

Sermon: "Persuasive Power"

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Scripture readings: 1 Samuel 3:1-20 and John 1:43-51

The last week of January, my husband Stephen and I were in Mississippi visiting Stephen's brother Greg. Stephen and Greg had great experiences all through their teen years by being part of a dynamic youth ministry led by Methodist churches in Mississippi. Greg is a good public speaker and all through his 20s, 30s and 40s when he lived in California as a general contractor and a science teacher, he was invited back to Mississippi for these same youth ministry events. So it has felt like a perfect circle for him to return and work with some of the same people now, as one of the two directors of a church camp. He's also built several buildings for this camp.

During this visit just before New Year's, we got to talking about the future, and Greg said how much he'd hate to come back in 20 years and find the camp's buildings in disarray and decay. That point of view, about the relationship between buildings and one's legacy, is deep. I would never discount it, especially for a contractor.

But I personally have a different view of legacy and I think Greg really does, too. I see legacy as the reverberation of one's life in other people's lives. That reverberation can be long and strong, as when one is talking about the legacy of a parent in the lives of children and grandchildren. As we get older we see more and more ways our families of origin have left their mark on us. That is a legacy, and most families try pretty hard to make it a good one.

Or the reverberation can be short but still important. A night when Greg spoke at the camp that led some teenager to open his or her heart to Jesus. A moment when some camper saw the two directors playing frisbee golf and realized that being a Christian can be fun and not all seriousness. A moment when a camper wanted to post something on Facebook but Greg pointed out how it could be misunderstood, and the camper learned the importance of not being a party to even the appearance of evil.

This idea of the short but important impact we can have came home to me when I was invited to stand in for the denomination's moderator at an event in Louisiana. And a very strange event it was. For sport, this large congregation was in the habit of inviting the denomination's top official to visit and to be grilled. First you lead worship, then everyone takes a comfort break, and then everyone comes back and asks you the toughest questions they can think of. They read everything you've ever written in advance in order to prepare. (You can't make this up!)

Well I preached, we adjourned, everyone came back, and I got grilled. A week later I got a letter from someone who was there that day. He introduced himself and wrote that he was a candidate for ministry and was going to have to be examined by his presbytery on his theology before being approved. He was wary about going through that experience. He said that he watched me get grilled, thinking all the while about what would happen to him. But then, he said, that when I left the pulpit he saw that I noticed some beautiful flowers, red roses as I recall. He saw me stop to admire and sniff them. Because of that one moment, he felt that he could just stop worrying and remember to enjoy his life. Most people don't write letters to us about small moments like that one. But that doesn't mean they aren't happening!

In the science of chaos theory, there is a term for this kind of big effect from a small thing. It's called the butterfly effect. The term itself was coined by Edward Lorenz, and it's taken from the metaphorical example of the details of a tornado being influenced by the earlier flapping of the wings of a distant butterfly.

I think it is worth noticing that Jesus knew his legacy would be through people. He didn't just call everyone to follow him. He also called some particular persons and he set about turning them into his legacy and into the kind of people who would create his butterfly effect.

Take Philip for example. Philip is a "show me" kind of guy. He's the one Jesus turned to about getting bread for the crowd, and Philip's reply was "it'll take a half year's wages just to get enough for everyone to get one bite!" A good project manager response! He's also the one who told Jesus, "Show us the Father and we'll be satisfied." So if we were going to give him a nickname today (the way Jesus nicknamed Simon "The Rock"), maybe we'd call him "Missouri" for the "show me" state.

So it's natural that when Missouri believed that Jesus was the one scriptures had foretold, he told Nathanael and said "come and see." Because that's how Missouri types are. At the same time, though, he was passing along to Nathanael Jesus's own words, "come and see." So here we see the butterfly effect spreading out from Jesus already at the very beginning as Jesus called his followers.

To varying degrees, we're all invitational in this way. "Hey I found a cookbook with lots of very tasty recipes." "Well, I'll try it out and see." "Hey the series on Vietnam really tells the story from all angles. Hmm, I'll take a look." "Hey, our church is really friendly and supportive." "Okay, well maybe I'll come check it out." We accept a bit of vulnerability when we do that. Maybe our friend will think the recipes are terrible, or the series of Vietnam was inexcusably biased, or the church was not so friendly. But we put ourselves out there because we want others to have what we think is good and true.

Since this seems natural to us, we might miss the fact that Jesus, with all this authority and giftedness, chose to be vulnerable in just this same way. Jesus had great persuasive power. He promised Philip and Nathanael that they would see great things if they would follow him. And they did. But one thing he never did was to coerce people.

I love this about Jesus. He offered an opportunity for truth and for abundant life in relationship with him. We don't have to take it. To be sure, he had something about him that was apparently more persuasive than any of us can quite muster. How often I wish I had that power of persuasion! It would make a pastor's life very nice!

All we have, though, is the ability to live in such a way as to have the butterfly effect. And to be invitational without being defensive.

A commentator named Jill Duffield wrote about this in the Presbyterian Outlook magazine. She wrote that we should be "honestly open to whatever opinion others may have about us, about Jesus, about the church, about Christians. Nothing good can come out of Christianity. "Come and see." Christians are judgmental and exclusive. "Come and see." All they do in church is ask for money. "Come and see." Worship is boring. "Come and see." The institution of the church is irrelevant. "Come and see." No one will speak to me. "Come and see." People will judge me for how I look or talk or think or believe. "Come and see." I am beyond redemption. "Come and see." No one ever really changes. "Come and see."

Like Philip, we are not to cajole or convince or sell or sugarcoat. We are to share our experience of following Jesus Christ and invite others to come and see Jesus for themselves. How often do we unabashedly tell others about Jesus and his impact on us and then invite them to get to know him, too? No guilt. No empty promises. No expectation that their experience will be identical to our own. No need for them to confirm our choices or beliefs. No requirement that they agree with us. No defensiveness or debating. Just: Come and see Jesus for yourself."

Jill Duffield is right. And I hesitate to tell you this but one of the real strengths of this congregation is that you are invitational in this way. Why hesitate? Well, I don't want you to get self-conscious, I want it to go on being natural!

You even went so far as to publish for all to read the results of last year's opinion survey about the congregation. Why not? No need to get defensive! Just keep inviting. The South Frankfort Presbyterian motto is "seeking to be a living testimony to God's love, grace, and mercy." It is an honest claim. Seeking. Come and see. Come and see God and how God's butterfly effect continues to work through us. Come and see God's legacy in our relationships.

After Andrew Harned's untimely death, Glenda started wearing a blouse I like very much. It is covered with butterflies. I commented that butterflies often appear in Christian art as a symbol of resurrection, since they emerge from cocoons. Everyone who has preceded us has this butterfly effect in our lives. Thanks especially to the persuasive power of the one whose resurrection gives us our wings, Jesus Christ, we can live our lives as an undefensive "come and see" invitation to know and love God. May our wings continue to spread and honor his legacy!

LET US PRAY: We have come to see you, O God. And you are indeed persuasive. Help us to use our wings for the sake of your legacy. In Jesus' name, Amen