

NURSE WITHOUT BORDERS

SHERARD EDINGTON

1 Corinthians 9:16-23

When I mention the American Red Cross, what comes to mind? Blood? Absolutely. The American Red Cross draws over one-third of the United States' donated blood. First Presbyterian Church has hosted two Red Cross blood drives in the past year. But blood is only a part of a wide range of health-related services provided by the Red Cross. The Red Cross also offers training services. How many of you have been Red Cross certified in first aid, CPR, lifesaving, babysitting, and more? The Red Cross also runs comprehensive disaster response services bringing aid in the wake of hurricanes, tornadoes, floods, earthquakes, explosions, home and apartment fires, and more. The Red Cross also provides a variety of services to the members of the armed forces and their families. During times of war, the Red Cross has played a pivotal role in caring for members of the military.

The American Red Cross was organized in 1881 by a woman named Clara Barton.¹ If you were to assume that Barton was a wealthy do-gooder founding a charitable organization to bolster her reputation in society, you could not be more wrong. Clara Barton was an exceptionally brave and compassionate woman whose life was shaped by people and circumstance that compelled her to dedicate herself to assisting people in need. This year, we celebrate the 200th anniversary of the birth of Clara Barton.

Clara Barton was born on Christmas Day in 1821. She was born in North Oxford, Massachusetts, the youngest of five children.² When Barton was ten years old, her brother David fell from a roof during a barn raising and suffered a severe head injury. Clara assigned herself the task of nursing her brother and did so for close to two years well after the doctors had given up on him. He made a full recovery. Caring for the injured would become the theme of Clara's life.

As a child, Barton was timid and painfully shy. To fight this shyness, her parents encouraged her to become a schoolteacher. She earned her teaching certificate at age 17 and for the next twelve years led a successful career as an educator. In the beginning, she recalls that she was so nervous teaching in front of a class that she would start each day reading from the Bible until she calmed down. She became highly regarded in her field and eventually was contracted to organize a new school in Bordentown, New Jersey. This would be the first public school in the entire state. The school founding was successful. However, when the town hired a man to replace her as principal and paid him twice the salary, she quit. She later

¹ <https://timesmachine.nytimes.com/timesmachine/1961/02/26/118902618.html?pageNumber=270>

² Her full name was Clarissa Harlow Barton.

said about this incident, “I may sometimes be willing to teach for nothing, but if paid at all, I shall never do a man’s work for less than a man’s pay.”

In 1855, Barton moved to Washington, D.C., and embarked upon a second career as a clerk in the U.S. Patent Office. This position was a first for a woman and she received a salary equal to the men. However, at this job she was subjected to abuse and slander from the men in the office. Because of political opposition to women working in government, her job was downgraded. In 1856, under the administration of President James Buchanan, Barton's job was phased out, and so she returned to Massachusetts. When Abraham Lincoln was elected president, she was finally able to return to her job at the Patent Office.

On April 19, 1861, while Barton was back in Washington, the first bloodshed of the Civil War took place at an event known as the Baltimore Riots. Fort Sumter had fallen a week earlier, and federal troops were called to Washington, D.C., to protect the capital. Soldiers from Massachusetts responded and were traveling by train from Boston to Washington. At Baltimore, they needed to transfer between train stations, and while doing so were ambushed by a mob of Southern sympathizers and anti-war protesters. The soldiers made it to the train station and then to Washington but four of their number had been killed in the attack and several dozen wounded. They were forced to abandon much of their gear in Baltimore and they arrived in Washington with little more than the clothes they were wearing.

In D.C., the wounded were taken to the capitol building to a makeshift hospital in the not-yet-completed Senate chamber. When Clara Barton learned of this, she left work at the Patent Office so that she could bring food and supplies to the men—many of whom had been her students back in Massachusetts. She went to work nursing the wounded among them. The next day, Barton canvased her neighborhood collecting food, blankets, clothes, and other needed items for the soldiers.

As the Civil War progressed, Barton embarked upon a mission of caring for the wounded. The military was reluctant allow a woman to get involved, but, after constant badgering of political and military officials, Barton was issued the passes needed to gain access to the front lines. She was not going to let anyone tell her that she could not go where she was needed.

She would travel to battle sites with wagonloads of supplies and medical gear that had been donated or that she had purchased with her own money. Barton developed a nationwide network of donors and volunteers. During battles, she would often arrive ahead of the military supply trains and would provide the surgeons with desperately needed bandages and supplies. Barton would assist with surgeries and care for the wounded. She became known as the “angel of the

battlefield.”³ At Antietam, while offering water to a wounded soldier, she felt her sleeve quiver. She looked down and noticed a hole in her sleeve. The hole had been made by a bullet which passed through her sleeve and killed the man she was helping.

