

EXTRAVAGANT GENEROSITY

Discipleship Month
Week Five

Sunday 28th August 2016

John 3:16



For me, one of the highlights of the recent Rio Olympic Games was a heat in the women's 5,000 meters. About half way through the run the New Zealander, Nikki Hamblin and the American, Abbey D'Agostino crashed to the track. Then, in a magnanimous gesture, D'Agostino turned to assist Hamblin up off the ground. *"Get up" she cried, "we have to finish this"* And Hamblin replied *"yeah, you're right....this is the Olympics.....!"*

But the American was also injured. Her right knee gave out and the shaky Hamblin, upon struggling to her feet, surrendered any chance of taking a place in the race by holding back to help the hobbling D'Agostino complete the event.

This was an act that conjured up memories of John Landy in the 1956 Melbourne Olympics when he stopped to help the fallen Ron Clarke get back on his feet.

Such big-hearted, gracious, generous acts epitomise what is revered as the "Olympic Spirit." Here honesty, impartiality, decency and decorum are celebrated for these are values which help bind people together and make the world a better place.

There are many examples. And here I refer to the 1936 Berlin Olympics. German long jumper, Lutz Long, was up against his main rival, Jesse Owens. Under the watchful eye of Adolf Hitler and his white supremacist manifesto, Long offered his rival some tactical advice that prevented Owens from continually foot-faulting and thus being disqualified from the event.

Jesse Owens went on to win the gold medal. Then to further discredit Hitler's public contempt for black athletes, Long extended his hand of friendship to the gold medalist.

"You can melt down all the medals and cups I have won." Owens said afterwards, *"and they wouldn't be worth the plating on a 24-carat friendship I felt for Lutz Long at that moment."*

(2)

I am not a mad sports fanatic, but I do rejoice when acts of real generosity and kindness take place. With this in mind I recall the second test between England and Australia when the English defeated the Aussies in Edgbaston back in August 2005. Brett Lee was on 43 not-out when the last Australian wicket fell. Lee had faced a barrage of brutal fast bowling when Andrew Flintoff, one England's finest came over, bent down and consoled the distraught, beleaguered Lee.

Then there is the famous 1963 Rugby League Grand Final when the St George Dragons defeated the Wests Tigers on a miserable wet day at the Sydney Cricket Ground. After the final hooter the two rival captains, Norm Provan of St George and Arthur Summons of Wests, embraced one another in what is considered to be a true example of what sport is all about.



Generosity towards the other is something we value, encourage and celebrate. But it's not always so common these days. This is, perhaps, no better illustrated than it is on our roads. The phenomenon of "road rage" is familiar to many – and some of us have no doubt experienced it. According to researchers, around 75% of Sydney drivers have experienced road rage in one form or another, whether it be tailgating, failing to keep left unless overtaking, being the subject of offensive verbal abuse or being confronted with obscene gestures.

Such behaviour is not nice. It troubles, even disturbs us as courtesy, civility and respect go out the window.

Today, in our final focus in the series "Five Practices of Fruitful Congregations", we consider the practice of generosity. What does it mean to be generous? And why is generosity such a critical Christian virtue?

Friends, the answer is actually quite simple. Christian life, the way we live as followers of Jesus, is actually a response to the graciousness of God who loves us unconditionally.

(3)

In other words, God is a generous God. God is a giving God. God is a bounteous God. God is a God who shares and who offers everything God is. And God does so, with each and every one of us, in the most incredibly lavish and profuse ways.

And this is no clearer demonstrated than it is in words we read from John's Gospel today.

"For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but have eternal life." (John 3:16).

Here we encounter the Gospel in a nutshell. Indeed, if there is ever a Bible verse you should commit to memory – this is the one. For, it speaks of God's incredible bounty and God's mind-blowing abundance. It speaks of God's extravagant generosity that involves real self-sacrifice by going well beyond self-interest and self-obsession. Indeed, it goes well beyond notions of self-preservation and self-promotion to embrace the common good of all and to affirm the value and esteem of every person.

At the heart of this text is a commitment to the sacrifice of self for sake of others. This is a sacrifice that has the well-being and benefit of all at heart as it involves the God who offers his own Son for our sake. Here God presents, here God gives that which is most precious as Jesus goes to the cross to confront evil, to defend truth and to uphold the authentic nature of love, a love that refuses to submit to the unscrupulous, double-dealing, deceitful authorities of the day.

