

10/09/11

Living Life Together by Making a Difference that Can't Be Ignored

- I'd like to begin our time this morning with a question...should a follower of Jesus Christ want to make a difference in the world in which you've been placed?...
- and should a local church want to make a discernable impact in our community, in our country, and in our world?...
- and when I use words like "make a difference, or an impact"...I'm not talking about doing so in a way that draws attention to oneself, or to an organization...but that brings glory to the Lord...or that whets the appetite of those around us for the things of God?...
- we could also ask this negatively...how bad would it be in your mind if you worked your entire career and none of your co-workers ever knew you were a follower of Jesus Christ?...
 - or none of your neighbors, or the guys you play softball with, or your extended family members or people you rub shoulders with in the community?...
- would you agree that it's impossible to make a difference or to have an impact for God unless you find ways to let your light shine?...
- Paul said it this way in **Philippians 2:15-16 - Prove yourselves to be blameless and innocent, children of God above reproach in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation, among whom you appear as lights in the world, holding fast the word of life.**
- so there's no way for an individual or a church to make a difference without finding ways to shine the light of Christ as brightly as possible?...
- Jesus said it this way in the Sermon on the Mount... **Matthew 5:14-15 - A city set on a hill cannot be hidden; nor does anyone light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all who are in the house.**
- now, some people have tried to be a follower of Christ without letting others know...
 - do you remember how Nicodemus came to Christ?...
 - **John 3:1-2 - Now there was a man of the Pharisees, named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews; this man came to Jesus by night and said to Him, "Rabbi, we know that You have come from God as a teacher; for no one can do these signs that You do unless God is with him."**
 - he came by night so others wouldn't know...and you might say – that's just an obscure detail---actually that became part of Nicodemus' legacy...
 - so later in the gospel of John, we read...
 - **John 7:50-51 - Nicodemus (he who came to Jesus by night, being one of them) said to them, "Does our law judge a man before it hears him and knows what he is doing?"**
 - the beauty of that passage is that while Nicodemus isn't publicly identifying himself with Christ yet – he's at least sticking up for Jesus in front of the Pharisees on this procedural point – but notice the way he's described...the one who came to Jesus by night...
 - here's how that story ends...after Jesus is crucified... **John 19:39-40 - And Nicodemus, who at first came to Jesus by night, also came, bringing a mixture of myrrh and aloes, about a hundred pounds. Then they took the body of Jesus, and bound it in strips of linen with the spices, as the custom of the Jews is to bury.**
- he's not keeping it a secret any longer, is he?...

- there's plenty of other examples like just like that...of people who wanted to know Christ, or receive something from Him...but not make a impact...not risk anything...not make any waves...
- in the last passage we just read about Nicodemus...we also learn about...
- **John 19:38 - After this, Joseph of Arimathea, being a disciple of Jesus, but secretly, for fear of the Jews, asked Pilate that he might take away the body of Jesus; and Pilate gave *him* permission. So he came and took the body of Jesus.**
- there it is again – the desire to follow Christ...but not make any waves, not take any risks...
- one other really sad example is earlier in the gospel of John...when Jesus restored the sight of the man born blind...how do you think his parents responded?...
 - imagine if your son had been born blind...and Jesus Christ restored his sight...wouldn't you shout that news from the rooftops...
- **John 9:18-23 - But the Jews did not believe concerning him, that he had been blind and received his sight, until they called the parents of him who had received his sight. And they asked them, saying, "Is this your son, who you say was born blind? How then does he now see?" His parents answered them and said, "We know that this is our son, and that he was born blind; but by what means he now sees we do not know, or who opened his eyes we do not know. He is of age; ask him. He will speak for himself." His parents said these *things* because they feared the Jews, for the Jews had agreed already that if anyone confessed *that He was Christ*, he would be put out of the synagogue. Therefore his parents said, "He is of age; ask him."**
- we want to receive blessings from God but we have no interest in having an impact for His name...if that's not shameful, tell me what is...
- the story's told of an elderly man whose wife passed away giving birth to their only son...
 - so the man did his very best to raise their boy in the nurture and admonition of Christ...
 - he taught his son God's Word and rejoiced the day he accepted Christ as Savior and Lord...he knew his deceased wife would have been so happy and thankful for the decision their son had made...
 - and he kept pouring his life into a little boy who was becoming a young man and finally the day came when he was going to leave for the summer to find work at the local logging camp...
 - and his dad was very concerned about that – he knew the way those rough men treated Christians...
 - but he prayed for his son day after day that his testimony would be strong...and his life would be pure...and that men in that camp would come to Christ...
 - and he also asked God to protect his son from the abuse and ridicule that often comes to followers of Christ in a place like that...
 - and sometimes he worried about the treatment his son would be receiving for his faith...
- so the day came when his son returned home and his father asked him all about the experience and he especially wanted to know about how much ridicule and abuse he received because of his faith in Christ...and he said – it's OK dad – they never found out...they never found out...
- friends...that's not making a difference...that's not having an impact...that's not living in a way that's consistent with the reason Jesus drew you to Himself...
- let's talk about that this morning...please open your Bible to Acts 17...page 107 of the back section of the Bible under the chair in front of you...

