

## A COMMUNITY OF BLESSING: Pay It Forward

---

Theme: In a post-Christian era of tarnished Christian image, the way to gain credibility is through authentic Christ-like compassionate service to the world.

Texts: Matthew 5:14-16; I Peter 2:9-12

Series: Get a Life...Give it Away

All that we have been reflecting on this month regarding Christian servanthood has been leading to this message. We have affirmed servant love as modeled by Jesus as the mark of the Christian community. We also have noted that the application of this service to the world for which Christ gave His life is captured in compassion, especially in God's heart for the powerless.

My question this morning is why is servanthood so vital at the particular era in which we live? The answer to this question can be found in our texts for this morning and an awareness of the historical moment.

These two texts have phrasing in common. Jesus says of us, **"You are the light of the world...let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven"** (Matthew 5:14, 16) Peter echoes Jesus' words in the pre-Christian, pagan world of the first century church, **"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"** (I Peter 2:12). Both Jesus and Peter stress the authenticity of good deeds as foundational to pointing people to the glory of God. We live at a time when our credibility will be reestablished beyond words.

Let me put my professor hat on this morning and try to paint a picture of the crucial age in which we live, and therefore why the lifestyle of service to our community will be a major means of witness.

In I Chronicles 12:32 it is said of one of the tribes of Israel that **"the men of Issachar understood their times and knew what Israel must do."** We need to understand our times so that we can know what we must do. How should we understand our times? In the Western world, meaning Europe, North America, other English speaking settings like New Zealand and Australia, we have been going through a cultural shift of seismic proportions which has tremendous implications for how we do church. We have been living through a time of massive transition that has repositioned the church within a new missionary context. Where we once thought of missions as a far-off enterprise in lands beyond, the mission of the church has returned to its doorstep. No longer can we think of missions as 100 Christians who support one person we send to another part of the world.

It has been said that the 21<sup>st</sup> Century is the century most like the first century since the church was born. The church in Christ's and Paul's day was conceived

## A COMMUNITY OF BLESSING: Pay It Forward

---

into a hostile environment. To be a Christian was to be a part of a fringe group. The Roman Empire was packed with a multiplicity of pagan deities with the emperor often claiming god status for himself. Christianity was an illicit faith out of step with the dominant life. To hold to a belief in one God, whose Son occupied a human body, was crucified on a Roman cross in shame and raised from the dead in power, was to hold to a belief that was simply not acceptable and incomprehensible to most. Isn't this actually starting to sound pretty contemporary? This era of the first three centuries of church life is known as the Apostolic Period. An apostle is one who is sent. The primary mission of the church during this period was to bear witness to this resurrected Christ who had the power to transform lives.

Yet everything changed for the position of the church in the world at the beginning of the fourth century. From the time of the Roman Emperor Constantine, the first emperor of Rome friendly to the church, to the 1960's in the U.S., the church of Jesus Christ held an influential position in a friendly and supportive culture. For 1600 years the church of Jesus Christ was the primary institution that shaped the Western world. Even in the U.S. with our doctrine of separation of church and state, the church was expected to provide the ethical and moral glue to hold society together. Until the 1960's the church was respected, consulted, and influential. Western civilization was a churched society.

The era from the early 300's to 1960's is called Christendom -the rule of Christianity.

But where are we now? We live at the time of the collapse of Christendom. We are in that generation of transition from one era to the next. What are the signs that Christendom has collapsed?

### **A. We have lost the memory of Christianity in our society.**

I clearly remember the warnings of Francis Schaeffer and Elton Trueblood, two Christian prophets whose influence reached its peak in the 1970's. At that time they said we lived in a "cut-flower" society. That is a helpful image. When you cut a flower from its roots and place it in a vase, it can still look good for a period of time, and then it droops. They said during the 60's and 70's that we were living off a memory of the faith, still looked alive, but we had been severed from our roots. The next generation, they said, would be without even a memory of Christianity. Brothers and sisters, we are that next generation of which they spoke.

