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# THE FIRST WORD

FROM FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH OF BONITA SPRINGS

## Disruptive Invocation

SERMON BY REV. BRAD ROGERS ■ SEPTEMBER 16, 2018

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Since the beginning of the world, no one has had greater influence, no one has shaped the hearts of individuals or the trajectory of culture more, no one has left a greater mark on civilization than the One who was marked in His hands and in His feet and in His side for us. Jesus has had the greatest impact on the world of any human being who has ever walked the earth. He has, literally, changed the world. Yet surprisingly, when He spent about 33 years of life on this earth, He influenced a relatively small number of people. As compared to the millions of people who have come to call Him Lord and Savior over life, His influence only grew after His life.

Consider the words that Pastor John Ortberg from Menlo Park Presbyterian Church in California wrote in a book called **Who Is This Man?**

Jesus' impact was greater a hundred years after his death than during his life; it was greater still after five hundred years; after a thousand years his legacy laid the foundation for much of Europe; after two thousand years he has more followers in more places than ever.

How is it that this One person, who lived 2,000 years ago and who influenced a relatively small number of people during His life, was able to literally change the course of history, especially given that the world which He inhabited rejected Him and crucified Him? Part of the answer is that He found some very unlikely people to carry on the message that He started. He called some simple fishermen, a few reformed tax collectors, a thief, and various others who became the early church. They were His Spirit-empowered community carrying the message of Christ to all people. After His resurrection, He chose

another, perhaps even more unlikely, person. He chose a man who was actually a religious leader in the Jewish faith, a Pharisee who hated the church and was persecuting the church. After a significant encounter with the resurrected Jesus, this man was blind for three days. His name was changed to Paul and he became God's chosen instrument to reach beyond the Jewish faith and take the gospel to all nations. He would become the "Light to the Gentiles."

In our Call to Worship from Isaiah 49 this morning, verse 6 reads: "I will send my light to the Gentiles, that my salvation may reach to the ends of the earth." Paul understood this prophecy as not only being God's word but being God's word specifically to **him**. This became his life's mission. His purpose in life was to share the good news and the hope that he had found in Jesus with all people from all nations. Today we will read a passage from Acts 17:16-34. It is the first passage recording Paul's taking the gospel beyond the Jewish faith and into what we would call a Gentile audience.

**W**hile Paul was waiting for them (that is Silas and Timothy with whom he had been traveling) in Athens, he was greatly distressed to see that the city was full of idols. <sup>17</sup>So he reasoned in the synagogue with both Jews and God-fearing Greeks, as well as in the market-place day by day with those who happened to be there. <sup>18</sup>A group of Epicurean and Stoic philosophers began to debate with him. Some of them asked, "What is this babler trying to say?" Others remarked, "He seems to be advocating foreign gods." They said this because Paul was preaching the good news about Jesus and the resurrection. <sup>19</sup>Then they took him and brought him to a meeting of the Areopagus, where they said to him, "May we know what this new teaching is that you are presenting? <sup>20</sup>You are bringing some strange ideas to our ears, and we would like to know what they mean." <sup>21</sup>(All the Athenians and the foreigners who lived there spent their time doing nothing but talking about and listening to the latest ideas.)

<sup>22</sup>Paul then stood up in the meeting of the Areopagus and said: “People of Athens! I see that in every way you are very religious. <sup>23</sup>For as I walked around and looked carefully at your objects of worship, I even found an altar with this inscription: to an unknown god. So you are ignorant of the very thing you worship—and this is what I am going to proclaim to you.

<sup>24</sup>“The God who made the world and everything in it is the Lord of heaven and earth and does not live in temples built by human hands. <sup>25</sup>And he is not served by human hands, as if he needed anything. Rather, he himself gives **everyone** life and breath and everything else. <sup>26</sup>From one man he made all the nations, that they should inhabit the whole earth; and he marked out their appointed times in history and the boundaries of their lands. <sup>27</sup>God did this so that they would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from any one of us. <sup>28</sup>‘For in him we live and move and have our being.’ As some of your own poets have said, ‘We are his offspring.’