- we're talking this morning about **Living Life Together by Making a Difference that Can't be Ignored...**
- this is our final message in our study of the book of Acts...we've been trying to discover how the early church lived life together then so we can learn all we can about the way we ought to be living life together now...
- this passage contains a complaint that was hurled out against the early followers of Christ...but just like is so often the case...what some people mean as a criticism is actually a badge of honor for those who know the Lord...
- let's read beginning at verse 1 of chapter 17 to see what we can discover...
- read Acts 17:1-15...
- we're talking about Living Life Together by Making a Difference that Can't be Ignored...and with the time we have remaining, let's look for 3 lessons to help us make an impact for the Lord we love.

I. Maintain a Focused Commitment to the Centrality of the Message.

- there's a formula in this passage that we find God's servants using over and over in these missionary journeys...

A. Paul clearly proclaimed the gospel.

- he found a synagogue...so apparently there were more Jewish men here who were heads of households because remember back in Philippi, no such group existed...
- and what did he do?...
- **Acts 17:2-3 - Then Paul, as his custom was, went in to them, and for three Sabbaths reasoned with them from the Scriptures, explaining and demonstrating that the Christ had to suffer and rise again from the dead, and saying, "This Jesus whom I preach to you is the Christ."**
- we've seen that over and over in this book...that the people of the early church were very much on message...
- Peter's first sermon on the Day of Pentecost when the church was founded was focused on the death, burial, and resurrection of Christ which was clearly prophesied in the OT Scriptures...
 - **Acts 2:29-32 - "Men and brethren, let me speak freely to you of the patriarch David, that he is both dead and buried, and his tomb is with us to this day. Therefore, being a prophet, and knowing that God had sworn with an oath to him that of the fruit of his body, according to the flesh, He would raise up the Christ to sit on his throne, he, foreseeing this, spoke concerning the resurrection of the Christ, that His soul was not left in Hades, nor did His flesh see corruption. This Jesus God has raised up, of which we are all witnesses.**
- that's the same message that eventually landed Peter and John in jail...
 - **Acts 4:13-15 - Now when they saw the boldness of Peter and John, and perceived that they were uneducated and untrained men, they marveled. And they realized that they had been with Jesus. And seeing the man who had been healed standing with them, they could say nothing against it. But when they had commanded them to go aside out of the council, they conferred among themselves,**
 - we could trace this throughout the book – it's the same message that the first deacon who was martyred for his faith, a man named Stephen...this is the message he delivered just prior to being stoned to death by an angry

mob...which included, ironically, a young observer named Saul who became the apostle Paul who is the one giving the message in Acts 17...

- now, what's the lesson for us...if we want to make a difference...if we want to have an impact...if we want to turn our community upside down for Christ...we must stay focused on the message...
- and it's so easy to get off course...to become all about politics, or the latest social crusade, or the latest theological fad or trend...
- and I'm not saying there's no place for some of those things...but too many churches have essentially become ashamed of the gospel so they're trying to find some other message that's more palatable to the modern mind...
- that's why Paul told the Romans... **Romans 1:16 - For I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ, for it is the power of God to salvation for everyone who believes, for the Jew first and also for the Greek.**

- now let's think about:

B. How we have tried to do that as a church.

- in the providence of God there have been a couple of decisions that we have made that have consistently helped us be known as a place that is on message...
- that is trying to proclaim the truth of God's Word and the joy and change that comes from knowing His Son...
- and those two events are the passion play and the living nativity...
- now I'm not saying that's all we do around here or that those are the most important things we do around here...
- but they are two of our signature events...and the vast majority of the people who attend our church are involved in those programs in one way or another...
- some of you raised your kids in Bethlehem...and you still talk about that when everyone gets together at Christmastime...and you praised the heavens when your kids were old enough to be in other scenes so you weren't assigned to another year of scene 5 purgatory...
- others have consistently served in the Passion Play...
- and what I love about those being our two signature events is that they are both community outreach oriented, they are both offered free of charge, and they are both absolutely focused on the proclamation of the gospel...
- in that sense, we are living life together right in the tradition of the people who part of the early church...
- that's helped us have an impact in our community for sure...

- but let's push it one step further...think about...

C. How you can do that as an individual.

- the gospel isn't simply a set of truths we believed some day in the past in order to become a Christian...or ideas that will secure a place for us in heaven sometime in the future...
- this central message is something you and I can live every day...
- there's a million ways we could apply that – let's just pick one...
 - what about a mom who has a couple of small children...and she's tired from all the work that goes with caring for small children...and she's struggling with the weight she put on when she had her babies because who has time or energy to exercise...and she feels separated from her adult friends...

