

Streetsville United Church

Sunday, January 13, 2019

Rev. John Tapscott

“THE STRENGTHENING WORD”

Luke 7:22

We sometimes get caught up in the question about who is greatest in any field of endeavour. “Who was the greatest Canadian?” “Who was the greatest President or Prime Minister?” “Who was the greatest hockey player or baseball player of all time?” “What was the greatest rock band?” And all this can lead to an interesting, if endless, discussion. Now there is no question that Jesus Christ was the greatest person to ever live on this earth. Even those who don’t believe in him as the Christ, the Son of the living God, agree that Jesus of Nazareth has been, by far, the most influential and talked-about figure in human history. But we do believe that Jesus was the incarnate Son of God, the Saviour of the world, God’s promised One, even if our faith sometimes becomes a bit shaky. But here is good news. When our faith wavers, God’s word comes to strengthen our faith again.

Now Jesus told us who he thought was the greatest person of all, at least until the time of his coming. Jesus said of John the Baptist, “I tell you, among those born of women, there is no one greater than John; yet the one who is least in the kingdom of God is greater than he.” It’s high praise indeed. Jesus considered John to be as great or even greater than Abraham, greater than Moses, greater than David, greater than Solomon, greater than Isaiah or Jeremiah or Elijah. The greatest person until the dawning of God’s new age in Jesus Christ was John the Baptist.

Now we know that John was the immediate forerunner of Jesus. His courageous and prophetic preaching prepared the way for the One who was even greater than he. John said, “I baptize you with water, but one who is more powerful than I is coming, whose sandals I am not worthy to untie. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire.” And though Luke doesn’t record it directly, we know from Matthew and Mark that John reluctantly baptized Jesus because he didn’t think Jesus needed it. John’s Gospel tells us that John pointed to Jesus and said, “Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.” John also said of Jesus, “I myself have seen and testify that this is the Son of God.” John was strong in faith and certain in his conviction.

But once even this great man’s faith became shaky. John’s doubts about Jesus were expressed in Luke 7:20. John’s disciples came to Jesus and said to him, “John the Baptist sent us to ask, ‘Are you the one who is to come, or should we expect someone else?’”

Now we shouldn’t be surprised that doubts arose in John’s mind. The Herod who was ruling at the time was son of the Herod who ruled when Jesus was born. And Herod’s son was also an immoral and vicious man. He didn’t like it when John publically criticized him. So Herod “added

to his evil deeds by shutting John up in prison.” And there in prison, John’s faith started to waver. Was Jesus really the promised Messiah or should they be looking for someone else?

But whether we are in prison or not, doubts come to all of us. Yes, there are times when we are very certain about our faith, times when we say, “I am sure.” But other times our faith wavers and we wonder, “Is the Christian Gospel really true? Is Jesus really who we proclaim and believe him to be? Or should be looking for someone else and following another way?”

Don’t be surprised when this happens. For there is a believing, faith-filled part of us and there is a doubting, questioning part of us. Sometimes one is stronger than the other. Now for Christians, most of the time, our faith is stronger than our doubts, thankfully. But do you know even people who claim to be unbelievers sometimes wonder if it’s true. Even unbelievers sometimes veer towards faith. The preacher George Buttrick put it like this: “Everybody doubts, skeptic and believer, pulpit and pew; and everybody believes. We should rightly speak not of a world divided between skeptics and believers, but of the ‘faith-doubt’ tension in every person.” And I’m reminded of the man who came to Jesus and said, “I belief, help my unbelief.”

Let’s look closely at the reasons for John’s doubt. For in them we may recognize why our own faith sometimes wavers.

First, John’s conviction about Jesus wavered because of unfulfilled expectations. John had proclaimed that the coming one would have a winnowing fork in his hand, clearing his threshing floor, gathering the wheat into his granary and burning the chaff with unquenchable fire. Why wasn’t Jesus doing this? Why wasn’t he leading an army to overthrow Herod and Pilate and the Romans? Why wasn’t he coming to release John from prison? John looked for a certain kind of Messiah and it wasn’t happening. His expectations were not being fulfilled.

It can happen to us. Sometimes doubts come because God isn’t doing what we think he should do. Situations go on and on and on without any change. Our prayers seemingly go unanswered. Why doesn’t God act? Why doesn’t God put away evil and suffering and bring righteousness and justice now? Why is God allowing bad things to happen to good people? Our expectations of how God should be and should act are unfulfilled. And our faith may become shaky.

Another reason John’s faith wavered was because of his isolation. Now he couldn’t help it, but John wasn’t preaching or baptizing any longer. This gave him time to brood, and the more he brooded the more his confidence wavered. John’s faith grew shaky because he was alone.

