

The Externally Focused Church

It Wasn't About the Donkey

Frankton – 4/24/16

Scripture: Luke 19.29-38 Jesus' entry into Jerusalem

Proposition: Like the donkey, we are not the message; we are carriers of the message.

Today we start a series of sermons I am calling [SLIDE] “The Externally Focused Church”. This series gets its title pretty easily. I am using a book of the same name for the backbone of this series. It was written by Rick Rusaw and Eric Swanson. I read it and was totally enamored with the book, and I hope you will be enamored with some of the things I bring to you from the book. There are many books that I read that I never make a sermon series out of. There are a few books that I start reading, but never finish. And there have been a couple of books that so upset me that I ended up throwing them against the wall or in the trashcan. This one was different. This one impressed me. You're going to hear a little bit more about me reading the book a little later, so let's get started.

As we begin this series of sermons, we need to first define a few terms. We'll start with “internally focused”. I don't know of any church that claims to be internally focused, but they exist all the same. Internally focused churches are really all about themselves. Most things they do, if not all things they do, revolve around the people that are already going to that church. They may have decent worship experiences, good teaching, a youth program and have a good Sunday school, but at the end of the day what is measured is the number of people and activities within the church. But more importantly, what is valued is what the people inside the four walls deem important. Don't get me, wrong those activities I just mentioned are important for building the internal capacity necessary to sustain an external focus. But if all the resources are spent inside the four walls of the church, then no matter how spiritual things may appear to be, something is missing.

God, through Isaiah, had a thing or two to say about Israel being internally focused. In Isaiah 1, God said to stop bringing him meaningless offerings. Ouch! That must have hurt. God went on to say that when Israel prayed, he would hide his eyes from seeing it and he would not listen to it. He implored them to stop doing the wrong things and to learn to do what are the right things. Then, like any good teacher, he told them what he felt were the right things to do. [SLIDE] *Seek justice. Help the oppressed. Defend the cause of orphans. Fight for the rights of widows.* [1.17] God didn't mention contemporary or traditional worship. He didn't mention tithing. He didn't mention Bible studies. He didn't mention Sunday school or small groups. All good things in their own right and all pleasing to God. But the things he does mention must be the things that are truly important to God.

Externally focused churches are internally strong, but they are externally oriented. By internally strong, I mean that they do good worship – contemporary or traditional or both. They tithe. They do good Bible studies. They do good Sunday school or small groups. But because they engage their communities with the good works and good news of Jesus Christ, their communities are better places in which to live. These churches look for ways to be useful to their communities; to be a part of their hopes and dreams. They build bridges to their communities instead of walls around

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themselves. They don't complain about the dirty river, they get in the water and begin cleaning it up.

Externally focused churches measure not only what can be counted – attendance, small groups, etc. – but also what matters most: the impact they are having outside the four walls of the church. They ask the all-important question: [SLIDE] Whose lives are different because of this church? Nearly everything that is done inside the church should prepare and equip people not only for personal growth, but personal impact. I'm not saying that everything is perfect in an externally focused church; they still have their problems. However, they are determined to make a difference in their community. Internally focused churches help individuals, but externally focused churches change the world.

So, who is the recipient of all this external focus? In business, the question would be asked this way: Who is our target market? Although everyone outside the church is a potential for ministry focus, the externally focused church moves toward two specific groups of people. The first group is comprised of those [SLIDE] folks on the margins. What do I mean by that? God has a special place in his heart for those folks who live on the margins of society – and a plan for his people to minister to these broken people. There are nearly four hundred Bible passages that demonstrate God's concern for the orphans, widows, prisoners, aliens, the homeless, the poor, the sick, and the disabled. God cares for everyone who is made in his image and he wants his church to do the same.

The second group for the externally focused church to target is the [SLIDE] community in which it sits. Externally focused churches have moved past being angry with the community to wanting to be a blessing to it. Much has been written about 'taking back our communities for God', but much of that is testosterone-driven language that reinforces the idea of being at war with the community. That's not the language of Jesus. Jeremiah provides a good example of how we are to care for our towns. The text is written as the Israelites are in exile. They aren't in Jerusalem; they are in Babylon. God tells them to build houses and settle down. Plant gardens. Marry and have sons and daughters and marry them off. Finally he says that they are to work for peace and prosperity and to pray to God for the community. That doesn't sound like 'taking back our community' to me.

