

Capturing the Communities Heart

The Church You Always Longed For #2, Acts5:12-16

◆ **Intro:** The Christian Church is a different sort of animal. Here we have a group that believes it exists primarily for people who are not in it yet, as well as for those who join. The theme for this week in our 50 Day Spiritual Adventure is *capturing the heart of the community*. Today's message is going to be a little different. I think we'll start with establishing that this is something God wants us to do. Then I hope to inspire you with examples of how your forefathers and mothers in Christ did just that. All this with the hope that all of us will start letting the gears inside our own souls and heads start turning with innovations for how we can capture the heart of our community right here in Lafayette.

◆ **1. Jesus sent the church out to win the world.** We've talked about his Great Commission multiple times around here. Preach the Gospel, make disciples! Jesus said to be the light of the world. Be the salt of the world, bring it flavor! But how shall we do this. At first one might assume this is a job for the super-preachers so the rest of us needn't worry too much about it. After all preachers are paid to be good, right? ... (The rest of us are good for nothing.) So preachers might as well be the ones! However nowhere do you find Christians that you do not also find them ministering to people who are *not* Christian. Jesus said, "As I have loved you so you ought to love one another." And this is what Jesus did.

◆ Jesus preached and taught God's way, but as you may recall, a lot of the time people didn't get it. Even his closest disciples

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needed the parables explained to them. He told them repeatedly that he would die and come back to life, but they never picked up on it until after it happened. So Jesus did more than just preach. Speaking wasn't the only way Jesus showed the love of God. Listen to Peter tell pagan Romans about Jesus.

◆ *"...God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and power, and... he went around doing good and healing all who were under the power of the devil, because God was with him.*

"We are witnesses of everything he did in the country of the Jews and in Jerusalem. They killed him by hanging him on a tree, but God raised him from the dead on the third day and caused him to be seen." Acts 10:38-40, NIV.

◆ Its just a little interesting that Peter did not say "he went around giving sermons and holding classes." Jesus did that too, but that's not what Peter singles out. ~~The people needed to know that God loved them (Jesus came and healed and did good.) and they needed to know he was risen, had beaten death and was therefore authoritative. (Mark this, the resurrection was the one thing that started the Christian church. When the first christians meet the alive-again Jesus, that's when everything changed for them and they went from hiding to dying for him.)~~ But what I want us to see in that verse is that Jesus did more than teach. Word and deed went together. Heres how two followers of Jesus put it in the book of Luke.

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◆“He was a prophet, powerful in word and deed before God and all the people.” Luke 24:19, NIV.

◆Word and deed. And for Jesus’ disciples word and deed went together as well. When it comes to capturing people’s hearts word and deed are a great combination! You can prepare the soil for the seed of the Word by your deeds. In fact, one of Jesus’ followers who lived in the 1100’s, named Francis, accented this truth by saying, “Go and preach the Gospel. If necessary use words.” The holy records say this kind of thing over and over:

◆Paul wrote...“Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up.” Galatians 6:9, NIV.

◆Peter wrote... “For it is God’s will that by doing good you should silence the ignorant talk of foolish men.” 1 Peter 2:15, NIV.

◆and...“Live such good lives among the pagans that, though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us.” 1 Peter 2:12, NIV.

◆What did you hear similar in all of those? (doing good). This my friends is a way to capture people hearts! It’s what the Apostles did. Look at our text:

◆v12 *they did miraculous things.* Like what? Pull a rabbit out of a hat? Make your Chevy disappear? No.

◆v16 *sick people were healed, people with demonic presences in them were set free.*

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◆ *That's what God-followers did.*

◆ *"In Joppa there was a disciple named Tabitha (which, when translated, is Dorcas), who was always doing good and helping the poor." Acts 9:36, NIV.*

◆ Same thing Jesus did, right. God still does miracles through his people. God still brings healing through his people whether by miracle or not. So then, we need to start asking the question all the time because this will capture the community: how can we bring healing to people around us? How can we serve our community?

◆ Ok, so no argument right. Doing good to those in need is Jesus' kind of church and it's contagious. Steve Sjogren, a pastor in Cincinnati OH wrote,

◆ "If love could be sent through printed information alone, we could simply flood our cities with gospel tracts and then rest assured that we have done our part. Deeds of love allow us to sneak into the hearts of those we serve. Even though people aren't conscious of what's happening, they are welcoming us and the God we represent into the fortress of their hearts."

◆ He wrote a book about it called *Conspiracy of Kindness* which talks about all kinds of innovative ways his church did simple things to touch people's hearts: free car washes, cleaning restrooms in the mall. Some members of my church in IA read the book and approached the church with an idea. The town Labor Day parade was always super hot. Let's give away free cans of

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pop with a little card on them that says, "this pop is free just like God's love for you is free" and the church name. So we did. We started bring cases of soda to church each sunday and piling them in front of church like a big offering. Three thousand cans! We cooled them in cattle tanks of ice on a flatbed truck. We handed them out along the parade route using everyone from second grade to grandpa. Guess what happened.

◆ Jessie Tweedy called the church a few weeks later saying he felt like he wanted to kill himself. An elder and I went to talk with him, shared Jesus with him and invited him to church. He started attending. We asked him how he heard of us and he pulled out one of the cards from a pop can.

◆ Russel Squib was not exactly neatly clothed or all that clean. He floated around town getting hand outs from whatever church (probably all the churches one time or another), but he never committed to attending one. A friend of mine became his legal manager (basically a dad to help him not waste his money) and invited him to church many times. One day he finally declared he was coming. He eventually took the membership class though he was less literate than some, and gave a beautiful account of faith in Jesus to the elders and joined the church! My friend asked whatever made him finally decide to start coming. His said it was the pop can give away in the parade.

