

Streetsville United Church

Sunday, November 17, 2019

Rev. John Tapscott

“A GOOD AND GENEROUS BELIEVER”

Acts 11:24

I read a story recently about nearly everyone's favorite hockey player, Brad Marchand of the Boston Bruins. I am being facetious of course. He's probably the most disliked player in the NHL, except if you're a Bruins fan, of course. Anyway, when Brad Marchand returns to his hometown of Halifax in the summer, he stops whenever he sees a young person running a lemonade stand. As he takes the lemonade he hands the youngster a \$100 bill, no change required. "I always liked a good glass of lemonade," Marchand says. Now you can say that Brad Marchand is a wealthy man who can easily afford such a generous act. That's true, but just imagine the surprise and the joy and the uplift that generous gift creates in the young person who receives it.

When I was about 15 years old I received an unexpected and generous gift. Our farm was located on a busy highway and every August my cousins and I set up a wagon near the roadway selling sweet corn. People would ask "where did the corn come from?" We would point to the field behind us and say, "Right there." Business was very good. Well, one year on a weekend in September a local farmer with an orchard hired me for the weekend. He wanted me to sell his apples from this same busy spot. But business was bad. I couldn't point to the orchard and say, "The apples came from there." I probably sold less than \$100 worth of apples all weekend. On Monday he came to pick up his empty baskets, the unsold apples and the money. I had to tell him that sales were disappointing. But then he peeled 2 \$20 bills from the money I gave him and handed them to me. It was far more than I expected or deserved. \$40 was big money for a 15 year back then. I have never forgotten how surprised and pleased I was. He was not a wealthy man but he was generous. That very incident continues to shape my thinking and my acting about generosity. It even gives me insight into the character of our Generous God who lavishes upon us far more than we earn or deserve.

I want to speak to you today about a most generous character in the Bible. His name was Barnabas. In Acts 11:24 we read that "He, Barnabas, was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and of faith." Wouldn't you like that to be said about you. "She or he is a good person, full of the Holy Spirit and of faith." It's certainly possible for anyone who follows Christ, anyone of us.

Now the Bible never directly calls Barnabas a generous person. But he certainly was, as we can tell from his actions. Generous character is revealed by generous actions.

For one thing, Barnabas was generous with encouragement.

Barnabas was actually a nickname. Acts 4:36 - "There was a Levite, a native of Cyprus, Joseph, to whom the apostles gave the name Barnabas, which means "son of encouragement." It was a

name well deserved. Every time we see Barnabas in the New Testament he is encouraging someone in some way.

Barnabas encouraged Paul when Paul came to Jerusalem. The Jerusalem church naturally feared their former persecutor. But Barnabas brought Paul to the apostles. He told them of Paul's dramatic conversion and how Paul had preached the boldly in Damascus, proclaiming Jesus as the Son of God. Barnabas encouraged the church to accept Paul as a brother in Christ, which they did.

Some time later, the Jerusalem church received news from Antioch. The number of believers in the Lord Jesus was growing rapidly in that city. So they sent Barnabas there to encourage and help organize the fledgling church. Acts 11:36 reads, "When Barnabas came and saw the grace of God, he rejoiced and he exhorted them all to remain faithful to the Lord with steadfast devotion." And it was there in Antioch that believers in Jesus were first called "Christians."

In both his actions and his words Barnabas was generous in encouragement. And shouldn't we all be like that – a son, a daughter of encouragement, generous in encouraging others?

Unfortunately, we sometimes hesitate to do so. Perhaps it's personal insecurity. We don't want someone else to be praised. Or perhaps it's thoughtlessness or preoccupation with ourselves. Or for some it's a personality trait. The world is full of nay-sayers, always finding something wrong with what others do - with their ideas or their efforts. Now sometimes critical judgement is required. But when we criticize the speck in our neighbour's eye let's be sure we don't miss the log in our own eye. Furthermore, even criticism can be given in an encouraging way, not simply pointing out faults and flaws, but by suggesting positive ways for correction and improvement. The world needs the ministry of encouragement. Timely words of encouragement can make a huge difference to someone's attitude and outlook.

There was a logging operation in northern British Columbia. The superintendent was training a young deputy. Before leaving on vacation the superintendent said to the deputy, "You shouldn't have any trouble, except possibly for one man named Tony. He can be difficult, even rebellious. But never fire him. He is the best logger in the whole province." The next day the deputy went to see Tony. After a pleasant greeting he said, "Tony, the boss tells me you are the best logger in the whole province. No one can touch you at the job." That evening, Tony invited his temporary boss home for supper. As they enjoyed a meal, Tony told his wife what the deputy had said earlier, that he was the best logger in all of B.C. and there wasn't a man who could touch him. Tony's wife got up from the table, wiped her hands on her apron, went over to their guest and put her arms around him. "Today is like Christmas day in our house," she said with tears in her eyes. And Tony said, "Why didn't the boss ever tell me that himself? It would have changed everything. There were days when I was so angry and frustrated I felt like quitting on the spot."