It can be the same for us. Doubts come when we are isolated from other believers. So often when doubts arise in someone, their first instinct is to leave the church and drop their involvement in any form of Christian ministry and activity. And when you deliberately cut yourself off from fellow believers and the church’s worship, your doubts can be magnified.

John’s doubt also arose from his suffering. John was in a dark dungeon prison. So he was suffering physically and mentally, a victim of very unjust circumstances. Personal suffering and misfortune can certainly undercut our faith. And it’s not just personal suffering. The giant agony and suffering of the world may fill us with doubts about the goodness and power of God.

So there are some reasons why John's faith wavered. They are reasons why our faith may waver, as well. Then add to that the skepticism of the world which surrounds us, along with the people who are always raising doubts about Christian faith, and are often given considerable publicity. None of it is helpful for our faith.

But there is good news. Look back to the story. John's messengers came to Jesus with the question, "Are you the one who is to come, or should we expect someone else?" Jesus sent them back with this answer. "Go back and report to John what you have heard and seen. The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and good news is proclaimed to the poor." Jesus was telling what John what he was doing; works that John couldn't see. And Jesus was quoting Scripture. His answer came from Isaiah 35 and Isaiah 61; prophecies of the work the Messiah would do. No, Jesus was not doing the works John expected, but he was doing works which Scripture said that the Messiah would do. So when John's faith wavered Jesus sent God's word to strengthen John's faith again.

Again, it is true for us. When our faith wavers God's word comes to strengthen our faith again. God's word is powerful. God's word puts our faith on solid ground once more. God's word strengthens the believing part of us. Oh, the doubting part may still be there, but the believing part will be stronger so that we can say about Jesus, "You are indeed the promised One and there is no need to look for another."

Now God's strengthening word may well come as you read Scripture or through the witness of a friend or through someone who answers your questions. But most often God's strengthening word comes to us right here, in worship. That, by the way, is why the church and its fellowship is where you need to be when your faith becomes shaky. This is a community of believers but doubters and skeptics are welcome here. When your faith grows cold, you need to be in the very place where God's word is proclaimed and faith is practiced. For here our faith can grow warm and come alive again.

One Sunday morning a minister noticed a middle-aged man sneak into one of the back pews. The sermon that day was on the parable of the Prodigal Son and the minister confessed it was quite ordinary. Later, the man contacted the minister and told him his life's story including the fact that he had become very successful in his profession. But his wife had died suddenly, leaving him alone, wretched and miserable, filled with doubts and despair. But God's word had come to him that day. God as a concerned and caring Heavenly Father had become very real to him. The experience literally saved him, he said, from going off the deep end and enabled him to make a new life. The minister knew that because they kept in touch for years afterward. Yes, God's word is powerful indeed. It rescues us, saves us. When our faith wavers, God's word comes to strengthen our faith again.

God's word gives us a great deal for the strengthening of our faith. In fact, we are given what Jesus gave to John and much more. God's word not only tells of the works of Jesus, but tells us of his atoning death on the cross for our sins, his glorious resurrection victory, his ascension to heaven, his promise to come again as Lord and Judge, to bring God's Kingdom in all its fullness, to put away suffering and evil at last and to make all things new. God's word tells us of this Jesus

who is our hope for this life and the life to come. God's word declares that in the death and resurrection of Christ the power of sin and evil and death has been decisively defeated; that God is at work for good in all things for those who love him, that the living Christ with us always to the end of the age, and that a place has been prepared in the Father's house for all who believe. God's word declares, "Jesus is God's Son, the beloved, with whom God is well pleased." And Jesus says, "Blessed is anyone who does not stumble on account of me." In other words, Jesus says, "Blessed are you when your faith in me is stronger than your doubts about me." And when our faith wavers God's word comes to strengthen our faith again. God's word makes our faith stronger than our doubts. God's word helps us in our unbelief and keeps us on the believing side.

We don't know for sure whether John's doubts were overcome and his faith in Jesus as the Christ was strengthened. But I think it must have happened. For God's word is powerful indeed. It accomplishes that for which it is sent. And so John entered the Kingdom of God through faith in the Saviour. And so do we.

Now the first person we will see in heaven is Jesus. But then we will see and meet all the saints who have gone before us including our dear loved ones who died in Christ. And I believe that in the long line of saints we will see this great man, too. I wouldn't be a bit surprised if Jesus will have his hand on John's shoulder, saying "My dear cousin and beloved friend, one of the greatest of all my witnesses."