direction. He was far away from home and family and friends. In short, it was a very tough summer. When you added to all to all of this the stress and demands of dealing with seriously ill and dying patients and a high-pressure clinical training program, the burden sometimes became almost too great. However, one day we received an unexpected and unusual invitation from "Gerhard". In the middle of that unbearable summer, Gerhard invited us all to a party at his apartment. It was his birthday party! Since it is apparently customary in Holland for the birthday person to throw his or her own party, Gerhard invited us—his surrogate family, his curious colleagues—to celebrate with him. He not only provided the refreshments, but the presents as well! What a celebration it was! How wonderful to be invited as a colleague and member of the family of God to the party!

My friends, my colleagues, the grace of God comes to us like an invitation to celebrate a birthday party, refreshments and presents provided by the host himself. The host is our Lord Jesus Christ. The men and women of faith who have gone before us—like Deborah and Barak—summon us to celebrate with them. They are our "curious colleagues". They have so much to teach us.

Collegiality involves a call to action.

Collegiality involves confrontation of the enemy.

Collegiality involves celebration before God.

As we gather here today, it is my prayer that God will enable us to become genuine colleagues with one another and partners in the ministry of our Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ. Amen.