

The Externally Focused Church

Good News and Good Deeds

Frankton – 5/8/16

Scripture: Jeremiah 22.15-16 Jeremiah's Lament for Josiah

Proposition: It's not either good news or good deeds, it's both good news and good deeds.

Today we continue a series of sermons I am calling [SLIDE] "The Externally Focused Church". Remember, I am using a book of the same name for the backbone of this series. We began by defining a few terms. Externally focused churches make decisions based on the needs and wants of the people who are outside the church walls. They focus their energies on two groups: people on the margins of society and people in their community. Externally focused churches know that good deeds and the Good News can't be separated, and they also believe that service is part of the DNA of a Christian. You can become a Christian without service, but you cannot grow as a Christian without service. Last week we talk about Jesus saying that when we provide service to another person, we are providing that service to Jesus. (Remember MT 25). We also said that we minister to others without regard for their response. If we get a thank you or a movement toward Christ from them, great; if not, that's ok too. That brings everyone up to speed on what we've talked about so far.

One day, you'll be gone, but those who knew you will think of something when your name comes up. What will go forward from your life? People usually associate great men and women with one great ideal, invention, achievement or cause. Mention the name of Lincoln and people will say: "freed the slaves" or "kept the union together". Mention George Washington and you'll hear: "father of our country". Mention Martin Luther King Jr and people will say: "civil rights movement" or "I have a dream." Those men all had numerous biographers to write the stories of their lives. Few of us will have biographers to record our successes and our foibles.

Israel's King Josiah was one of the lucky (or unlucky) ones who actually had a biographer. In fact, he had a couple of biographers. The writer of 2nd Kings and the writer of 2nd Chronicles record that Josiah became King at the age of eight, began seeking God at sixteen, rediscovered the Scriptures, and brought about great spiritual and moral reformation in Judah. (This was when Israel was split in to two countries – Judah in the south and Israel in the north.) But one thing that went forward from his life was the epitaph written by his contemporary, the prophet Jeremiah. He wrote the following short verse about Josiah: [SLIDE] *But he was just and right in all his dealings. That is why God blessed him.* [SLIDE] *He gave justice and help to the poor and needy, and everything went well for him.* [15b-16a] Thirty-two words. Rarely have thirty-two words been laden with so much content. To defend the cause of the poor and needy is what it means to know God. It is the equation that matters.

Good works are coupled with the Good News throughout scriptures. They are like the two wings of an airplane. Each is incomplete without the other. Each gives "lift" to the other. To study the life and ministry of Jesus is to study a tapestry woven of two threads: good news and good works. Woven throughout the fabric of his life was a ministry of Show and Tell – of good works and good news, side by side, working powerfully together. Here is just one example. In Luke, when Jesus sent his disciples out: [SLIDE] *he sent them out to tell everyone about the Kingdom of God and*

The Externally Focused Church

to heal the sick. [9.2] The good deeds paved the road over which the good news traveled. Every church that seeks to be more externally focused can do so with the assurance that Jesus has gone before. He has shown the way.

If we can learn anything from the history of the early church, we can learn that a church without seminaries, church-growth strategies, elaborate youth programs, or large multi-building campuses can still grow at a phenomenal rate. There were many factors that contributed to the spread of the gospel during the church's formative years. Some were spiritual; some not so spiritual. The first century was indeed the right time for Jesus to enter our world. We cannot deny the importance of such conditions as a common majority language, which had been pretty rare before the time of Rome. Also, there was the safety and relative ease of travel, again due to the Romans. And last, there was also the Pax Romana, the long period of relative Mediterranean peace under Roman rule.

But in addition to these factors, the early Christians lived in such a way that caused the world to sit up and take notice. The early Christians lived a lifestyle that could not be ignored. They were followers of Christ, so they sought to live as he lived, love as he loved, and if the ultimate price was to be paid, they would be welcomed into the company of Jesus himself and all those who had gone before them. We can assume by their actions that they were changed by Jesus and consumed with the values of the Kingdom of God. They were more than salt and light in their communities. They were the soul of their communities.

