

Sermon: Signs of Life-Rolled-Up Sleeves

July 9/10, 2011

Texts: Matthew 25: 31, 34-40 & John 13:12-15, 34-35

Theme Sentence: "We declare Christ's love with our mouths, but we demonstrate it with our muscles."
(p. 128 in Signs of Life)

I have been intrigued by vehicles I have seen on the road that are completely covered in some kind of advertising. Actually, I'm kind of impressed that someone could figure out how to do that so well, covering all of the curves and edges so that the message is seamless. Then I saw the vehicles that tell you where you get this kind of thing. It's called Wrap That Ride. At least that's one of the vendors who do this; I found others on the internet as well.

They claim that this is excellent advertising because you potentially pass hundreds of cars each day and that people, like me, take notice. It is a great way to get your message out as you drive your sign around town with you. I suppose we could wrap the rides of a couple of our Lord of Life members who could do our advertising for us. Any volunteers?

What are the signs we actually display everyday through our lives? When people see us, what do they learn about us and the kind of people we are? To whom do our lives point? Our clothes are often pointing people to Aeropostale or the Gap or the Milwaukee Brewers. Do our lives point to God?

"We declare Christ's love with our mouths, but we demonstrate it with our muscles." This quote from David Jeremiah in our book, Signs of Life, sums up well what Jesus says in our two Bible readings today. Teaching his followers about what it means to be his disciples, he instructs them to care for the sick, and feed the hungry and shelter the homeless and visit the imprisoned. This will be a basic sign of their lives lived in him and that when they do these things to others, they are actually doing it for him and to him.

In John's gospel it is that clear again. Jesus does the unlikely thing: he washes the disciple's feet. They would argue that they should wash his feet; they should honor him. But he is giving them a sign, a sign of how they are to live:

So if I...have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. For I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you.

A few verses later when Jesus speaks those famous words about love,
By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another,
I don't believe that Jesus is talking about us saying that we love each other, but rather that we DO acts of love, demonstrate love in our actions. "We declare Christ's love with our mouths, but we demonstrate it with our muscles."

David Jeremiah goes on to give us a very practical way to show these signs of love. He says, "Find a need and fill it." It almost seems too easy, right? But I think it really is that easy to be attentive to the people around us...to have our eyes wide open to the hurts and hopes of our friends, our neighbors, the people we encounter each day.

You know that I always compliment Lord of Life for its commitment to serving those beyond our walls. We are always very responsive when a need arises or when a new monthly collection is announced. Just remember our altar area at the time of the Baby Jesus diaper drive or when the Vogels invited us to bless their mission to El Salvador and gave us a list of medical supply needs. We filled the area.

But I want to give us an encouragement to take it a step further: Be proactive and not simply reactive to the needs around us. Don't wait for church to announce it or even for someone to ask. Find a need and fill it. Now I do understand that sometimes the way we find a need is that someone tells us it's there, so to some degree we do need to wait for someone to ask. But I wonder if we are actually looking ourselves. I think that's what Jesus is asking of us.

In our work with TAG consulting last year, a part of the process was to do a demographic study to look at the community around us and to learn of the needs and concerns. Here are some of the things we discovered:

In our area, the two largest age groups in the population are people 29-49, and those 9-29. But we also found out that the fast growing portion of our population are kids age 8 and under and that by 2015 they will be the largest segment of our community. Think about what needs that population will bring, How can those needs shape our ministry plans?

We also learned that the percentage of female workers with children is over 15% higher than the national average. (In most other areas we were right around the national average so this stat really stands out.) With that being the case, child care needs are huge.

One other helpful statistic is this: 17.3% of all households are working urban families. Among this segment of the population, the primary concerns are around parenting skills, employment opportunities, having a fulfilling marriage, & day to day financial worries. Again, what are our ministry opportunities given these facts? How does God want us to demonstrate Jesus' love by our actions and our ministries? To be a relevant and vital congregation into the next decade, we will want to answer these questions.

God would have us seize these opportunities to do His work and to affect the people around us in the name of Jesus. That doesn't mean it will be easy. I think this is what David Jeremiah implies when he calls this section of his book, Rolled-Up Sleeves. We going to have to get in there and be willing to do the hard work, much like our Lord who suffered for us in the ultimate way.

About these opportunities, author Jeremiah says, they are all around us, but they may not seem like opportunities at first glance. He says,

-Sometimes they are disguised like problems. "Too often what we perceive as obstacles—no money, no machinery, no methodology, no manpower—are God's opportunities in disguise." (p.151)

-Are time sensitive and that if we don't seize the moment, God will find someone else who will.

-Tested by opposition. Just as the Apostles experienced when they tried to share the message of Jesus, there are people and forces that may try to derail our efforts.

AND,

-Opportunities are often missed because of fear. He reminds us that we have two choices, "to walk in faith or to walk in fear."

Instead of wrapping our ride with a message about Lord of Life or putting on a bumper sticker about Jesus, it's about just being living signs of Jesus' love in the world? I believe that's what Jesus really asks of us and I believe that that is the best way to really show and live our faith. "Become the hands of Jesus so that others might discover the heart of Jesus." (p.132) That's how David Jeremiah phrases it.

Here's one final image from the book that comes from Henry Drummond's sermon, "The Greatest Thing in the World," goes like this:

"If ordinary steel is attached to a magnet and left there, after a while the magnetism of the magnet passes into the steel so that it too becomes a magnet."

The point is this...stay close to Jesus and your life will become like his: a blessing and gift to others, reflecting him and showing the signs of his life in you. Amen.