

Engage:
Delivered February 10, 2013

In many ways I feel like this series of messages has been in the preparation stage for my entire life. I have spent so much of my 37 years in churches in different places in New England, and I have a passionate love for the church as a whole, and this church in particular. It feels like this is the culmination of many years of thinking, reading, and praying for God to see the church take her place in God's purpose for the world. In fact, this series felt so significant for me that I literally had a hard time settling down to start it because I just didn't want to mess it up – I wanted to get it exactly right.

I never wanted to be a pastor, most of you have heard me say that before, but now that I am and have been for a while, I have to tell you that there is nothing else I would rather be doing. Even further, there is nowhere else I would rather be doing it. I'm a New England boy, born and bred, and I intend to spend the rest of the years God gives me pouring out my heart and soul into this church becoming all God means for us to be.

I am totally convinced that we are at a crucial moment in our church's history, but more importantly, a crucial point in the story of God at work in our community. Some people see the challenge of advancing God's Kingdom in this area as too daunting. Some are willing to throw up their hands and be content with ineffectiveness, but I am licking my chops to see what God is about to do here in our church and through our church in our community. To put it as directly as possible, I believe God wants New Life to be a church that dramatically changes what people associate with church and Jesus. I believe he wants to do that through us in the least church-ed, most skeptical area of our country, and I believe he wants to do that now.

We understand the problem very clearly, don't we? People around us have a very negative view of the church, Christians, and even Jesus as a result. If you played a word association game with the word "church" you would get all kinds of feedback – we're a hate group, a boring place with an irrelevant message, or a group more concerned with telling people what we are against than what we are for. We live in the midst of a massive mission field, but I'm convinced that we are meant to be part of the solution – not the whole solution, but a part of it for sure.

Most of us have, at one time or another, met the person who spends so much time talking about their problems and complaining about how they can't get a break, right? How do you feel when you're around that person? Don't you just want to tell them that if they spent half as much time thinking about ways to address their problems and their circumstances as they do complaining about them and talking about them that they would probably find a way to make them better? Well, I have to say, sometimes we are that person. We identify the problems of a sin-sick, broken world and then spend lots of time complaining about it, talking about it and dwelling on it, and forget that, as we said a couple weeks ago, we are supposed to be part of God's healing solution for our world.

We live in a place where the spiritual foundations are broken down, the walls of faith are falling apart, and the spiritual climate seems to get worse every day. Our community desperately needs the church of Jesus Christ to step into the midst of those broken foundations and crumbling walls and begin rebuilding and restoring them from the

ground up. Our world needs people who will take their responsibility to Jesus and his mission so seriously that we would turn our backs on the safety and security of comfortable churches that aren't changing anyone's mind about the church and Jesus and instead boldly engage our world in a demonstration of what it really means to follow Jesus.

Mark 12 tells the story of several encounters Jesus has with different people in his community. The first few interactions are with the religious leaders of his day, but they are in full view of the everyday, common people as well. Those religious leaders are highly skeptical of Jesus, and as his ministry has gone on they have become more hostile to him and his message. So they approach him with all of these questions which are not really sincere, but are just meant to trap him in front of the people. They hope that if they stump Jesus, he will look foolish in front of the people – like what I imagine some talk show hosts think when they get a pastor on their show.

Their questions are not sincere, and as they ask the questions, I think they reveal a disconnect between them and the average person who is listening to Jesus teach. The average person seems intrigued by Jesus' message, but the religious leaders are threatened by him. There is a growing divide between those religious professionals and the common person who looks skeptically on the religious institutions but favorably on Jesus and his message. Jesus is certainly teaching in a world in which his message about the kingdom of God is very much outside the familiar religious box.

And in the midst of that world where the average person is skeptical towards what we might now call "organized religion", Jesus manages to find the people who are sincerely seeking truth. Jesus seems to have a knack for finding the people who are wondering about this disconnect between the religious elite and the common person, and whose hearts and minds are open to change if the truth is presented to them.