<sup>29</sup>“Therefore since we are God’s offspring, we should not think that the divine being is like gold or silver or stone—an image made by human design and skill. <sup>30</sup>In the past God overlooked such ignorance, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent. <sup>31</sup>For he has set a day when he will judge the world with justice by the man he has appointed. He has given proof of this to everyone by raising him from the dead.”

<sup>32</sup>When they heard about the resurrection of the dead, some of them sneered, but others said, “We want to hear you again on this subject.” <sup>33</sup>At that, Paul left the Council. <sup>34</sup>Some of the people became followers of Paul and believed. Among them was Dionysius, a member of the Areopagus, also a woman named Damaris, and a number of others.

## **Disruptive Innovation**

It is happening all the time today in countless industries, from the taxi industry to the music industry: leading business thinkers from Harvard's prestigious School of Business are referring to it as *disruptive innovation*. This term refers to the process by which an entrepreneurial start-up company begins to reach into a new market or the low end of an existing market. These new companies come onto the scene and the large, established organizations are not threatened by them because they do not reach into their particular area. Over time, though, as some early adopters pilot their new product, it is refined and eventually the new company is able to access the market and the profit margins of those larger companies, shifting the entire market from underneath the established organization. This is called disruptive innovation and it is happening in countless industries. Ideas can be very disruptive.

A week ago today, my wife Lauren and I were watching Sunday Night Football. It was the Bears versus the Packers in prime time. We hadn't watched primetime television for a number of years and we were absolutely shocked by what we saw. During breaks in the action there were commercials on network television for Netflix's original programming. Netflix is a company that has been disruptive since the day it started in 1997 as a small, mail order DVD rental business targeting people who didn't want to pay late fees to Blockbuster. Originally Blockbuster was not threatened by this new startup because Blockbuster had stores around the nation. In fact, it relied on consumers coming in to look at DVDs which they rented on impulse. Blockbuster rented them, and then made a lot of money on late fees.

Netflix came onto the scene but wasn't tremendously disruptive. But then, having taken note of the way that our technology was changing and the way in which we were receiving information, Netflix shifted their business plan and became an online streaming company. This allowed customers to watch high-quality movies and television shows from the convenience of their home without ever having to

leave. How disruptive was this for the movie rental industry? Let me put it this way: When was the last time you saw Blockbuster? I think there's only one left in the country, and it is in Bend, Oregon. There are former Blockbuster brick-and-mortar buildings sitting empty or repurposed by other companies. Netflix has shattered the movie rental industry.

Fast-forward to today. Netflix has made yet another shift. They used to be a movie rental company, then they shifted to an online streaming company sharing content with people, and today they are a production studio making their own original content and advertising for it on network television! They are disrupting another entire industry—the cable industry and network television industry! Many people are cutting the cord, so to speak, of their cable subscriptions in favor of these streaming programs.

This is disruptive innovation. New ideas can be very disruptive, shift markets entirely, and take down companies. For a little while, a company can avoid having to change, but if they wait too long they might find themselves going the way of Blockbuster.

### **Disruptive Invocation**

Back to our original question for the day: How is it that Jesus, a man who lived 2,000 years ago, with no power or prestige or wealth, should be known today? How is it that this Man could foundationally change the world?

Jesus has always been more than a little disruptive. When He came into the world, He came proclaiming that the Kingdom of God had been fulfilled in His coming. If you were one of the rulers and powers of that day, this would have been very disruptive to hear. His early followers called him Lord and Savior, the same two words that were used to describe the power of Caesar. It was Caesar who was supposed to be the lord and savior of all through his brute military force. When Jesus walked into the synagogue and said that He had the power to forgive sins, the power which was reserved only for God, He declared that He was the Son of God. It was threatening to

Jewish understanding of the very nature of God. For all these reasons, Jesus was a disruptive influence.

