

Streetsville United Church

Sunday, September 8, 2019

Rev. John Tapscott

“ALL THE GOOD WE MAY DO FOR CHRIST”

Philemon 1:6

Every week on the front of the bulletin we print this very brief statement. You might call it a vision statement for the church. It says, “Anchored in God’s Word...Moving into God’s Future.” As we embark on this upcoming year of transition, these are two phrases that we should keep in mind. It is most important to stay anchored in God’s word as you make important decisions around the church’s future leadership. It’s also important to remember that the congregation is moving toward the future, which will inevitably mean some changes. It is a future that God has planned and prepared, a future to be embraced with enthusiasm. Yes, transitions lie ahead, but staying anchored in God’s truth and looking ahead with hope and prayer is a good strategy.

My text today comes from the book of Philemon chapter 1 (actually there is only 1 chapter) and verse 6. Paul writes, “I pray that the sharing of your faith may become effective when you perceive all the good that we may do for Christ.” Isn’t that a great phrase – “all the good that we may do for Christ.” And Paul says that all the good we do stems from sharing our faith. Today let us think about all the good that we are doing for Christ as we share our faith.

But first, let’s consider this short letter which Paul wrote to Philemon from a prison in Rome.

Philemon was a Gentile and member of the church at Colossae, converted to Christ on one of Paul’s visits there. Paul called him a dear friend and co-worker. Philemon was quite involved in the life of the church in that city. And in common with many people at the time Philemon owned a slave. His name was Onesimus. It seems that Onesimus had stolen some money from Philemon and took off for Rome. In that big city he began to feel lonely and scared and regretful. A runaway slave faced harsh penalties when caught. But somehow he sought out Paul in prison. Perhaps he remembered Paul’s message of grace which he preached in Colossae. Or perhaps he thought of Paul as someone whom he could trust.

In any case, Onesimus found Paul and Paul became like a father to him. In fact, he converted Onesimus to Christ. Paul called Onesimus a beloved child. And there in prison Onesimus proved very useful to him. But Paul knew that that Onesimus must return to Philemon. And so Paul sent him back with this letter. Paul asked Philemon to take Onesimus back no longer as a slave, but as a beloved brother in Christ. Paul even offered to pay what Onesimus owed. So Paul entreated Philemon to receive Onesimus. Paul reminded Philemon that he owed his very salvation to Paul. So Paul was confident that Philemon would receive Onesimus back, not just as a slave, but as a fellow Christian. Paul may have been hoping that Philemon would receive Onesimus back, then

send him to Paul again. Perhaps that happened because early church fathers referred to one Onesimus who years later was bishop of the church in Ephesus. Could it have been the same Onesimus? Quite possibly. From slave to bishop.

Now some people criticize the Bible because it doesn't condemn slavery as harshly as we might like. Slavery was widespread in the Roman Empire, part of the very cultural fabric. Paul didn't write, nor did any other Bible writer, "Free the slaves and free them now!" But here we see Paul laying the groundwork for the eventual abolition of slavery. Paul asked Philemon to accept Onesimus back not as a slave but as a beloved brother. That echoes Paul's statement in Galatians that "there is no longer slave nor free, for all are one in Christ Jesus." Christians eventually worked out the social implications of Paul's statement. So if someone tells you, "Don't believe the Bible because it doesn't condemn slavery," you can say that the basis for abolition is right here. Maybe that's why in God's providence this little letter is in the Bible.

But now let me go back to the text. "I pray that the sharing of your faith may become effective when you perceive all the good that we may do for Christ." Paul is speaking to Philemon about Philemon's own ministry in the church. He is saying to him, "Think of all the good you are doing for Christ as you share your faith."

The church of Jesus Christ, then and now, is a faith sharing body. The sharing of the Bible story and the Christian faith is one of our prime functions. Now there are many ways we share Christian faith – through preaching, through Sunday School, through study groups on a Biblical theme, through personal testimony and witness, through music, through praying for one another and encouraging one another. Such sharing becomes even more effective when we perceive the good it does. So let us think of the good that we do for Christ as we share faith.

First, in sharing the story of faith we are helping to create and strengthen faith.