That's where our passage picks up this morning – in Mark 12:28-34. A religious leader seems to have gotten out of line with the status quo and starts asking real questions of Jesus. Specifically he asks about the greatest commandment of all the commandments in the OT Law. What is the one command that would give context and make sense of all the others? It might be the equivalent of someone today approaching one of us and asking "what is all this religious activity about for you? Tell me in one sentence why you're doing all of this."

Jesus' response is not unique – other rabbis before and after him had identified this command as the greatest, and even linked together the command to love your neighbor as yourself. But there is something more at work here as Jesus speaks, a more powerful force. Because Jesus doesn't just give an answer to a question, but in his answer holds out an invitation to the man to follow the only one whose life would lead down that road. His response cuts through all the religious packaging and gets to the heart of what even the skeptical seeker is searching for – a vision of the person that values what God really values. It is a vision statement and it is an invitation, and that combination is potent.

The prescription for dry, lifeless, heartless, soulless expression of religion is a person who is on a journey that moves him to love God with all his heart, mind, and strength.

Jesus' vision is of a movement of those persons who are being engaged with God in all of those ways, not just one, and as a result are being completely transformed. It's not just that Jesus wants to change his mind about loving God, he wants to change his heart, mind and strength to create a disciple, a follower of who loves God so deeply, so emotionally, so intelligently, and so actively that they become irresistible to other seekers. When Jesus says this is the greatest command, I think he is extending a challenge to the man to see what happens when he chooses to love God that way – not as a hypothetical statement, but as an experienced reality.

Not surprisingly the man responds to this simple, direct presentation of what matters most in a really positive way. Jesus sees from his response that he is “not far” from joining the movement. He is moving towards following Jesus even if he is not there yet – he is on the way towards a life that would be characterized by love for God that engaged him in his heart, mind, and strength.

But then you notice what Jesus doesn't do. He doesn't push for an immediate response or a change of direction from the man. He doesn't “seal the deal” or give an altar call. He does what most of us who have been in churches for long enough hate: he lets the tension linger in the air. He lets it linger because it is the tension that he created for the man. He has painted a picture of where his life could be, he has allowed the man to measure himself against that vision, but Jesus won't push to resolve the tension right away.

I think Jesus understands his responsibility to present the picture of what could be – a person who is totally engaged with heart, mind, and strength in a relationship with God. He then allows that tension to build inside of this man (and others), and while that tactic probably drove everyone else crazy, Jesus doesn't shy away from letting it stay there. That's the absolute brilliance of Jesus, and the thing that maybe his followers have found hardest to emulate. He hears the question, surfaces the tension by painting the picture of what could be, and then leaves the tension as an invitation to come and follow. It was exactly what his community and audience needed then, and I would suggest it is exactly what our community needs now. We want to resolve tensions, but I think it is far more engaging to the heart, mind, and strength of our community if we leverage the tension as an invitation to come follow Jesus and experience the change and transformation he brings.

You know that the current landscape of our community would be described as mostly skeptical, sometimes hostile, to organized religion, the church, and church people. By association, that makes Jesus guilty in the minds of many. So you have a choice this morning. You can wring your hands and complain about the way people perceive Jesus and the church, or you can be a part of the solution. The first step for you is to sincerely engage your heart, mind, and strength in love for God. That leads to the kind of transformation that is compelling to others, and leads you to be engaging your world with your heart, mind, and strength.

But you are not doing that alone. You're doing that here in a community of other people who are after the same goal. Together we want to create the environment in the church that creates the tension for every single person, regardless of their background, to feel the difference between what is, and what could be if they follow Jesus. You can find

ways to serve here, to contribute of your time, your money, and your gifts here to help create that environment. And most importantly, you can ask yourself: “Will what I’m about to say or do or ask for help us be the kind of church that changes the words associated with church and Jesus in our community?”

I’m convinced that it’s fairly easy for a church to engage one of the three elements Jesus talked about here, but pretty difficult to engage all three. So for the next few weeks we are just going to flesh out how we, as a church, want to work to be the kind of place that goes after all three so that God can use us to bring about transformation in our community.