

## **QUESTIONABLE LIVES - preached at Eastview Baptist Church 21/9/16**

### **Connecting with people.**

*Col 4: 2 - 6 Devote yourselves to prayer with an alert mind and a thankful heart. Pray for us, too, that God will give us many opportunities to speak about his mysterious plan concerning Christ. That is why I am here in chains. Pray that I will proclaim this message as clearly as I should.*

### **Connecting with people.**

*Live wisely among those who are not believers, and make the most of every opportunity. Let your conversation be gracious and attractive so that you will have the right response for everyone.*

### **Connecting with people.**

Picture a scenic rail coach traversing the Rocky Mountains in Canada for two 12 hour days. While stunning landscapes and wildlife pass by the high glass observation dome, the dining car serves delicious meals and refreshments. But the best part is the people you meet. Most travellers hail from outside Canada, - from Europe and England and others from the US - and they are great company. There's a pair of scientists from Switzerland who come to the Rockies every winter, though this is their first summer trip. A couple from Wisconsin spend every winter in a trailer park in Arizona. Tall Af-Am Herman is a newly-retired IT engineer from Chicago who doesn't plan to stop working. Colin from Kent has been umpiring county cricket for forty years. Carol teaches needlework, journalist Hilde is doing a Masters of Fine Arts. Her husband Brad has just completed an investigation into wine counterfeiting in Napa; look out for the film of the project - *Sour Grapes*. These are folk we met on our trip. Mostly over meals in the dining car as we were mixed up to meet and talk with a different group each time.

**Connecting with people.** My husband has to do it up to 30 times day as a local GP, so he's quite adept at building rapport. I'm more introvert so have to have a plan of what to ask and say. Those Bridge Builder questions we learned a few years back came into good use. What do you do with your time? Tell me about your family? What do you do to relax? Where else have you travelled? We talked about Brexit with the Brits and Trump with everyone. Most of the conversations were once over lightly, but some went deeper. (*Names removed*) were celebrating their 20<sup>th</sup> wedding anniversary. When they asked about my profession, they weren't intimidated like some of the others. We found out they used to be church folk but are 'taking a break'. Something in the way they said that made me probe further; I have met enough wounded and burned out Christians to know when something is amiss. Turns out the wife was the children's pastor at their church for five years but there has been a painful parting of the ways. We didn't spend long together but the time was precious. I hope .... felt deeply listened to, even if the healing she needs will have to come from others.

Making connections is one of the reasons we chose to take two train trips while we were on holiday in Canada. Meeting new folk with whom you may at first seem to have little in common means you have to listen hard to find something you can meaningfully discuss and share. Sometimes it's just that one time, but those two journalists gave us their contact details; they have been to NZ several times and who knows when we'll meet again. That'd be fun.

**Connecting with people.** We heard about that last week from Acts 17 – what preachers call the Areopagus Address. In Athens Paul had noticed some features of local spirituality and he used one of the religious statues as a starting point for a sermon about Jesus. Only it didn't sound like a sermon. It sounded like connecting with people. Our preacher reminded us of God's call to connect with people in our own context. He spoke of being vulnerable, of making sacrifices, of living Questionable Lives. He didn't mean dodgy-type questionable but rather lives that provoke questions and give us a chance to connect with others in ways that go deeper in a respectful way. He said "The people in our own circle of acquaintances are the people God is calling us to connect with". I believe that, and I think for us it's so important that I decided to pick up on it again this week. My main Scripture is Colossians 2: 2 -6 that I read at the start.

But since our New Community series is based on the Early Church I also want to dive in to Acts 16, which is about Paul and Silas visiting Philippi before they got to Athens. We won't read the whole thing, but you could open it up on your phone if you like. I'll just tell it to you 'out of my mouth', as I say to my grandkids. But first let me offer you a useful distinction.

Last week our preacher pointed out that we are not Paul, we have different talents and different contexts. Paul was a skilled evangelist, and so his response to the three kinds of people we meet in this chapter is going to be different from ours. But there are things we can notice about these three encounters, factors that apply to us as what Michael Frost calls 'missional believers'. Gifted evangelists, he says, are called to Bold Proclamation, while our missional believers' role is to give Gracious Answers that build connections and evoke more questions. To live generous, hospitable, Spirit-led, Christ-like lives as missionaries in our own networks and relationships. With that in mind let's look at Acts 16.

