

How to Change the World

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Luke 4:14-21

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What is that common definition of insanity? To do the same thing over and over again expecting different results...In his book *Outliers* in 2008, Malcolm Gladwell reversed or challenged that definition a bit, reminding us that even if we have been blessed with enormous talent or natural ability or great skill, to truly excel in a craft or achieve above and beyond the normal expectations at something requires '10,000' hours of practice. After receiving some criticism for the science and analysis behind claims Gladwell wrote this: 'there is a lot of confusion about the 10,000 hour rule. It doesn't apply to sports. And practice isn't a sufficient condition for success. I could play chess for 100 years and I'll never be a grandmaster. The point is simply that natural ability requires a huge investment of time in order to be made manifest.'

When I was all packed up and ready to leave home for college, the parting words that were put into a letter and handed to me as I walked onto an airplane quoted Woody Allen, reminding me that '80% of life is showing up.' I am not sure Woody was a great exemplar at the other 20% of life, but still, there is something meant by that statement that is radically crucial to life---fidelity, consistency, making your bed, showing up, being counted on, and showing up for others---things done over and over again that seem mundane and ordinary but that are the very way faithfulness occurs, the very means by which God works in this world, the ordinary practices that lead enrich lives, shape souls, and impact the world in remarkable ways.

I remember reading not long ago that Facebook founder (sorry I refuse to say Meta—it just sounds silly to me), Mark Zuckerberg had taken to styling his hair akin to Augustus Caesar. The article went on to say this was no coincidence and some kind of unintentional hair-do, but that in fact Zuckerberg admired Octavian, Caesar Augustus, and by having a similar cut he sought to project a similar image. Why would it be surprising, when you think about it, that the titans of our age would be enamored with the power, exuberance, and splendor of ancient Rome, and fashion their own businesses, lives, and metaverses, into modern little Roman empires, not much interested in liberating humanity to become the creatures God intended them to be, but to make sure humanity is captive to the algorithm designed analytics and metrics and that we stay in our lane, keeping our heads down and on our devices. I should not pick on Zuckerberg alone, just the past year, Amazon founder Jeff Bezos donned a silly looking space suit and got in a rocket built by his new space exploration and space tourism company Blue Origin and blasted off to explore beyond the far limits of the earth's atmosphere. The goal of life again being not so much to liberate humanity or to better humanity, but to maximize profits from humanity, and then transcend humanity. Maybe in a less brutal way than Augustus or

Andrew Carnegie, but still pretty conventional power expansion. Though one could argue that Carnegie's great legacy may be the commitment to placing libraries throughout what was then the developing nation and it always amazes me to travel to a small nothing-special town in anywhere America and find a library that was given by Carnegie to give the gift of books and reading to a community and generations he would never meet. That's how you change the world though, right. You make a lot of money, you create a foundation, and you try to move the needle on health, on education, on poverty, on food insecurity, or some other strategic initiative. Or you rally around a cause, raise an army, and conquer more territory or dislodge the powerful or enact a rebellion. Or you invent a product that everyone must have and build your own empire.

Which makes who Jesus is, what Jesus does, and how Jesus goes about doing it even more mesmerizing, surprising, and unsettling to our conventional notions about enacting change. When I was a small child, I remember asking a parent who would listen to my barrage of questions, that I could find where my heart was in my body and I knew where my mind or brain was, but where exactly was my soul? Lanta Davis, professor of humanities and literature at Indiana Wesleyan University, reminds us that 'Christians of other times intentionally cultivated the imagination because they understood that we become what we behold,' and that our word 'character' 'comes from the Greek *kharakter*, a stamp that impresses an image. Medieval Christians compared the soul to a wax tablet' and that part of the point of showing up together in Christian community was soul formation, to shape our souls.¹

