



The other day I heard a Youth Pastor share one of the strangest experiences of his life. Just before the Friday night youth activities began, he received a phone call from the mom of one of the kids. She said that her ex-husband (the father of her daughter) had just been killed in a car accident. She added that their daughter would be at youth that night but due to the circumstances around the accident, it would be a while before the mom could come and get her daughter, so she asked if he could break the news to her. The problem was that by the time the daughter arrived he was already up front leading the evening, and so he couldn't get to talk to her right away. He said it was as if two things were happening in his mind at the same time. While he was speaking up front to the group of kids, he looked out and saw the girl talking to her friends and joking and having fun. He knew that he had information that would simply rock her world. The words that would come out of his mouth in just a few minutes would change her world forever. He knew that when he passed on what he knew to the girl her future would change and, on many levels, she would never be the same. He knew that the next few words he would speak would have life changing, future altering consequences.

We believe that we hold in our hands a message that can change lives once its told. We believe that once the message of Jesus truly touches a heart, when a person gets it, it can simply change everything. Their world view, their actions and their eternity. That is what we want to talk about today.

Last week we began looking at the communities that we live in. We did that because I believe that just as God placed you and me close to the neighbours we have for a reason, we have also been placed in communities to be the hands and heart of Jesus. We looked at some interesting statistics that we have discovered concerning the Triwood area in which our church is located. Things that we need to think through so we can have an impact on this community. And we found that we have people who attend Brentview from over 52 communities within Calgary. After some of you put more pins on the map in the entrance, we found that we have our fingers (our hands and hearts) in almost 60 communities in our city. That means that when I give the benediction at the end of the service and ask you to "*Go and Make a difference in your world*" we actually have the ability to touch communities all over our city. This morning I want to look at how God can touch the heart of an individual, a culture and a community.

I. Can Christ impact an Individual?

If we are going to make a difference in our community, I believe we need to catch it like in the story of the youth pastor whose words, once spoken, would change a young girls' life. The reality is that you and I have a message that once someone gets it, no matter who they are, where they have lived or what they have done, can change everything in their life and world. There was a time in many of our lives when someone made it clear to us, and today I feel called to explain it so some of you here will hear words that will change your life as well.

One of the most fascinating things that you will discover about Jesus is that people who weren't anything like Jesus liked Jesus. And even more shocking, was that Jesus liked people who weren't anything like him. And the reason I find that's so interesting, is that as a person who grew up in church, I have found that accidentally the church has often appeared to say that in order to get connected with God you have to first become like a 'church' person. But when you read the story of Jesus you will find a completely different picture - that people who weren't like Jesus, liked him. And Jesus liked people who weren't like Jesus. Actually the driving force behind why Jesus came to earth was to deliver a new paradigm by which we could connect with God. The result of what he was about to do, is that you and I would have

an opportunity to have a personal connection with God. Not through a religious system or a church, but through a personal connection with him. This was a brand new radical thinking for His day. He was constantly creating word pictures to describe this. He said that relating to God is like how a child relates to their Father (not like your earthly father, but a heavenly, perfect father). He would say that when you think about approaching God through prayer or some other way, understand it is always in the context of a son/daughter relating to their loving father. Why? Because he wanted us see God as wanting to have a loving relationship with us. Or he would say that relating to your heavenly father is like a vine, being connected to it's branch (it is to be a living connection, a transfer of one life to the other). Or think of yourself as a sheep and God as your shepherd. This has the idea of protection and care.

In their culture this was different from what they had been taught. In the Greek/Roman setting, they had so many strange and self centered Gods that they never knew what their gods would do. And in the Jewish context of Jesus' day, you had to be so holy and more religious than you could ever be in order to get into the inner circle of God's care. And in the middle of that, Jesus came along and explain that *God wanted to be connected with us like a father loves their son/daughter... like a vine gets it's life from a branch... like a sheep feels secure in a shepherd's care. Oh, and by the way it doesn't need to be that complicated when it comes to getting to know this God.*

I say that because, I feel at times, people with jobs like mine in churches like this, have made it seem far too complicated to get in relationship with God. But if you have been in church 30 years or 30 minutes this is for you. Turn to the book of Matthew, chapter 9. This is a story about Matthew written by Matthew himself. Matthew 9:9. I need to stop right there and tell you about the tax collector's booth because that is what makes this story so intriguing. Many of you know that the way the tax system worked was that people would bid in Rome to collect taxes in a specific area and the highest bidder won. Then you would set up this multi layered system by hiring local people from that area to squeeze the taxes out of the people. However, if you were a Jewish person who went to work as a tax collector you were despised, seen as a traitor and an outcast from the synagogue. Actually, you had your own category when it came to sin. The priests would talk about people who were '*sinners and tax collectors*'. In those days you didn't even get lumped into the group called the sinners. You see, you could be a prostitute, a murderer or a thief and you still got to be a sinner. But if you were a tax collector, you had reached a new low of disgusting. Matthew was one of those kind of people. He knew he was bad. His family knew he was bad. He would do whatever it took to get rich no matter who got hurt. And there he sat, collecting money, probably with Roman soldiers behind him. Jesus walked up to him, probably with his disciples mumbling about how terrible he was, and to everyone's astonishment Jesus said 'Follow me'. You can almost hear Peter say "What did you say Jesus?". And Jesus said "I just invited Matthew to join us". John would have said "Time out! We need to talk about this. We had a legitimate fishing business and people like this guy ... he isn't even an accidental sinner. He has chosen this life style and you need to understand that if he is traveling with you Jesus, he is hanging with us and when others hear about this we will never be able to hold our heads up again"

And then Jesus looked Matthew in the eyes and said "Follow me". Notice Jesus didn't list all the sins Matthew had committed (He could have easily buried him in guilt). He didn't even tell him what he had to change in life or that he would have to give up his job. He simply asked him to take one simple step - follow me.