When Paul gets to Philippi – a Roman colony with very few Jews – he first meets Lydia, an expat businesswoman, a Gentile, not a Jew but someone who had been impressed with Jewish worship and spirituality. A godfearer like Cornelius in Acts 10. Each Sabbath she is in the habit of meeting with others to pray by the river; Paul finds her there because in a city without a synagogue that was a likely place for Jews to hang out; some rituals require running water. Paul and Lydia had a theological conversation, and that very day Lydia became a committed follower of Jesus Christ. There's a lot more to her amazing story as a leader in the church but for us I just want to note that Paul found a way to connect with Lydia, and that connection was with **words**. We too can make connections with people who want to talk about spiritual things. Just yesterday I met up with a Palestinian Christian lady I hadn't seen for ten years – thankfully I remembered her name – and blow me down, within a few minutes she was asking me whether Baptists revere the Virgin Mary in the same way that Orthodox Christians do! I'm pretty sure you won't get asked that one but people do wonder about our lives as followers of Jesus. Their questions can help make a connection. Here are a couple of scriptures about that:

From Isaiah 50: *The Sovereign Lord has given me his words of wisdom, so that I know how to comfort the weary.*

One of the Proverbs says: *To make an apt answer is a joy to anyone* (Proverbs 15: 23)

And 1 Peter 3:15: is about being ready to explain your faith: *Be ready to speak up and tell anyone who asks why you're living the way you are, and always with the utmost courtesy.*

These conversations and connections don't have to be explicitly Christian; sometimes our **actions** speak louder than any words. Remember St Francis' advice – preach the gospel at all time and of necessary use words. There was another person Paul met in Philippi, who was radically changed by seeing how the Christians acted. Paul and Silas ended up in jail on a trumped-up charge of subverting the order of the city. They pass the night in chains by singing, but there is an earthquake, not necessarily a supernatural event as they were common in the area. They could easily run away but they realise that will get the warden into deep trouble, and he was about to kill himself. They care about this Gentile enough to stay – and the jailer is so surprised by this act of kindness he asks for an explanation, and as a result he too comes to faith. The apostles again found a way to connect and this time the connection was with actions - the act of sticking it out when it would be easier to run away.

Such acts of kindness - even sacrifice – speak volumes to people as they observe our daily life. They wonder why we are spending our Sunday morning playing in a worship band or teaching unruly kids. They notice when we are generous or hospitable, when we go the second mile. They notice when a skilled teacher sticks it out in Otara when they could get a job at a private school, when a business donates enough laminated timber to build an assembly hall in Ethiopia, when a young man cares enough to strap a disabled friend to his body before he enters a swollen stream – and loses his life in the act.

There are scriptures about this too:

Jesus said *You are salt and light - let your good deeds shine out for all to see, so that everyone will praise your heavenly Father* (Matt 5: 16)

1 Peter: *Live properly among your unbelieving neighbors. they will see your honorable behavior, and give honour to God.* (1 Pet 2: 12)

Peter notes this particularly applies in marriages where there is a spiritual mismatch: *Your godly lives will speak to them without any words. They will be won over by observing your pure and reverent lives.* (1 Peter 3: 1 – 2) I have seen that happen.