This means that for large segments of the population that there is no Christian background, vocabulary, or assumptions. People have been described in relationship to the Christian faith as "ignostic", meaning that they do not know what Christians are talking about. One young couple

## A COMMUNITY OF BLESSING: Pay It Forward

---

realized that their son's spiritual development was lacking when he confused church with Church's Fried Chicken. When the grandparents said that they were going to take their grandchildren to church, their grandson wanted to stay longer because as he said, "I want to stay for fried chicken."

On the Tonight Show one night Jay Leno inadvertently confirmed the loss of memory of Christianity in our society. In one of his "man-on-the-street" interviews he collared people to ask them questions about the Bible. He asked two college age women, "*Can you name one of the Ten Commandments?*" One replied, "*Freedom of speech?*" Then Leno turned to a young man, "*Who according to the Bible was eaten by a whale?*" The confident answer, "*I know, I know...Pinnocchio.*" The memory of Christianity is gone.

### **B. The church has been moved to the margins of our society.**

Once at the center of power or at least influence, we are now on the fringes. As we have become increasingly secularized, by that I mean that the sacred has been stripped from public life, then the church and transcendent morality are no longer invited into the public discussion, except as a novelty.

In many ways the church has become invisible. This was brought home to me through a recent TV AD campaign for the Sunday LA Times Newspaper. Sophisticated looking people are talking about how they spend their Sunday mornings with the LA Times. One person says, "*On Sunday I get the LA Times delivered right to my door, because on Sunday I don't want to go anywhere.*" Another says, "*The longest walk I want to make on Sunday morning is to my front porch to pick up the Sunday Times.*" I would contend that a generation ago that AD would not have been possible. It would have offended the church. Now it is assumed that no one thinks about Sunday as sacred space. Many of you experience this because you are having to make decisions about whether you allow sporting events to supersede your Sunday morning commitments. The church is invisible to many planning the soccer schedule and I might add, will be unless, we speak up.

### **C. Discarding of traditional moral convictions and lifestyles.**

It is breathtaking to see the rapid change in the moral climate when you catalogue the shift in moral positions that have occurred in just the last 40 years in our country. In the last 40 years what have we seen? The previously unthinkable has become acceptable. Marriage is no longer sacred, nor does it provide a sacred context in which to express our sexuality; sanctity of human life has been discarded in favor of choice; we

## A COMMUNITY OF BLESSING: Pay It Forward

---

are no longer sure we want doctors committed to preserving life; homosexuality is an equally valid, alternative lifestyle; materialism is not greed but a birth right; and the poor who are near to the heart of God are the scapegoats for societal ills, etc. From a historical perspective this is a very rapid change in the acceptable moral standards for a culture.

### D. The emergence of a Post-Modern Worldview.

We live at the time of the collapse of Christendom. We have lost the memory of Christianity; the church has been pushed to the edges; there has been a departure from traditional values; and relativism prevails. I call this time a “seam in history”. We live during a time of great upheaval, because world views are in transition.

The question becomes, how should we respond to the moment in which we live? Now there are two very different ways that we can react to this new circumstance. The first is to consider the new position in which the church finds itself an entirely bad thing and follow the strong impulse to find our way back to the center. Coming to terms with the death of Christendom is similar to coming to terms with our own impending death or that of a loved one. Elizabeth Kubler-Ross outlined the famous stages of coming to terms with death in her book On Death and Dying. There are five: denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and finally acceptance.

**(1)** In regards to the death of Christendom in the West, **The first stage is denial.** It can't be. We are a Christian nation. Our founding fathers were Christians. We can win the culture war. If we just elect enough Christians to office, we can take this nation back again.

