

BUILD A LEGACY

Difference Makers Series (Part 3) | Titus 1:5-16

The week before last I made a fairly sudden trip back to Connecticut to visit with some members of my family that have been ailing in recent days. On Wednesday I attended a luncheon at which these two gentlemen were present. The man in the beige coat is my father. You can see that he's not doing badly for 88 years-old! Some of you might also recognize the well-tanned gent in the blue coat. His name is John Boehner, a 13-term congressman from Ohio, whose more familiar image is something like this, back in 2015, when he served as Speaker of the U.S. House.

Among the many things Speaker Boehner shared over lunch that day was his sadness over how brutal American life has become today. My parents raised me in a two-bedroom home with eleven siblings AND one bathroom, he said. And that's before my grandparents moved in! We had to learn how to get along or we'd have killed each other. We had to figure out "*how to disagree without being disagreeable.*" Boehner said: We used to be able to do that in Washington. I disagreed with a lot of my colleagues over matters of policy, but we were friends. We didn't demonize each other. We looked for ways to compromise and work for the common good. But now with all this social media and 24-hour ideological news ranting at us, we've gotten too hot-headed and too hard-hearted – even within our own parties. So, I left. I got out.

If you were here last Sunday, then you know that Charlie Browning struck a similar note. He talked about the empirically verifiable shift that has happened in American life toward the NEGATIVE and he reminded us of Christ's call to be DIFFERENCE MAKERS in this context. As we've been emphasizing throughout this series, Jesus said that his followers were to be like salt or light or yeast. They were to be agents who bring something positive that changes for the good every environment they enter. Do you feel that you ARE doing that or even how you CAN do that?

In part one of this series, we suggested that it begins with having a clear sense of your IDENTITY as a Difference Maker. The Apostle Paul models this clarity in the way he introduced himself in his letter to his protégé Titus. As I observed two weeks ago, Paul could easily have thought of and defined himself in terms of his great education or his impressive credentials as a pharisee or his top 1% status as a Roman citizen. But sees himself first and foremost as a servant of God, sent on a mission, to sow the seeds of truth that help people become all they can be, and to steward Christ's message of hope. How do you think of YOUR core identity? Do you KNOW WHO YOU ARE and that your sense of identity makes a difference?

Then last week, Charlie unpacked for us Paul's greeting to Titus and showed us how that one verse reveals three of the great gifts that you and I can give to others that will make a profound difference in their lives. If you didn't hear that message, please go

back and be reminded how life-changing these three gifts are and rededicate yourself to offering these things to your family members, your friends and workmates.

I don't know about you, but my life is fundamentally different – as in better –because I've had Paul's or Paula's in my life who so actively and regularly expressed their affection for me that it was like drinking a can of confidence daily. I've had some pretty down moments in my life when the only thing that got me through was remembering: But that person sees something good in me. That person is for me. That person loves me. Who in your circle needs you to come to them like Paul did to Titus or Jesus did to so many people and say: This is what I see in you, what I feel about you, what I hope for you. Who is the one person your affection will LIFT this week?

I thank God too for the people who built in me a sense of affiliation with a cause bigger than me that kept me from settling into being a really small and trivial person. My life could so easily been all about satisfying my little appetites or ambitions. But that's a long-term recipe for misery. The Irish playwright, George Bernard Shaw, once wrote: *"This is the true joy in life -- the being used for a purpose recognized by yourself as a mighty one; the being a force of nature instead of a feverish, selfish little clod of ailments and grievances, complaining that the world will not devote itself to making you happy."* Who do you know who needs to be invited to affiliate themselves with a greater purpose than their own comfort or status quo? How can you help someone find the joy that comes from rising to their role in the family, on the team, in the cause of humanity, or the call of Jesus Christ and his kingdom?