What a difference a few words of encouragement can make to our attitude and outlook. We all need encouragement and we can all offer encouragement generously, as Barnabas did.

Secondly, Barnabas was generous with money.

Acts 4:37 tells us, “Barnabas sold a field that belonged to him, then brought the money and laid it at the apostles’ feet.” Now Barnabas was clearly a man of some means. But he sold a field and donated the proceeds to the church. It was a most generous act.

Now as I said, one does not have to be wealthy to be generous. Some of the most generous people are those who have little. A girl bought a package of cookies at the Harvest of Crafts sale, handed the woman behind the table a toonie, and said to her, “Keep the change.” That’s the generous spirit. In fact, all Christians should be growing in generosity throughout our lives. Now most of us live within budgets. But God has given each of us enough so that we can be generous in many ways – including with our money.

Yes, God commanded his people to tithe, that is, give a tenth of their income for God’s purposes. You can use that as a guideline. But it’s not a binding rule. We are free to go beyond the tithe. Or perhaps we need to work up to it over time. Whatever we give pleases God when it comes from a generous heart. The motivation for our giving is not a rule but the spirit of generosity within us. And that spirit comes to us from God’s own generosity towards us. For we live by grace, that is, by God’s generosity. If God were to deal with us on the basis of our earning or our deserving, we would be lost. But God deals with us on the basis of our need and his generosity in meeting those needs. What we need is grace, forgiveness and mercy, lots of it. And that’s exactly what God gives us. God gives us a full day’s pay even though we’ve come late to the vineyard, or slept under a shade tree when we should have been working.

Let’s never forget God’s most generous gift. “For God so loved that world that he gave his only Son, so that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.” God’s gift of his Son, incarnate, crucified and risen again saves us from our sin and delivers us unto eternal life. God is generous indeed. He has saved us by his grace accepted by our faith. And God-like generosity grows in us by the power of the Holy Spirit. Barnabas had certainly heard the message of grace and I’m sure that motivated him to be generous in giving.

You have heard of the congregation’s financial requirements. And I know that we will meet those needs because you are a generous people who love God and love your church. Let the spirit of generosity motivate your giving.

Finally, Barnabas was generous in extending mercy.

Acts 13 and 15. Paul and Barnabas were on a missionary journey through Asia, visiting the cities and spreading the Gospel. They were accompanied by a young man named John Mark, who grew weary or frightened. John Mark left them in Pamphylia and returned to Jerusalem.

A year later or so, Paul and Barnabas planned to go on another missionary trip, back to the cities where they had established churches. Barnabas wanted to take John Mark with them. But Paul said, “No.” The disagreement was so sharp that the two men split up. Barnabas took Mark with him and sailed to Cyprus. Paul chose Silas and they went through Syria and Cilicia, strengthening the churches.

Maybe Paul, the apostle of grace, had good reason for not taking John Mark with them. After all, he had let them down before. But Barnabas showed generous mercy. He gave John Mark a second chance. And while I don't want to say that Paul was completely wrong, and Barnabas completely correct, it does seem that the way of generous mercy paid off in this case. John Mark made the most of his second chance. He wrote the Gospel according to Mark, the first of all the Gospels. John Mark and the whole church has benefitted greatly from the generous mercy Barnabas extended to him.

God's people, having been treated so mercifully, ought to be generous in extending mercy to others. Sometimes it pays off, other times we are disappointed when it doesn't seem to affect the recipient. But at least by extending mercy, we have acted in a God-like way.

Barnabas was generous with his words of encouragement. He was generous with his money. He was generous in showing mercy. He is a good model for all who follow Jesus. But let's go back to the main text. "Barnabas was a good person, full of the Holy Spirit, and of faith." This was really the key to his character. Barnabas welcomed Christ to dwell in him by the power of the Holy Spirit. And that's how you grow in Christ-like character. It's not by emulating someone and saying, "Well, I am going to strive to be like that person." You grow in Christ-like character by allowing Christ to dwell in your heart by faith. You listen to the teachings of Scripture. You focus on the generosity of our God. You let the Holy Spirit shape your character from the inside out. Do that and you become not just like Barnabas, you become like Jesus.