Do you know what companies do, what institutions do, to try to take care of those who disrupt the system? They try to stifle them and to stop them, which was why Jesus was constantly being run out of town; eventually it cost Him His life. But as we know, the message of Jesus Christ didn't stop at the end of His life. In fact, His influence only grew after His resurrection. His disciples carried the message even in the face of persecution. The resurrection power of Jesus Christ showed up all the more! Instead of disruptive innovation perhaps we should call it *disruptive invocation*, because "invocation" is a word that refers to someone calling upon the name of the Lord for salvation. The more the disciples called on the name of Jesus Christ as their Savior, the more disruptive it became to those around them and the more it changed the lives of individuals and institutions, eventually even nations and cultures.

Paul walked into Athens where two Blockbuster-sized institutions were represented. There was the Jewish synagogue and there were the Gentile, God-fearing Greeks, each with their faith systems. The Jews believed that salvation came through strict adherence to the law, and that it was primarily for the people who were descendants of Abraham, the tribe of Israel. The Greeks, on the other hand, believed that the best way to live an honorable life was to study wisdom and virtue, invoking the names of countless gods. Paul walked into this environment and began to preach about the resurrection of Jesus Christ. This wasn't easy. As Paul said in 1 Corinthians 1:23, preaching of a resurrected Lord to the Jews was scandalous; to God-fearing Greeks, it was foolishness. Yet Paul walked in, invoked the name of Jesus Christ, and said that He had been raised from the dead. Paul was invited to a meeting of the Areopagus because the local city leaders wanted to hear more. He was given the opportunity to proclaim the Good News.

Paul knew his audience well. He was a Pharisee by trade. He knew how to communicate with the Jewish people and when he walked

into Athens, he studied and took note of the culture that was represented and the symbols around town. In doing so, he was able to adapt the Christian faith and make it relevant and understandable to a group of people who were previously far away from God. He even quoted their own Stoic philosopher Aratus when he said, *“In him, we live and move and have our being”*—referring to Christ. He used their own thinkers to adapt the core of the gospel to speak to this new audience of people.

Paul was incredibly innovative in presenting these two revolutionary ideas. First, he adapted the gospel by communicating it in a way that people could understand. Second, he understood that the gospel was supposed to be for **all** people. He took Jesus seriously when Jesus said to “go therefore and make disciples of all nations” (Matthew 28:19). He believed that what had happened in Christ and the hope that he had found wasn’t for a small group of people or one nation or one tribe, but it was for all people. All people in Christ have access to the same hope that you and I have found. This was revolutionary!

For the most part in the ancient world, religions tended to be ethnically and geographically specific. If you were Jewish, for example, you tended to follow the Jewish God; you are a descendent of Abraham, and you followed the Law. If you were from Canaan, you tended to follow the Canaanite gods. If you were a Greek, you tended to follow the philosophers and those who invoked the names of the idols in Athens. All religions tended to be ethnically and geographically specific. Paul came onto the scene and said that the gospel is Good News for everyone! Everyone can find the hope that we have in Christ. He adapted the message of the gospel to speak to those people, which is what helped Paul to become the Light to the Gentiles. It was this idea that shaped civilizations to come.

Just exactly how successful was this? Timothy Keller, a pastor of a Presbyterian church in New York City, wrote a book called **Making Sense of God**. He wrote these words about how successful Paul was in adapting the gospel for those to whom he spoke:

One of the unique things about Christianity is that it is the only truly worldwide religion. Over 90 percent of Muslims live in a band from Southeast Asia to the Middle East and Northern Africa. Over 95 percent of all Hindus are in India and immediate environs. Some 88 percent of Buddhists are in East Asia. However, about 25 percent of Christians live in Europe, 25 percent in Central and South America, 22 percent in Africa, 15 percent (and growing fast) in Asia, and 12 percent in North America.