Here's an example. When the devastating plagues of the first three centuries swept over Europe, those who were able to (that means could: afford it) fled the cities. But not the Christians. They stayed and ministered to the sick and dying, whether the sick and dying were Christians or not. Dionysius, who was bishop of Alexandria, described how two different groups of people responded to the plague of 260 AD in that city. Dionysius talked about the non-Christian response to the plague. He said the "heathens" (his term) deserted those who were sick, even if they were closest friends. They cast the sick out into the streets and left the dead unburied. Then he talked about how the believers responded. He said that the Christians visited the sick fearlessly and ministered to them continually. And many who cared for the sick and gave strength to others eventually died themselves.¹

Later Christians kept up the ministry of the early church. William Wilberforce, a member of England's Parliament and a committed Christian, is best known for his tireless commitment to the abolition of slavery. He introduced his first bill to abolish slavery in early 1790s. It was soundly defeated. But Wilberforce continued to fight for the same cause for over fifteen years until the slave trade in England was finally abolished. United Methodism's own John Wesley did more than just birth a new denomination and lead revivals in the 18th century. He campaigned for prison and labor reform, built orphanages and schools, gave medicines and health treatment to the poor, worked to help solve unemployment, and set up accounts for making loans for the poor. In 1865, at the end of the American Civil War, William and Clara Booth began what became known as the Salvation Army. And we all know what good things the Salvation Army has done and continues to do.

¹ From Church History by Eusebius, book VII, Chapter 22 (from TEFC, pg. 114.)

The Externally Focused Church

I need you to hear this: [SLIDE] Good deeds are not just the wrapping for the gospel. Ministering to others is something God requires of us, whether or not those to whom we minister ever come to faith or not. The stipulation on folks for our loving and serving them is not that they come to faith or attend our church. We love and serve because we are followers of Jesus. Yes, people are often led to God by humans who show them God's love. Your ministry to others may indeed be the beginning of a reconciling relationship between them and God. But that's not the primary purpose. We love and serve because we are Jesus' followers.

Having said that, I want to tell you about the Vineyard Community Church in Cincinnati. Every Saturday morning the people of the church set aside a couple of hours to do simple acts of service to the community; things almost anyone can do. They give free car washes in the summer and free gift wrapping at the mall before Christmas. Frequently, between morning worship services, one of the pastors will grab a bag of groceries and a lay person and deliver the groceries to a needy family in the community. Service is a way of life at the Vineyard church. When people are served and loved, when they see good deeds, they are more apt to want to hear the good news behind it. Good works create enormous curiosity that can only be satisfied with deeper understanding. For many people, being on the receiving end of good deeds is often their introduction to the church.

A few years ago, Jim Collins and Jerry Porras wrote what became a best-selling book titled: *Built to Last*. In the book, they developed the concept that most companies work on what they called the "tyranny of the OR". Simply stated, they advocated that most companies are subject to either/or dichotomies that force a choice between profit and benefit to society, or between speed and quality, and so on. The authors pointed out that successful companies actually pursue two seemingly contrary goals simultaneously: profit *and* idealism, speed of production *and* quality. In other words, it wasn't "either/or" it was "both/and."

One day, Jesus was confronted by a group of Pharisees. One of them asked, "Teacher what is the greatest commandment?" He gave them two equally important answers. [SLIDE] '*You must love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your soul, and all your mind.*' [SLIDE] *A second is equally important: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.'* [MT 22.37-38] Jesus would not submit to the 'tyranny of the OR'. A life of faith must always give primacy to loving God and loving people – [SLIDE] the 'genius of the AND.'

In the same way, churches and individuals don't have to choose either good news or good deeds, evangelism or service. They also don't have to choose to either build up the church or do externally focused ministry. Churches can, and should, pursue both at the same time. It is in turning the tyranny of the OR into the genius of the AND that God shows up, creativity is found, and breakthrough ministry ideas are discovered. We serve because serving is at the core of our being, the reflection of who we are as Christ followers. Getting to share the gospel is not a condition of service, but service often creates wonderful opportunities to share the gospel.

There are a lot of people out there who wear two different contacts in their eyes. One allows them to see things that are far away such as highway signs. The other allows them to see things that are nearby, like a computer screen or a good book. When they look through both eyes, they can't distinguish which lens allows them to see up close and which one allows them to see far away. It's only when they close one eye that they realize what the open eye sees. That's probably how

The Externally Focused Church

it should be when Christians look at others' needs. We need to see their physical needs as well as their spiritual needs without closing either eye.

Externally focused churches have discovered that they don't have to compromise telling the truth to demonstrate grace. They have discovered the ministry style of Jesus. He didn't compromise the good news to engage in good works. He didn't compromise saving the lost by serving the least. He didn't compromise the truth in his grace or the grace in his truth. Today we need a new generation of Christians – people who can think and act with the same combination of complexity AND simplicity, bringing grace AND truth, individual transformation AND community transformation, good news AND good deeds to those around them with the hopeful expectation that they are changing the world.