The faith that is being created and strengthened is in you and in me. And we are doing it for Christ because he wants us to grow as faithful, believing disciples. Jesus said, "Believe in God, believe also in me." Certainly nothing pleases Christ more than when we believe and keep believing. For Christ lived and died and rose again to save us from the power of sin and evil and death. That was the greatest good he accomplished for us. And His work becomes effective in us when we believe in him, when you and I trust in Him as Saviour. As John writes about his Gospel, "These things are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ and that so believing you may have life in his name." Paul writes in Romans 10, "If you confess with your mouth that 'Jesus is Lord' and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved."

Now we don't generate saving faith in ourselves. It is a gift of God to us through his Son by the power of the Holy Spirit. We don't create faith in ourselves but the church has a vital role in helping God to create it in us. Our part is to share the faith and to tell the Bible story, especially the story of Jesus. Paul says that, "Faith comes from hearing the message and the message is heard through the word of Christ." In the same Romans chapter 10, Paul praises those who preach and teach and share the Gospel. He says, "How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!" Well, Paul has not seen my feet, that's for sure. They are not beautiful. But I am a

Gospel preacher. Sharing the Gospel is used by God to create faith in those who do not yet believe and to confirm and strengthen faith in those who do. There is so much in the world that causes us to doubt and to disbelieve, so we often need such strengthening. Sharing the Gospel story is a vital ministry of the church. It is part of the good that we do for Christ.

Here is another aspect of the good that we do for Christ as we share faith. *We are helping Christ to build the church in this place.*

Now it is Christ himself who is building the church. And the rock on which he builds it is the confession of Jesus as the Christ, the Son of the living God. Wherever that confession is made Christ builds his church, his community of gathered people, his ecclesia. But he uses us in the process. He uses our preaching and teaching, our works, our offerings and our outreach to build the church in this place. Christ is the chief cornerstone, and we are living stones in the church's structure.

Now often we think of the church as the building, and the church building is important. A clergy friend of mine told me she was envious of the facility we have for ministry here. And while the building has some challenges because of its age and structure, it serves us very well. In fact, the building speaks to us of God's enduring permanence and presence. Things come and go in this world with remarkable speed. We notice that every year as people donate 5-year-old electronic gear to our garage sale. It's hard to sell as it's already out of date. But this church reminds us that God endures unchanging on. His salvation is for every generation. His promises are sure in every age. Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today and forever.

One person from another community attended a funeral service here not long ago and commented on the beauty of our sanctuary and how he felt the warmth of the people and the presence of God here. So the church building is important.

But what Jesus is building here is more than a physical structure. He is building a community of faithful, believing Christians. He is building a gathering of people who love the Lord, who love one another, who love and care for God's creation, who proclaim Jesus Crucified and Risen, our judge and our hope. He is building a community in which we encourage and strengthen and comfort and pray for one another, a community in which people of all ages are valued and cared for. As we share faith we are helping Christ to build this kind of community.

In the near future the congregation will be engaged in a survey. You will be asked about what kind of leadership the church requires to go into the future as a strong, believing Christian community. You will be asked to respond to other questions about the church and its needs and activities. I encourage you give serious consideration to the task. Certainly we just can't look back to the past. We know things are not what they were even a generation ago. The neighbourhood around us has changed considerably. The culture is becoming more secular. We come into contact with more and more unchurched people. But it's for that very reason that the church must be strong in Christian faith and witness and work. There can be no doubt about who we are and whose we are and what we stand for. We are doing good for Christ as we help him to build a strong, faithful church in this place.

Here's the final aspect of the good that we are doing for Christ as we share faith. *We are setting people into motion for his sake.*

Sharing the message of faith not only helps Christ to create faith and build his church; it also puts his followers into motion. The Gospel stirs us into action for Jesus' sake. Of course, we are saved by grace through faith and not by our own works, lest anyone should boast. Yet as James tells us, faith without works is dead. The Bible tells us that God has already prepared good works for us to walk in. The Holy Spirit opens our eyes to see those paths of service and then empowers us to follow them. They may be types of service we do on our own or some in fellowship with others in the church. But setting people into motion is surely part of the good that we are doing for Christ.

Over the next year, a number of activities will be going on here in the church. There is the celebration of the congregation's 200th anniversary. There is the significant process of preparing to call a new minister and the further significant process of selecting that person. And this is in addition to our regular outreach, educational, caring and fund raising ministries. Many of you will be called upon to offer your talents in some capacity over the next year. I hope and pray that the proclamation of the gospel will set you in motion for the good of your church. I hope that you will say yes, promptly and willingly when you are asked to serve. Please remember that offering our gifts is part of the good that we do for Christ, our precious Lord and Saviour.