In other words, the adaptation of the gospel meant that it has been relevant in literally every culture into which it has come. Christ's vision of salvation reaching all nations and sending a "Light to the Gentiles" to the ends of the earth has begun to be fulfilled. All this because it's been remarkably adaptive in different environments.

### **Further Disruption**

We are in a time of incredible disruption. I mentioned how it's happened in the network television industry, in the movie rental industry, in the taxi industry, in the music industry. We live in a world that is in constant change and the greatest change is just how fast it is changing around us. Organizations are struggling to keep up, and the Church is often no exception. For 1,600 years the Church was at the center of cultural development, specifically in Europe and North America. It enjoyed unprecedented power to influence culture. In the last several decades, however, the church has moved from the center to the periphery. It is no longer the cultural hub. It is being moved to the margins and losing its influence on the world around us.

This has been going on for quite a while. Actually, in 1966 John Lennon was being interviewed by the *London Evening Standard* and was quoted as saying, "Christianity will go. It will vanish and shrink. I needn't argue about that. I'm right and will be proved right." He then went on to say that the Beatles were more famous than Jesus, which I think was his ultimate point. It was more about self-buildup than about the message of Christianity, but this is a sentiment that exists in the world: Christianity is just going to go away.

As we look around Europe and around the big cities in the United States, specifically on the coasts, we see that churches are losing attendance. In fact, in some places it has gotten so bad that the buildings which they inhabited, though recognizable on the outside, no longer have Christians on the inside. Consider the former Presbyterian church in North London which today is a bar. A former church in Naples even became a bar. Was John Lennon right? Is Christianity going away?

It is my conviction that this is not true, and here's why: It's in our very DNA as a Church to be flexible and adaptable to any new culture. The gospel has always adapted. The core has stayed the same, but the church has always adapted to speak relevantly to any culture. This worldwide religion, though diverse in culture, has never been stifled or stopped, because within it is the Resurrection power of Jesus Christ.

There are three things we can do for the gospel to continue to be proclaimed. Remember, Jesus chose some very unlikely people to share the message with the world. He chose some simple fishermen, some reformed tax collectors and thieves, even those that had persecuted the church, to be the "Light to the Gentiles." And guess what? As unsuited as we may feel, God is choosing us to be the "Light to the World" now. Here are some simple suggestions.

- 1) **We need to stick to the core.** Just a few minutes ago I told the kids the core of the gospel. In Jesus Christ, through His death and resurrection, we can have forgiveness and eternal life with God. We can start now with our daily living. There are those in the world today who have said that the church needs to adjust its principles and adjust its core in order to speak and to be relevant in the world today. I don't think that's true. Let's go back to Netflix for a second. Netflix adapted the means by which it communicated with the world, but it was always an entertainment company. It never changed its core, it just adapted to its surroundings. The Church may express itself differently, but the **core** cannot and will not need to be

changed. It is built on the principles of grace expressed through Jesus Christ and made accessible through God's Word; we will never change that. We need to stick to the core.

- 2) All of us—not just the church leadership—need to **study our culture**. When Paul walked into Athens, he looked around at the symbols of the culture and he realized what value systems undergirded those symbols. Then he presented the core of the gospel in a way that was relevant and accessible to those who were listening, both Jews and Gentiles. He was absolutely brilliant! We, too, as the Church, must study the world around us, determine how it is changing and what the competing value systems are, and present that core message in a way that is relevant.
- 3) We need to **live the Gospel**. This is actually what the early church did so powerfully and compellingly. They lived the Gospel message; they didn't just say that Jesus is Lord, they lived it as the truth. Do you know what they were often accused of in the first century? They were accused of being ridiculous for loving their enemies. They were accused of taking care of widows and orphans who the rest of the world had written off. They were accused of living the gospel. We as Christians need to do the same thing.

How was it that One Man, 2,000 years ago, could change the entire course of history? It was because those who followed after Him were empowered by His spirit, maintained the core of His teachings, studied the world around them, adapted the message for others, and lived it out! Friends, I submit to you that this is our challenge today!