In a letter to her father, Barton wrote, “I may be compelled to face danger, but never fear it, and while our soldiers can stand and fight, I can stand and feed and nurse them.”⁴

There are innumerable stories of this brave woman’s accomplishments during the Civil War. She collected and delivered supplies, nursed the wounded, rallied volunteers, performed minor surgeries, cared for the soldiers and comforted the dying. In 1864, despite no formal medical training, she was named head nurse for one of General Benjamin Butler's units in the Army of the James. As Butler put it, she was the “lady in charge.” She never allowed the borders of society’s expectations to keep her from going where she needed to be.

Towards the end of the war, sanctioned by President Abraham Lincoln, Barton assumed the task of helping locate the bodies of missing soldiers and communicating with their families. She headed up the Missing Soldiers Office and labored for four years without pay. Her work led her to the infamous Andersonville prison in Georgia. She eventually would compile a master list of the war’s missing soldiers, most who died in POW camps—13,000 at Andersonville alone. Her work provided closure to countless families.⁵

In 1869, Barton traveled to Europe on doctor's orders to get needed rest. It was there that she learned of the work of the newly created International Committee of the Red Cross—a humanitarian organization committed to protecting the life and dignity of those involved in conflict regardless of which side they fought for. Barton became determined to create an American arm of this organization. The U.S., however, was reluctant to participate. President Rutherford Hayes worried that the treaty would be seen as a "possible entangling alliance" with European nations.⁶ It took ten years of Barton writing, lecturing, and preaching to change American opinion.

In 1881, the United States ratified the Treaty of Geneva. Barton immediately formed the American Association of the Red Cross. Then, for the next 24 years she served as president of this organization. As president, she traveled to disaster areas across the U.S. and around the world. She went to Russia to deliver food to the victims of famine. She went to Cuba during the Spanish-American war and at age 76 served once again as a battlefield nurse. At the request of President McKinley,

³ <https://www.clarabartonmuseum.org/firstaid/>

⁴ <https://www.clarabartonmuseum.org/firstaid/>

⁵ <https://www.clarabartonmuseum.org/opening-missing-soldiers-office/>

⁶ <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/health/clara-barton-founding-american-red-cross>

she set up several Red Cross orphanages in Cuba for children left homeless by that war.

Clara Barton retired from the Red Cross in 1904 and died in 1912 at the age of 91. She was, without a doubt, an American hero. She led a life wholly devoted to serving others.

Reading the passage from 1 Corinthians—our scripture for today—Paul’s description of himself reminds me of the life of Clara Barton. Paul explains in this passage that he preaches the gospel because it is an *obligation* that has been laid on him. *Woe to me*, he says, *if I do not proclaim the gospel*. He can't help but do it. It is his calling; it is his mission.

In another letter, Paul offers a brief autobiographical sketch. He was born a Jew, was circumcised, was a member of the tribe of Benjamin, was righteous, was a Pharisee, and a zealot persecuting the Christian church. Despite all this, he was called by Christ to follow him and preach the good news. The greatest value in his life, he discovered, is to know Jesus Christ.⁷

Paul tells us that what sets him apart is the fact that God had called him—laid on his shoulders that holy *obligation* to preach. Because of this obligation, Paul traveled the world relentlessly sharing the gospel of Christ, establishing new worshipping communities, and collecting donations for the church in Jerusalem. During his missions, he was imprisoned, shipwrecked, run out of town, and more. He likely died in service to his Lord. We view Paul as one of the greats of the Christian church not just because of his accomplishments (which were many), but because his life wholly reflected his calling to Christ. His life mirrored his mission.

Like Paul, Clara Barton traveled the world with her message of healing the wounded and bringing dignity to the distressed. She set up orphanages, hospitals, and schools. She taught first aid⁸ so that people might learn how to save lives. She inspired people to volunteer and to give generously. About helping people, she wrote, “You must never so much think as whether you like it or not, whether it is bearable or not; you must never think of anything except the need, and how to meet it.”

Clara Barton’s life reflected her calling to serve. She nursed her brother, she nursed the soldiers, she nursed a nation. That was the trajectory of her life. About this, she wrote, “The door that nobody else will go in at, seems always to swing open widely for me.” When a door opened, a door to helping people, no matter where it led, she walked through.

⁷ Philippians 3

⁸ <https://www.clarabartonmuseum.org/firstaid/>

My question for you today is this: What doors have been opened to you? In what way is God calling you to serve? How are you responding?

When we choose to follow Christ, we can model our lives after the apostle Paul as well as be inspired by someone like Clara Barton. Ultimately, however, it is imperative that when a door is opened for us that we will choose to walk through because there we will find Christ.