There's a third person in this passage as well, she was the reason Paul and Silas were reported to the authorities. A tormented slave girl who was a good source of income to her owners was pestering them with psychic insights. At first they tried to shake her off but then in exasperation Paul commanded the spirit to leave her; she was healed and no longer any use to her owners, who complained to the police. The apostles were using that spiritual authority which God has given to every Christian, but more importantly for our subject, they **ministered** freedom and hope to someone God loves. There are times when ordinary believers are called to exercise Holy Spirit gifts and bring life and hope to others. Isaiah calls it bringing 'a word in season'. Some of you will offer prayer for healing with people you come across, others experience prophetic insights, or discernment of spirits. When connecting with outsiders you need to be circumspect about offering these insights; avoid Christian jargon and any suggestion of superiority. (Ashley Smith story - she read a section of Forty Days of Purpose to a murderer who had taken her hostage and it changed his life – and hers.) Your spirit-led response may not even appear particularly supernatural – a few days ago I was walking to the car after school pick up when I saw two boys come across a large piece of polystyrene lying on the footpath. They immediately leapt on it, smashing it into about twenty little pieces and making a huge mess. Without thinking I found my school teacher voice saying firmly, hey guys, that's not on. How about you pick up all the pieces and I'll take them home to put in the rubbish? They meekly obeyed and we cleaned it all up. I think I was exercising God's calling to care for creation – and the lads didn't mind.

Message version of our Scripture: *Make the most of every opportunity. Be gracious in your speech. The goal is to bring out the best in others in a conversation, not put them down, not cut them out.*

Paul also said to Timothy: *Be ready in season and out of season; patiently correct, reprove, rebuke, and encourage with good teaching* (2 Tim 4:2)

And never forget that: *He that is in you is greater than he who is in the world.* (1 John 4.4)

These stories have given us some clues about how to live questionable lives and make natural connections with people God loves. Paul and his companions were gifted evangelists who needed prayer so they would have boldness and clarity. But those called to evangelise also need every follower of Jesus to live a missional lifestyle, to be watchful and wise in the way we interact with those who are not yet believers, to make the most of every opportunity, living the kind of questionable lives that evoke curiosity about the Christian faith. Making connections in gracious holy conversations that are gracious and attractive – “seasoned with salt.” A key phrase from our passage is “make the most of every opportunity”. If we only attend worship services and Bible study groups, we won't make the kind of connections God needs to use with the people beyond the church walls. Unless we are intentional in the way we live and the habits we cultivate, we will have limited opportunities for curious questions and holy conversations.

This month I've been enjoying a little book that aims to cultivate that intriguing lifestyle.

In *Surprise the World* (Navpress 2016) Michael Frost says we need to develop “habits that unite us as believers while propelling us into the lives of others”. And he introduces five missional practices that don't induce guilt or turn others off. These habits can shape generous, hospitable, Spirit-led, Christ-like lives and send us out into God's world hopefully and expectantly. I'm just going to introduce them briefly today, to cap off our message from Acts, but next week I'm here again and I'll unpack them in much more detail.

**Connecting with people:** There's space to write the five habits on your bulletin. Bless, Eat, Listen, Learn, Sent. Here's Michael Frost's aspirational suggestions, which you might find a big jump from how you live now, I certainly find it a little intimidating. But let's just take the ideas and let them marinate our souls for a while, and we'll work with them more next week:

**BLESS:** I will bless three people this week, at least one of whom is not a member of our church.

**EAT:** I will eat with three people this week, at least one of whom is not a member of our church.

**LISTEN** I will spend at least one period of the week listening for the Spirit's voice.

**LEARN:** I will spend at least one period of the week learning Christ.

**SENT:** I will journal throughout the week about all the ways I alerted others to the reign of God.

Each habit of a questionable life is designed to release a certain value in the life of the person who practices them.

- If you bless three people every week, you're going to become a very generous person.
- If you eat with others, you'll develop a greater capacity for hospitality.
- If you foster the habit of listening to the Holy Spirit, you'll become an increasingly Spirit-led person.
- If you're learning Christ, it's fair to assume you'll become more and more Christ-like.
- If you're journaling the myriad ways you've been sent, you'll increasingly see yourself as a missionary to your own neighbourhood.

In other words, these habits can shape us and form us as generous, hospitable, Spirit-led, Christ-like, missional people who share the heart of God.

**Connecting with people.** In our Colossians passage Paul asks for faithful prayers. To lead into communion, I'd like to share a specific prayer some people have found helpful.

*God, where will your Spirit lead today?*

*Help me be fully awake and ready to respond.*

*Equip me with the generous and hospitable spirit of Jesus as you shape my life in grace.*

*Grant me courage to risk something new and so become a blessing of your love and peace. Amen.*

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