And how can you give the gift of affirmation that so many people around you need? It's been my experience that underneath the surface of most everyone's life are two anxious questions: 1. In spite of all that is wrong about me, am I OK? 2. In the face of all the mess, will life turn out OK? The answer that DIFFERENCE MAKERS bring on behalf of Jesus is YES. Jesus offers you **grace** in spite of your failings. Put your trust in Me, ask for forgiveness, and you're going to be OK. And Jesus offers you **peace** in the face of all life's agonies. There's no figuring out or dismissing some of the things that happen in this world. When that kid was so tragically and senselessly killed... when that disease didn't respond to therapy... when that relationship failed to recover... there's only one source of real peace. It is the promise of Jesus that in the end: **Behold, I make all things new (Rev 21:5, KJV).**

It seems to me, that if we forget WHO WE ARE in God's sight and what he's called us to do in this world... and if we don't have people in our lives who give us the three GREAT GIFTS we've been talking about, it will be very easy to give in to the spirit of negativity and hopelessness that is so common. We can become like John Boehner and grow so tired and discouraged that we finally just quit.

Do you know that some biblical scholars think that this is why Paul wrote the Letter to Titus? What we have here isn't some cheery correspondence from a parent to a kid

who is having a blast at summer camp. It's a last ditch, desperate delivery aimed at keeping a very tired and discouraged servant from quitting. Harry Emerson Fosdick, a brilliant preacher of an earlier era, said that the true purpose of the whole letter to Titus turns on the opening phrase of chapter 1, verse 5, where Paul writes: **The reason I left you in Crete....** This letter, Fosdick contends, is actually more like the letter that a loving, wise parent writes to a kid who is miserable at camp and who has just written home saying: "I hate this place. Come get me!! I quit!"

If you think about it, that would make a lot of sense. On first blush, being sent to a Greek island like Crete might sound like a nice vacation but this was definitely not. The job Paul had given Titus to do was an extremely tough assignment. For one thing – and as Chuck Swindoll observes -- **islands are notoriously difficult places to cultivate spiritual maturity.** You can imagine why that might be true on Fantasy Island and Temptation Island and Survivor Island and Alcatraz Island but think about islands in general. Not all islands, of course, but quite a few are transient places. People come for a while and then move on. How in that context are you going to help people form the deep continuing relationships which are critical contexts for spiritual growth? Because islands are also often isolated from the world beyond them – especially in the first century when Titus was there – an island could also be a pretty provincial place – a place not particularly open to new ideas and customs. Christian discipleship, however, is all about replacing old, limiting ideas with new truths that lead to transformation. And, finally, islands can also be pretty hedonistic places. Again, not all islands are like this, but many are associated with a focus on comfort, leisure and even excess – at least for the tourists. How well is that spirit going to gel with the Christian message that spiritual maturity comes through sacrifice and self-surrender? Maybe this is why there are not a lot of thriving churches in Key West!

All of this is to say that Crete was, first of all, likely a very difficult context in which to cultivate spiritual maturity and, secondly -- to state the obvious -- Crete was filled with Cretans! Have you wondered why we associate the term "Cretan" with somebody who is stubborn, unreliable, difficult or dumb? Apparently, because at least some of the ancient Cretans were. In verse 10, Paul affirms in his response to Titus: **There are many rebellious people [there, full of meaningless talk and deception... One of Crete's own prophets has said it: "Cretans are always liars, evil brutes, lazy gluttons." This saying is true (Titus 1:10, 12-13).** In other words, Titus, if you are finding the work difficult there, I get it, says Paul. I admit it: I did not send you to an easy place or among easy people.

Have you ever been on Crete? I don't mean that literally, though if you found a good AirBnB there, I'm always up for knowing it. What I really mean is: Have you ever found yourself at a place in life or in a relationship with people that was far from easy? Have you ever given your best for a long time and seen so little fruit from the effort that you grew weary and discouraged that wanted to say or maybe did say: *I resign. I quit. Get me off this rock.* If that's you, you have a brother in Titus and mentor in Paul.

Let me just say – and it’s a longer sermon for another day – there are times to quit. John Boehner may have been right to walk away. Jesus said there are times and circumstances when it is right to shake the dust from our sandals and move on. But God’s Word also teaches us the importance of perseverance in hard work. Child-raising is hard work and our kids can be Cretans. Marriage is hard work and our spouses can be Cretans. Leading or serving people in the workplace or community organizations can be rocky, wretched work at times.