**(2) The second stage is anger.** We can shake our fist at the culture and in righteous indignation point out all the awful ways our culture is falling apart. **“How dare you turn away from God!”** we scream. We then become identified with a message of condemnation and odious self-righteousness. Let me dwell on this stage a little longer than the others. In our anger over our cultures' divesting itself of traditional moral values that we hold dear, I believe what the world feels from us is our hot breath of censure. In the cartoon serial, *Simpsons*, Homer Simpson asked his fundamentalist neighbors where they had been for the weekend: They responded, **“We went away to a Christian camp. We were learning how to be more judgmental.”** Robert Lewis, the lead pastor at Fellowship Bible Church and the author of the influential book, *The Church of Irresistible Influence*, indicts himself for the condemnation that came forth from his own pulpit. **“To me, jabbing and stabbing the world with the sword of what I considered impeccable logic and reasoning, backed by God's word and a dash of holy anger, was the way to turn the world around...The community also felt our occasional 'hot breath' concerning issues like abortion, pornography, and other specific social ills—a disembodied voice**

## A COMMUNITY OF BLESSING: Pay It Forward

---

**of judgment.”** Remember that line. We are angry that we have lost control. We are angry that society has moved away from convictions close to our hearts. So we shout. What the world feels from us is condemnation.

**(3) The third stage is bargaining.** If we just can have a revival in the land then we can turn this thing around. How often have I heard Christian leaders invoke the plea from God from II Chronicles 7:14. **“If my people who are called by my name, humble themselves, pray, seek my face, and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven, and will forgive their sin and heal their land.” (II Chronicles 7:14).** Much of the call for revival is little more than nostalgia for what once was. We want to return to the position of privilege at the center of culture that we once enjoyed.

**(4) The fourth stage is depression.** This is the recognition that we can't go back, things are not going to be what they once were. A lot of people who are raised in the traditional church are experiencing the loss of the church they once knew and in which they have grown up. Much of what we have seen as new forms of worship over the last decade have been attempts to adapt to the times in which we live. This can be very disconcerting to those comfortable in the church culture. A member of my former church said, "I feel like a dinosaur that is becoming extinct." The church is trying to figure out who it is to be in these changing times. This new position is uncomfortable.

The last stage that Kubler-Ross speaks of is **acceptance**. It is making peace with the new reality. It is only in acceptance of the death of Christendom, that you can embrace the opportunity. We have been marginalized and have become powerless. The church must reinvent itself to be faithful in this new missionary context. We must go through an entire reconfiguration of our identity in relationship to our culture. It is always on the margins and in times of powerlessness that God shows up to create resurrections. We must ask the Lord of the church who brings life out of death, to show us again what his plan is for the church.

I am not saying that Christians in a democratic culture should not attempt to penetrate every aspect of our world whether that be business, government, Hollywood, or values. What I am saying is that what people need to see is far more than words. Robert Lewis wrote, **“Our postmodern world is tired of words—it wants real. Real is everything. Real is convincing.”**

What is real? It is service in the name of Jesus Christ at the point of needs of people's lives. If the 21<sup>st</sup> century is the century most like the 1<sup>st</sup> century, what can we learn from the early church as to how it brought down the pagan Roman Empire? I would say that it is exactly what Jesus and Peter said, **“Let your light so shine before men that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven”**. An early church father by the name of Tertullian writing at

## A COMMUNITY OF BLESSING: Pay It Forward

---

the end of the 2<sup>nd</sup> century AD while under Roman rule wrote, **“It is our care for the helpless, our practice of loving kindness that brands us in the eyes of many of our opponents. ‘Only look,’ they say, ‘look at how they love one another.’**”

There is a wonderful story that comes out of 4<sup>th</sup> century Christianity 50 years after the Roman Emperor Constantine ended the persecution against Christianity. For a brief period a pagan Roman Emperor, Julian the Apostate, took over and tried to stamp out Christianity and restore paganism. He was unsuccessful, in part, because his pagan subjects refused to share with the poor. Julian had to grudgingly admit to a fellow pagan **“that the godless Galileans [i.e. Christians] feed not only their poor but ours as well.”**