Externally focused churches bring beauty to their communities. Their love is a garland of grace. They don't just hand out soup; sometimes they serve nachos. They don't just hand out winter coats; sometimes they go goo-goo over Halloween costumes. They don't just support the local high school and its students; they host the prom. To be a blessing to their communities, externally focused churches go way beyond what is traditional. Through arts, sports, and drama, they create opportunities to influence the lives of children and youth. By offering classes to the community in public settings such as banks, fire stations and town halls, they equip emerging workforces with the necessary skills to thrive.

I want to talk about a couple of the characteristics of an externally focused church that the book brings out. The first on is this: Externally focused churches are convinced that [SLIDE] good deeds and the good news can't and shouldn't be separated. Just like it takes two wings to lift a plane off the ground, so good works and good news make an impact on the community for Christ.

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The good deeds, expressed in service and ministry to others, validate the good news. The good news explains the purpose of the good deeds.

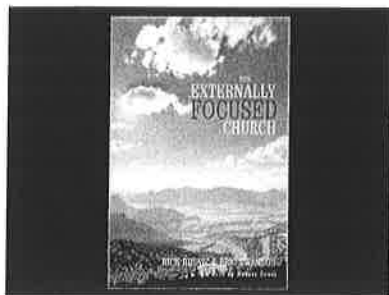
Second, externally focused churches believe that [SLIDE] ministering and serving are the normal expressions of Christian living. They believe that Christians grow best when they are serving and giving themselves away to others. Because service and ministry are part of the growth model for the church and spiritual formation of its people, it is not unusual for huge percentages of their congregations to serve and minister outside the walls of the church. Wanting to be more like Jesus, who came not to be served but to serve [MK 10.45], externally focused churches serve and give themselves to others. They are convinced that Christians can learn through good instruction, but they cannot grow if they remain uninvolved in ministry and service.

Ok, so I have given you a lot of information along the way today. We talked about what an externally focused church is, who it spends its time, energy and resources on, and some of its characteristics. So I hope you have kind of been thinking about this church and where we fit on the internally focused to externally focused continuum. In your own mind, you get your chance to rate us where you think we are on that scale. And you also get to determine where we should be on that same scale. I hope you talk to folks about your thoughts on where our church sits. And I hope that if you and others feel that we need to move one way or another, you begin to act and help us move that way.

So, I want to finish this first sermon in the series now. About a year ago, April 2015, I was reading this book (*The Externally Focused Church*). For just a minute go back with me to when I was reading it. I read it last year at this time while I was on the beach at Punta Cana, Dominican Republic. Sitting on a lounge chair in the shade of a palm tree at the beach, with the Caribbean Sea waves crashing onto the shore. Maybe we shouldn't have done that. Ok, let's all come back to April 2016 in Frankton, Indiana at First UMC.

As I was on the beach reading the book, there was this section that just absolutely struck me. It was a section about Jesus' entry into Jerusalem on what we now call Palm Sunday. Jesus is riding down the Mount of Olives through the Kidron Valley and up into the walled city of Jerusalem. He is riding on a borrowed donkey. The crowds are cheering him on and shouting praises to him. They have lopped off palm fronds and are waving them in the air. They have gladly taken off their coats and laid them down on the ground for the donkey to walk on. As they are walking ahead of Jesus some were shouting, "Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord. Hosanna!" [MT 21.9 para]. Maybe...maybe, just for a moment, the donkey thought it was all about him. After all, he was doing all the work that morning; Jesus was just taking it easy riding on the donkey's back. But, [SLIDE] it really wasn't about the donkey. It had nothing to do with him. He was simply carrying the Message.

The externally focused church is a good donkey that carries the message of Jesus to places where it hasn't always been welcome. The serving church is just the donkey. It's still about Jesus. You've heard me say this before, and you'll hear me say it again: It's not about you; it's about Jesus.



Seek justice. Help the oppressed. Defend the cause of orphans. Fight for the rights of widows.

Isaiah 1.17

Whose lives are different because of this church?

TEFC 17

**Folks on the Margins
Community**

Good deeds and the good news can't and shouldn't be separated.

Ministering and serving are the normal expressions of Christian living.

It really wasn't about the donkey.