Maybe that is central to our mission too...not just to add members to our congregation (though certainly important, right Margaret Anne) or to perpetuate new generations of Presbyterians or to believe our main purpose is to address all the problems we see in society, but maybe our central mission is to help shape souls, to help all who darkens these doors to realize that we have a soul, and to invest our time and energy in the practice of shaping souls as part of the way we seek to serve Christ's mission and shape our world. It is always important, I think, not to lose sight of Martin Luther's observation that it is impossible not to worship something. That we humans are worshipping creatures. So if you want to take God out of the equation fine, but you are still going to worship something. Nature abhors a vacuum. And so do we. And if you wanted a short answer to why I believe participating in a Christian community matters, showing up matters, being in community together matters, it is because it reminds us that we have a soul and that to have a soul is to care about other people, to care about the important issues in our world, to care about stretching our minds and our resources and our understanding of what it means to follow Jesus Christ. It is to try, however stubbornly and haphazardly, to worship something beyond our own personal preferences. As much

¹ Lanta Davis, 'A Vandalized Imagination,' *The Christian Century*, 28.

as we prefer it, as much as we might fight against within ourselves, there is no such thing as private Christianity.

Its interesting that Jesus' first act of ministry here in Luke's gospel is a very public one. He travels around his home region teaching at the surrounding communities and synagogues. And then he goes home to Nazareth and does the most unremarkable, mundane, un-radical thing you could ever possibly think of doing; he attends worship. If you are looking for a revolutionary and a someone who is going to burn the whole existing structure all down, I think Jesus is going to be a bit of a disappointment at times. How does he going about changing, saving, and being a Messiah to the world here in Luke as he begins his ministry? He goes to church. He travels to worshipping communities and teaches and he goes to his hometown, Nazareth, and Luke tells us 'he went to synagogue on the Sabbath day, as was his custom.' Theologian Karl Barth notices this odd way Jesus goes about changing the world, 'he did not separate Himself from the Galilean synagogues,' 'he was not really a 'reformer championing new orders against the old ones, contesting the latter in order to replace them by the former. He did not range Himself and His disciples with any of the existing parties. Nor did set up against them an opposing party.'² Barth concludes that Jesus' existence was unsettling even as he did not come in as a rebel or revolutionary wanting to dismantle the existing structures and burn it all down. I am reminded of the quotation from Martin Luther King, Jr., whose birth we commemorated last week, that whom you would change, you must first love. Jesus brings about change, he initiates change, he goes about changing the world, at least in our passage here, not by ignoring or dismissing, but by showing up on the Sabbath Day, opening up the scriptures and reading them aloud, and proclaiming their fulfillment. Again, not exactly the opening act pyrotechnics, fireworks, and power play you would expect from a gamechanger, Savior of the world, and Messiah. Zuckerberg, Bezos, Caesar Augustus, they could all make a spectacular and splashy entrance. Jesus makes his entrance by basically doing what pretty much all of us did today. Getting up on the Sabbath and going to worship. And all he does once he gets there is to open the scroll and read scripture. Not even a sermon. Imagine that. Nevermind. Don't' imagine that.

Not long ago I heard a seminary professor quoted as saying that when you walk into a room and find an open Bible and you start reading it, watch out, something miraculous is about to happen. As the scriptures are read, heard, lived, and embodied in the life and limbs of the community attending to them, miraculous things happen. We discover our souls, we are reminded that we have not just been put on this earth to consume product or to make a living, but to make lives, lives that live and believe as our closing hymn puts it, we are here to become living echoes of the Word. In so doing we find that it is possible as that living Word speaks, that we are called to say something and do something that

² Karl Barth, CD IV/2, 171-173.

reflects and riffs on it in our own corners of God's creation. That is how Jesus goes about changing the world and that is how Jesus goes about using us to do more than just play church when we gather together here. Jesus Christ really believes that works. Show Up. Hear the Gospel. And live it.

It is a power more deep and transformative and resilient than playing god and trying to amass our little empires or copycatting Caesar Augustus' 'do,' or trying to pretend we can live without a soul or without each other. It is not easy. It often flies under the radar of how success is measured, how power is wielded, and how impact is quantified. We may do it over and over again and not see any results. We may try the 10,000 hour rule and think we haven't moved the needle. And all Jesus does is keep showing up, empowering his gospel to be heard, and enabling us to live it and to find our souls—until his kingdom comes.