- where does the gospel intersect that?...the answer is – everywhere...
- so she preaches the gospel to herself by remembering that her identity isn't determined by a dress size or a number on a scale...
 - she's in Christ...that's the most important fact about her and that's what defines and directs everything else about her identity...
 - and sure she struggles with anger at times because she has to do the same thing over and over, sometimes with kids who seemed to have received a double dose of the curse of sin...
 - but she preaches the gospel to herself...she remembers that she has been crucified with Christ – so she's not enslaved to angry habits of thinking, or speaking, or behavior...she doesn't have to go down that road again...
 - and when she's tired she reminds herself that her Savior is alive – and she has access to strength and power – that maybe she never fully recognized she had before because she never needed it as much as she does right now...
- and before long, living out the practical implications of the gospel causes her to recite - **Galatians 2:20 - I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the *life* which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself up for me.**
- and I wouldn't be surprised at all if during the next visit to the park where other mothers have come with their kids, or the next play date or whatever...someone asks that young mom how she's able to cope with her challenges so well...and then guess what – what a great opportunity to proclaim the gospel...because she's been living the gospel...
 - and maybe the world's not going to be turned upside down...but the nursery is, or the city park...
 - she's just made a difference...an impact....for all eternity...

- now, what else can we observe from these verses?...

II. Understand that Others Might Respond to You out of Jealousy.

- you would think that if these people were living in such a gospel centered way – everyone would admire their dedication and applaud their efforts...
- not exactly...
- the text says... **Acts 17:5 - But the Jews, becoming jealous and taking along some wicked men from the market place, formed a mob and set the city in an uproar; and attacking the house of Jason, they were seeking to bring them out to the people.**

A. This is not the first time this has happened to the church.

Acts 5:14, 17-18 - And all the more believers in the Lord, multitudes of men and women, were constantly added to *their number*...But the high priest rose up, along with all his associates (that is the sect of the Sadducees), and they were filled with jealousy. They laid hands on the apostles and put them in a public jail.

- there's no question about the fact that what was motivating this opposition was sheer jealousy...
- they didn't like the numerical successes of the early church...
- now...

B. That might explain the way some people react to you.

- there may be people in your life who are mean to you, or cold to you, or hateful to you in ways that really make very little sense at all...

- and as long as...as far as you know...you've not sinned against them in some way...you may never know this side of heaven why they are behaving the way they are...
- I don't know if I ever mentioned this...but I used to build in-ground swimming pools...and after my first summer there, the owner asked me to bring some of my friends from Bible college back the following summer and he would give us our own crew...so we could work as many hours as we wanted...and we would be paid based on how many pools we could install...
- so that summer after my sophomore year we came back and worked like gangbusters...and it did go very well...
 - but there were a few people in the office who were just regularly jamming us up...
 - they were slow about applying for permits...
 - and they didn't the right parts delivered to the jobsite when we needed them...
 - and this was back before I was the patient, laid back individual I am today...
 - and I just couldn't figure out why they wouldn't want to expedite their side of the process so the company would make more money...
- and so I was talking to one of the young ladies in the office right before we went back to school about that and she said – oh yea, we did that on purpose...we got tired of hearing talk about how great you guys were, and our salary wasn't dependent on how many pools were installed like yours was, so we decided we'd try to figure out a way to make one of you preacher boys cuss...and we're kind-of disappointed because we didn't succeed...ha, ha, ha...
- I felt like saying – too bad you weren't trying to find a way to make me slap you silly...
- but people in your life may be jealous of the way you've chosen to live and you may never know that this side of heaven...now...

1. Don't run to that base too quickly.

- you should always consider whether you have offended them...or acted in some way that was self-righteous, or uppity, or proud, or condescending, or whatever...and maybe even ask them directly about that...

2. Don't be shocked if it happens.

- it's like Peter said... **1 Peter 2:12 - Keep your behavior excellent among the Gentiles, so that in the thing in which they slander you as evildoers, they may because of your good deeds, as they observe *them*, glorify God in the day of visitation.**

- I wouldn't be surprised if we get a little bit of that with Faith West...many people will like what we're doing...it's a great project...it's all about proclaiming the gospel and the truth of God's Word in that important field of ministry...
- but we'll have our critics...and some might make legitimate points we need to consider...but others might be acting out of jealousy...
- by the way...

C. If others can potentially do that to us, we must guard against doing it to others.

- in this day of the internet and instant access to what everybody else is doing...there are always going to be churches that are growing at incredible rates and there's also a fair amount of hero worship in the evangelical world...

- and what should we do if others are faithfully proclaiming and they're turning the world upside down at a more dramatic rate than we are?...praise God for them, huh?

- **James 3:14-16 - But if you have bitter jealousy and selfish ambition in your heart, do not be arrogant and so lie against the truth. This wisdom is not that which comes down from above, but is earthly, natural, demonic. For where jealousy and selfish ambition exist, there is disorder and every evil thing.**

- now, where does all of this take us?...

III. You Really Can Live in a Way that Makes a Difference.

A. The accusation

Acts 17:6 - But when they did not find them, they dragged Jason and some brethren to the rulers of the city, crying out, "These who have turned the world upside down have come here too.

B. The reality

- they were simply accomplishing the mission God had given them...

- **Acts 1:8 - But you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be witnesses to Me in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth."**