The reason why Matthew wrote down this story in his book, was that as he looked back at what he knew Jesus could have brought up from his past history, the scares he may have been using to stay away from faith due to what religious people had done to him or the guilt over how he had treated so many people, somehow there was the fact that Jesus at that

moment had demanded of him only one simple thing. That he would push back his chair and follow Jesus.

Here is what we know from this passage. No matter what we have done, Jesus only asks one simple thing of us - that we would choose to follow him. He knows that as we follow Him, He will have a chance to connect us to the God who wants to shepherd us and flow his life into us and be our father. And in order for that to happen all we need to do is simply *Follow Him*. Romans 3:23. That day, those words and that decision changed the rest of Matthew's life forever. Here is where we need to begin:

i) I have felt that I needed to stop and spend some time in as simple a way as I possibly can, to say to some of you this morning, no matter what baggage you have been carrying, if you want to have a relationship with God, just decide to Follow Him. Ask Him into your life. Pull out your chair and follow Him.

ii) If you are a Jesus follower, you need to grasp again that you have within you, words that can completely change the lives of those you share it with. Matthew would say that Christ can impact an individual *profoundly*.

II. Can the Church Impact a Culture?

Now let's ask the bigger question. Can the church, can our faith, actually have an impact on our culture? I ask that because it is one thing to believe an individual's life can change, but it is quite another thing to believe that Jesus can change a culture. Let me answer the question in two ways:

i) Look at the example of scripture. Turn to Acts 16:12-20;31-14. The exciting thing is that once the gospel of Jesus entered the city, three different groups were dramatically changed. First, Jesus' gospel changed those in the business community of the city. Lydia wasn't just a seller of purple cloth she, was a 'dealer' in the import and export linen business using a special process for dying cloth. It is from her house that a strong church was founded which we read about later in the book of Philippians. Then there were those folks who must have heard about or been friends with the slave fortune teller from whom Paul, with a word, cast out demons. Just think about the talk that must have gone on with her friends as she told them that for the first time in years she felt completely free, clean and new inside. The men in the Roman Garrison, who through the prison, knew the story of how the meanest, most sadistic man they had ever known experienced Jesus following the earthquake that freed so many prisoners. He had drawn his sword, ready to kill himself when this Jesus' follower named Paul had stopped him. Paul told him things that had radically changed their boss, to the point that they hardly recognized him. I will guarantee that the testimony of these 3 different people from 3 different strata of society in Phillipi, had a profound impact on that entire city. A city, by the way, that was a key port for the whole Roman empire.

ii) Pat Nixon here in Calgary. Our city is a gentler, far more caring city, because one man was changed by meeting Jesus. This man, without apology, says that his inspiration and the direction for the Seed is Jesus.

Look at the example of History. I saw a picture the other day that answered this question. A man said that when he was in Rome he went to tour the Coliseum. Rome was the epi-centre of the persecution of Christians. The Coliseum was the place where 500,000 people died, many of whom where Christians. On the tour, one had to enter the Coliseum by going through what was known as the Emperor's gate. It was the place where the Emperors walked with glee to witness the death of Christians, which was an integral part of their plan to destroy Christianity. Let me show you a picture of what you now see as you walk through the Emperors gate



Today as you enter this place where slavery was celebrated and Christians were butchered, you have to walk under this giant Cross. That means that it is possible for the church to impact culture. I say this because I can imagine that if 2000 years ago we found Christians huddling in the catacombs and asked them “What are the odds that your little itty bitty belief system that is being persecuted, that is following that carpenter named Jesus... what are the odds that in the coliseum where some of your friends have been marched off to be feed to lions, will be a place where they will hang a cross in honour of Jesus?” I would bet that they would say it was zero. But if you drive around Rome today you will find the impact and imprint of Jesus everywhere. You may not agree with all that has happened in and through the church of Rome, but don’t miss the fact that Jesus has and does continue to have an impact on cultures around the world.

III. Can We Impact our Communities

What we know, is what we tell others. The words that come out of our mouths can have a life changing impact on the lives of individuals. I pray it has done that in this sanctuary today. We know from the scriptures, for the lives of people in Calgary (like Pat Nixon), and from history (like we have just seen from the Coliseum in Rome) that God can change a culture. Having seen that it should give us hope to believe that Jesus can have a profound impact on the communities we live in. Some time, look up John 4:28 – 42. It is the story of the Samaritan women. You remember the woman who came to the well at mid day, so as not to meet the other women of her community. Instead, she met Jesus. If you read this passage you will see that there should have been no way that Jesus could introduce her to faith. I found 15 reasons in this passage why it shouldn’t have worked. Let me list a few of them for you.

1. Verse 6, Jesus was tired.
2. Verse 6, the timing was wrong – no one came to get water at lunch.
3. Verse 7, sexual barriers – in those days men never spoke to women, especially about faith.
4. Verse 9, racial issues – Jews never spoke to Samaritans.
5. Verse 10, religious differences

6. Verse 15, misunderstandings.
7. Verse 16, past scares.
8. Verse 17, a life style pattern of making excuses.
9. Verse 15, her present problems.

The list goes on. There are all kinds of reasons why she shouldn't have found faith, and twice as many reasons why her community should never let her words and actions lead them to Jesus. But look at John 4:29-30;39-42. A community was changed when one person heard the good news of Jesus and followed him so she could get to know his Father in Heaven. And in turn as she told others what she knew about Jesus her words, once spoken, made a life changing impact on those around her. Let me give you a couple of ideas about how this could happen.

Interview with Reverend Efraim del Rosario

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