And, friends, this is what Christian generosity is all about. It's an action that defies worldly values. It's a response that goes against the flow of human reckoning to challenge and even subvert the way most things are.

Christian generosity is a gesture that confounds consumer expectations, upsets market forces, bewilders those who yearn for prosperity and mystifies those who covet the "good life". It's a move that refutes the ego, baffles those whose god is materialism and rejects every effort aimed at gaining status, achieving fame, brandishing power or accumulating wealth.

Today, we are all challenged to embrace this kind of generosity. It's a generosity that says God and the things God calls us to - have top priority in our lives.

It's a generosity that says who we are - is not a product of our own being or our own efforts. Rather and who we are and what have is actually wholly gifted to us by God.

It's a generosity that calls on us to make sacrifices by sharing what we have and offering to others - and to God - what is needed.

For you see, John 3:16 goes on to say two really important things. Firstly, it tells of just "how much" God loves the world – we hear just "how much" God loves us. In other words we learn God loves us "so much" – that he offers his own Son for our sake.

Secondly, we learn about the manner of God's being and acting. For we see that God loves the world "in a certain manner" – God loves each one of us "in a particular way."

(4)



And that “manner”, that “way” is in the form of a love that is expressed in the utter giving of self.

Brothers and sisters in Christ, we are challenged to offer who we are and what we have. We are called to be generous in our living and in our giving because God is a God who gives. God is a God who offers the One who is unique and special for our sake. God is a God who, in all of this, is an “extravagantly” generous God.

And, friends, this places generosity, indeed, this puts “extravagant generosity” right in the centre of everything we are to be as Christians. In other words, to follow Jesus and to bear the mark of Christ in our lives, evokes an active response by each one of us involving sharing resources and giving generously.

Let me conclude with this story:

In the city of Chicago, one cold, dark night, a blizzard was setting in. A little boy was selling newspapers on a street corner as people dashed in and out of the big freeze. He was selling very few papers as he shivered in the cold.

A policeman passed by and the little boy called out,

"Mister, you wouldn't happen to know where a poor boy could find a warm place to sleep tonight? You see, I sleep in a box down there in the alley. It's awfully cold in there. I would love to have a warm place to stay."

The policeman looked down at the little boy and replied,

"You go down the street to that big white house and knock on the door. When they come out the door you just say John 3:16 and they will let you in."

So the little boy did so. He walked up the steps and knocked on the door.

(5)

A lady answered. He looked up and said,

"John 3:16."

And the lady said, "Come on in, Son."

She took the boy in and sat him down in cosy seat in front of a great big old fireplace.

He sat there for a while, and thought to himself, "John 3:16.... I don't understand it, but it sure makes a cold boy warm."

Later the lady came back and asked him "Are you hungry?"

"Well, just a little, said the boy. I haven't eaten in a couple of days and I guess I could stand a little bit of food."

The lady took him in the kitchen and sat him down to a table full of wonderful food. He ate and ate until he couldn't eat any more.

Then he thought to himself "John 3:16.... Boy, I don't understand it, but it sure makes a hungry boy full."

The lady then took him upstairs to a bathroom and a huge bathtub filled with warm water. He sat there and soaked for a while.

As he soaked, he thought to himself, "John 3:16.....I don't understand it, but it sure makes a dirty boy clean. You know, I've not had a bath, a real bath, in my whole life. The only bath I ever had was when I stood in front of that big old fire hydrant as they flushed it out."



(6)

The lady came in and took him to a room. She tucked him into a big old feather bed and pulled the covers up around his neck, kissed him goodnight and turned out the lights.

As he laid in the darkness and looked out the window at the snow coming down on that cold night he thought to himself, "John 3:16.... I don't understand it, but it sure makes a tired boy rested."

The next morning the lady came back up and took the boy down again to that same big table full of food. After he ate, she took him back to that same big old cosy seat in front of the fireplace and she took a big old Bible and sat down in front of him and looked up at him and she asked,

"Do you understand John 3:16?"

He said, "No, Ma'am, I don't. The first time I ever heard it was last night when the policeman told me to use it."

She opened the Bible to John 3:16, and began to explain to him about God and God's unfathomable, extravagant generosity – and all of a sudden it began to make sense - right there in front of that big old fireplace.

Amen



John Barr