In this context, the counsel of James, the brother of Jesus, can seem crazy: **Consider it pure joy when you face trials of many kinds for the testing of your faith produces perseverance and perseverance must finish its work that you may be mature and complete and not lacking in anything (James 1:2-4).**

Elsewhere, the Apostle Paul writes: **Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up (Galatians 6:9).**

In other words, don’t be too quick to give up the good work you are doing, because God will use your perseverance to mature YOUR character. And secondly, don’t give up easily because the work of cultivating the growth God seeks in others happens on agricultural time and not microwave time.

Do you remember how Charlie told you last week about the bosses in his first job that called him in for a conference and how Charlie worried about being fired? If you missed it, Charlie had been working so hard but there was no fruit from it. He hadn’t closed a single deal for the company. But the bosses said: “We love what you are doing and the way you’re doing it. Keep it up.” In other words: Persevere! And Charlie said that he went out of that office with renewed zeal. He had mentors who expressed affection, affiliation, and affirmation for him. And it gave him the stuff he needed to persevere. What Charlie didn’t tell you was that several months later, he harvested two of the biggest corporate accounts that business had ever seen.

Someday, perhaps, we’ll return to the Letter to Titus and unpack all the other fabulous wisdom there is in this text. As we come to a close let me just leave you with two seeds of truth to take with you. We find them in verse 5 where Paul finishes explain why he’d left Titus on this rugged rock and among these ragged people. Paul continues: **The reason I left you in Crete was that you might put in order what was left unfinished and appoint elders in every town, as I directed you (Titus 1:5).**

In other words, set a few things in better order, Titus. The work was unfinished when you got there. It’ll probably still be unfinished after you leave. Don’t be overwhelmed by ALL there is to do. But address a few gaps. Set some things right. Maybe you need that advice where you are on Crete. Just make a start. Set some things in better order around you or perhaps in your self.

And then, secondly, Paul says: Appoint elders in every town to which you go. The word for appoint is “ordain” in its original sense and it means to name, call and pray for people who can extend the mission and outlast your time there. It’s a reminder that one of the most important difference you and I can make is to invest in particular people – to name the gifts we see in them, to call them up to greater use of those gifts, and to pray for God’s power to flow through them. It’s something we can do in every family, workplace and setting of life, including the Church. Who in your circle can you do that for?

So, that’s where our series ends. I guess I should say that even were we to read all the way to the end of the Letter to Titus, we’d still be left in suspense. We’d hear Paul talking more about the difficult people Titus was dealing with and the rigorous work of trying to cultivate that rocky ground, and the specific kind of leaders he hoped Titus would shape. But the letter ends without an answer to the big question still hanging in the air. Was the letter and mentoring of Paul a DIFFERENCE MAKER? Did it help Titus recover his own identity as a servant of God, sent by Jesus to sow the truth that leads to godliness and steward the hope of eternal life? Did Titus himself become someone who exercised a ministry of affection, affiliation and affirmation with those difficult Cretans. Did Titus end up putting in order some of what was unfinished and appoint elders in every town? Or did he, like John Boehner and many others – perhaps understandably and naturally – QUIT? The New Testament doesn’t tell us. We hear no more of Titus after this time. We learn no more in Scripture about what became of the Christian movement on Crete.

But in 1978, the first year after a persevering follower of Jesus met me – a hot-headed, hard-hearted atheist Cretan – and led me to Christ, some archaeologists digging on the island of Crete unearthed the remains of a massive stone edifice dating back to the earliest centuries AD. In time, the scholars realized that it was a five-aisled temple – evidence of an unusually large religious community that had met there. The building had been destroyed by an earthquake in 670 AD. But upon one of the pediments the archaeologists found an inscription carved into the stone – a tribute and dedication actually – to someone the worshippers there called “ST. TITUS” of Crete.

I’m so glad he didn’t quit. I’m so glad Titus apparent continued to do his part to be salt and light and yeast in his time. The question in our time is: How persevering will you and I be in following the call of Christ to be DIFFERENCE MAKERS?