

Current Thoughts

from Dwight's corner

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During a recent conversation with a young GRR Pastor he told me how his preaching had changed. The point of each sermon was now to "get people to fall in love with Jesus Christ." I think he is on to something. I have been conscious that my own preaching the last 10 years has a more explicit Christ focus (at least when I am free to choose text and topic). There are good reasons for such a focus.

First, Jesus Christ provides the definition of who we are and what we do, both individually and corporately. As I have said before, the movement is Christology to Ecclesiology (the community of faith around Jesus Christ) to Missiology (the community of faith sent into the world as Christ was sent). We cannot hope to gather and nurture a community of faith without attending to Jesus Christ. That is the task of discipleship. Likewise, we cannot sustain motive, energy and focus for mission without Jesus undergirding, informing and empowering who we are and what we do.

There is a second reason for the intentional focus of inviting people to "fall in love with Jesus." We live in an age of paradox -- there is great interest in Jesus and at the same time there great ignorance of Jesus. There is widespread biblical illiteracy, both inside and outside our churches. Sometimes this is our own fault. We have been distracted to the point of exclusive focus on any of a number of issues, good causes or personal "needs." At other times our undiscerning culture sees Jesus as just one more offering as we move down the serving line of a spiritual smorgasbord. We pick a little Jesus, a little Buddha, a little Mohammed, a little Hillel, a little Confucius, etc., etc., but are careful not get the plate too full or to pick things we dislike. At still other times, Jesus has been presented in such a way that He is anything but inviting. People have been unnecessarily repulsed by an incomplete portrait of Jesus that looks more intent on punishing than inviting.

If there ever was a time to preach and teach Jesus plain and simple, clear and unmuddled, compassionate and inviting, this is it.

To know Jesus, to preach Jesus, to teach Jesus, to follow Jesus, to reflect on what Christian faith means for us in this time and this place demands that we begin with the story of Jesus. We cannot presume that those sitting in our churches know it -- let alone those who have not darkened the door of a church. More than that, how can poorly-discipled Christians speak invitingly of Jesus to their friends and co-workers?

As I reflect on the story of Jesus, I cannot escape the fact that it begins in **mystery**. Jesus was not rootless, but joined a human family "in transit." God had worked through Abraham, Moses and the prophets to prepare a place of "intersection" in Bethlehem.

The story of Jesus moves through **offense**. Jesus was not (and is not) exactly who we want him to be. He named our personal sin that we would rather deny or at least hide. He challenged our social sin that institutionalizes economic disparity, violence, and injustice. He preached and acted out a Kingdom -- but one not of this world, offending violent revolutionaries.

The story of Jesus personalizes and practices **grace**. He ate and drank with real live sinners, loving them without approving of sin. The greedy rich young ruler was confronted with the same love and grace as the woman taken in adultery.

The story of Jesus models a life of **sacrifice**. Jesus was not just one more in a long list of "victims." A lifetime of decisions climaxes in Gethsemane. Jesus surrendered his will, choosing a deadly path that would result in the redemption of humanity. (Another mystery!)

The story of Jesus explodes with **hope**. Death could not hold him. And because he lives, we live.

The Region's theme for 2010 is ***Thy Kingdom Come***. It will be launched at the Annual Assembly in Peoria. Jesus inaugurated the Kingdom which is our prayer, passion and purpose. I invite you to preach and teach Jesus in all His mystery, offense, grace, sacrifice, and hope during 2010.



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