◆ Deeds sneak into the heart.

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- ◆ **2. Now for a little inspirational church history:** There were 10 or more messianic movements within about 100 years before and after Jesus. All failed. Judas the Galilean. Men-achem the Sicarii. Eleazar whose movement all committed suicide on the mount Masada rather than surrender to the Roman army. Simeon Bar Kokhba. All executed or assassinated, just like Jesus. None of their movements continued. Yet Jesus with his relatively uneducated followers changed millions more than Alexander the Great, Mohammed, and Napoleon put together and the entire globe has felt his influence. How? These people were so convinced that Jesus came back to life from the dead that they lived his way of love no matter what people did to them. And people did many things to them.
- ◆ **A.** From Caesar Augustus when Jesus was born to the last pagan Roman Emperor, Julian the Apostate who died in 364 there were about 48 Caesars/Emperors of the Roman Empire. The vast majority of them persecuted one specific religion while allowing all the others no matter what they were as long as they would also recognize the Emperor as a god. That one religion was the Christian church. Christianity began under a world empire that:
 - ◆ continued to celebrate killing people for entertainment (gladiator games had already been going on for 300 years before Christ came),
 - ◆ practiced child abandonment (called exposure) and abortion if they didn't want their children,

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- ◆fed Christians to wild animals and burned them on crosses, systematically persecuting them,
 - ◆made it legal to confiscate the property of any Christian who would not recant, (Edict of 250),
 - ◆maimed them and sent to work in mines,
 - ◆ordered the destruction of Christian churches and writings throughout the Empire.
- ◆B. But Christians, never fighting back, were winning the hearts of the Roman community. And when Roman Emperor Julian died in 364 his last words were "You Christians have won!" See, Christianity was gaining influence.
- ◆The year 311 the Edict of Toleration granting Christians right to exist was signed
 - ◆In 313 that the Edict of Milan (not to be confused with a female Japanese warrior, Mulan) declared the government would no longer persecute a Christian and granted freedom to worship to them along with any pagan religion for the first time in Roman history.
 - ◆In 314 Constantine, a pagan though his mother was a Christian, put the Christian cross on Roman coins!
 - ◆In 321 Sunday was declared a religious holiday in the Roman Empire.
 - ◆In 364 Valentinian became the first Christian ruler of the Roman Empire.

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- ◆ In 380 Emperor Theodosius declared Christianity the official religion of the Roman Empire!
- ◆ So in a little over 300 years the followers of Jesus gained such influence that one of the most brutal cultures and perhaps the greatest ancient world empire, stretching from England to Egypt, went from killing Christians to being led by Christians.
- ◆ C. How? These people were so convinced that Jesus came back to life from the dead, and brought healing to life and hope for eternity that they lived his way of love no matter what people did to them.
 - ◆ Christians have a high view of the sacredness of human life. As another contrary example, Emperor Trajan celebrated a victory by holding four months of gladiator shows in which 10,000 participated. At least half were killed, obviously, and many more died of their wounds. I tell you this to remind us of the low view of human life that was an integrated part of Roman culture. But Christ followers were the opposite.
 - ◆ Christians have a high view of compassion. One historian wrote "Human compassion especially with regard to the sick and dying among the ancients was rare, notably among the Greco-Romans." For example Plato (d.347 BC. Not the colored clay in the little yellow can! The famous philosopher!) taught that a poor person unable to work because of sickness should be left to die. Roman philosopher Plautus said

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“You do a beggar bad service by giving him food and drink; you lose what you give and prolong his life for more misery.” Jesus taught his followers the opposite. God values human life above all things. Emperor Julian the Apostate lamented that Christians, whom he hated, showed love and compassion and his pagan countrymen did not. “The impious Galileans relieve both their own poor and ours!...It is shameful that ours should be so destitute of our assistance. When plague hit a Roman city in the 4th Century the Roman elites fled the city leaving their own sick. The Christians stayed and nursed the dying. Christians took home Roman infants left in “exposure” and reared them as their own. Following the NT, Christians took in orphans. It was Christians who introduced hospitals in the 4th Century as well as homes for the aged something that never existed in the ancient world.

◆ Closely related, Christians have a high view of women, and like it or not the status and rights women enjoy today is a direct result of the Christian religion.

◆ 1) In Greek culture women did not go to school at all or to speak in public. Neither did they in the Hebrew culture. But Christians allowed both. In Roman law a woman could not inherit property. Women were basically property under the control of men to be used for their passions. A Roman law called *Patria Potestas* gave the husband the power of life and death over his children and wives. But Christians like the

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Apostle Paul taught that submission was for husbands too.
(Eph.5:19)

◆2) In the Apostolic Church women were also leaders of house churches, something unheard of in Hebrew, Greek, and Roman societies!

◆3) In 449 the Christian Church declared for the first time in history that laws against adultery applied to the husband as well as the wife. "The wife was now able to divorce an adulterous husband, something that had never occurred in the ancient world." Whereas in pagan Rome, while prostitution was a legal profession, a wife could be killed by her husband for cheating on him, causing some wives to register as prostitutes to avoid such a consequence.

◆**Conclusion:** Lets tie it up, shall we. Christian love for other human beings literally flip-flopped the Roman Empire. Now how about us, if we closed the doors of this church and packed up and left would the city notice?

◆Have you heard about Playworks? It's a supervised recess program that Council has determined is a potential ministry area. Three of our staff began it this week! (Kelli, Mike, Me). Kelli, what did we do? Mike why are we doing this? Pray about whether you could do this as a ministry of compassion to capture the heart of the community. And this week as you read your daily devotional guide ask God to show you and us ways that we can offer love in word and deed right here in Lafayette, IN.