Let's move to the present. What gains begrudging respect from those who want to reject and even hate the Christian message is undeniable acts of compassion in the name of Christ. Nicholas Kristoff is a New York Times editorial writer who openly in his own words **“disagrees strongly with most evangelical Christians, theologically and politically.”** Yet he wrote an editorial entitled “God on Their Side” about evangelical Christian work particularly in Mozambique. He recounts the story of how a 17 year named Sonia Angeline was rescued from the town garbage dump while enduring four days of labor pains. She was a hairsbreadth from dying during childbirth. She didn't have the money to take a taxi to the hospital, until Katrin Blackert, a 23-year-old volunteer with Iris Ministries, encountered her on her regular visits to children in the camp. She paid for the cab and saved her life. After observing the kind of ministry that was taking place, Kristoff was forced to conclude, **“But I'm convinced that we should celebrate the big evangelical push into Africa because the bottom line is that it will mean more orphanages, more schools, and above all, more clinics and hospitals.”** What will it take to even gain a hearing in some circles for the claims of Christianity?

The ministry of Young Life has been using a phrase that its founder, Jim Rayburn, popularized. They say, **“We must earn the right to be heard.”** By that they mean, in their ministry to high school students, we must enter their world and live in it. We must walk alongside and understand the pressures that a high school youth faces. It is only then, that there will there be an opening to anything that we have to say.

The dominant image that Robert Lewis proposes we adopt for the church is that of being bridge builders. Bridges are designed to cross chasms. We have been shouting across the chasm between the church and the world. **“Straighten up!”** Instead we need to be building bridges between the church and the world. The wonderful thing about a bridge is that it bears two-way traffic. We build bridges from the church to the world across which we can walk. And as we embrace others, then we can walk back across that bridge and introduce people to the one

## A COMMUNITY OF BLESSING: Pay It Forward

---

who sent us across in the first place. The bridge is built out of good deeds that are so transparent that the purpose of our heart is to point to the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ so that He is glorified.

We can no longer assume: **“Build it and they will come.”** That was the era in which this church was founded. The message was, **“Do church excellently and people will show up.”** That era no longer exists. It is no longer about coming, but about going. Lewis writes, **“Unless the church rediscovers its primary role as bridge builder, the incarnational power of the gospel will remain hidden, and the credibility to reach a culture of cynical, experiential, and spiritually hungry souls will be lost. Even worse, the church’s incomparable message of eternal and abundant life, despite relentless weekly proclamation, will continue to be ignored. People will simply no longer listen to or attend churches that seem incapable of living out what is preached. Bridges of influence-tangible and evident through the lifestyles and good work of believers—are the only answer.”**

Sometimes there is an image in the secular media that conveys God’s truth in a way that captures the imagination. *Pay It Forward* was released in the year 2000. It is the story of a 7<sup>th</sup> grade teacher, Mr. Simonet, played by Kevin Spacey and his challenge to his students to engage the world and come up with a plan to change it. An 11 year old Trevor McKinney, played by Haley Joel Osment, is a tender hearted dreamer who takes the challenge to heart. He comes up with a plan. Let’s watch.

Play DVD clip (From the movie “PAY IT FORWARD”)

“A perfect world, so?” these are Trevor’s closing words of this scene. The church in God’s scheme is not perfect, nor ever will be, yet we are the chosen instrument through which God extends his heart to the world. What do we want to be known for in this community? Wouldn’t it be wonderful if everywhere people went, Christ Church people were found giving in the spirit of Christ, just because we are called to be there. One of our members is recruiting people to simply help in a local elementary school library, because she went there and said, “How can we help?” Don’t we want to surprise the community by showing up at our schools, government offices, police and fire station, senior community centers, simply asking, **“What needs do you see and how can we make a difference in this community?”** Let’s shock the world with a generosity of spirit. I want to be a pastor in a church that is known to be a blessing in the community and that lives are touched because we dared to make ourselves available. Our annual Project Serve effort is simply a way of catalyzing our hearts for a lifestyle urged by Peter, **“Live such good lives among the pagans that...they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day He visits us.”** Let’s build some bridges!

