

Look ... it's (yet) another celebrity running for public office. "I like his/her movies, so I'm going to vote for him/her!" Of course, we don't know whether the person would be a good or bad public servant, but hopefully the voter could muster up some sort of objective analysis of qualifications other than an unrelated-to-public-service accomplishment like starring in movies or playing in a band.

And yet, a closer look is always wise. After all, one might not expect Brian May of the band Queen, or the punk rocker Dexter Holland, to be intellectual giants at first glance, yet they have Ph.Ds in astrophysics and molecular biology. Now ... what was that saying about judging a book by its cover? To find out what someone or something is like, we have to go below just the surface.

We know that people can put on a good front—just ask anyone who's been ripped off by telephone scammers or a dishonest salesman. Words are cheap; actions speak a lot more loudly. Even scripture warns: When you gain a friend, gain him through testing, and do not trust him hastily. For there is a friend who is such at his own convenience, but will not stand by you in your day of trouble." (Sirach 6:7-8) So we look for friends, examples and mentors who have not just provided words, but have backed up words with deeds and thus gained our trust, especially if they've endured hardship in maintaining their principles.

Jesus Himself affirms the same trait in the true disciple: "Whoever does not bear his own cross and come after me, cannot be my disciple..." (Luke 14:27, 33) and "Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of my Father..." (Matthew 7:21)

I was thinking about this recently when reading how the newly-converted Christian Barnabas accepted the then-notorious Paul into his friendship. Paul had up to then been the most ardent persecutor of Jewish converts to Christianity, and the Jerusalem converts at first didn't want to have anything to do with Paul after his conversion: "...they were all afraid of him, for they did not believe that he was a disciple." And yet Barnabas saw Paul's actions and through them discerned Paul's sincerity: "But Barnabas took him, and brought him to the apostles, and declared to them...how at Damascus he had preached boldly in the name of Jesus..." (Acts 9:26-27)

Barnabas saw in Paul a growing and sincere allegiance/dedication to truth, despite opposition that Paul would then—and later—encounter, and thus Barnabas and Paul would be long-time co-workers for truth and for their shared principles—principles based in the teaching of—and faith in—Jesus. This doesn't mean that they agreed or got along swimmingly all the time; their argument of Acts 15 attests to that. But their mutual dedication to principle and to Jesus remained undiminished and undeterred.

Each searcher of truth inevitably examines himself ("An unexamined life is not worth living", said Socrates) and his own strength and motivations: "How dedicated am I to what I believe is truly right and good? Will I have courage to endure loss of respect and prestige, wealth and opportunity, and even friends and family for what I truly believe?"

We've all likely experienced the stark difference of declaring loyalty to principle when unchallenged compared to actually defending our beliefs when challenge comes. Sometimes defending our principles actually does result in others' rejection. Loss of good relations with friends and family are most hurtful; are we willing to bear even that for truth? But—if not—are we ready to endure wounded conscience, the shame of timidity and flight in the face of challenge?

A quote has rung in my own mind since the first time I saw the movie "The Kingdom of Heaven": "...your soul is in your keeping alone...When you stand before God, you cannot say 'But I was told by others to do thus' or that virtue was not convenient at the time. This will not suffice." And neither will it suffice even to soothe conscience, paraphrasing Shakespeare once again: "A coward dies a thousand deaths; the brave only once."

In another vein, many declare: "I'm loyal to family/party/organization...no matter what!" But to what end? Would we be loyal to something that does not deserve loyalty? And if we are loyal to that which is undeserving, what do we really love or believe is true? Loyalty to the ideal that the group should hold matters so much more. If a family becomes corrupt, for example, true loyalty is not in joining them in corruption out of misguided "loyalty," but rather working to get the family back to virtue and to that which is truly admirable.

Another memorable quote from that movie (it had a lot of good lines!) was the motto: "What man IS a man who does not make the world better?" Is this not the task—the mission—of anyone who seeks virtue and the good? Conversely, how very small is the one who works only for himself and for his own gain, forgetting that we keep no material thing of it for long. The only true gain lay in doing good in our daily lives. We plant seeds with our small works of charity, hoping and praying that they will bear fruit in seedlings which will "pay it forward." After all, look what a bent-over little nun (Mother Theresa), a penniless preacher (St. Francis), a rag-tag gaggle of backwater bumpkins (the apostles), and a common workman (Jesus) accomplished, just to name a few of many. Thus we recall—and find hope—in Barnabas' comrade's counsel: "Whatever your task, work heartily, as serving the Lord and not men, knowing that from the Lord you will receive the inheritance as your reward..." (Colossians 3:23).