

Days of Hope

To Preach or Not to Preach by Skyler Martin

There are many weeks that I am plagued by a question regarding my work as a minister that turns into a minor (sometimes major) vocational crisis.

“Am I doing this right?”

You may want to quickly respond, “Of course you are! The work you do is very important!” You may think the presence of such a question is only an indicator of ministerial burnout or discouragement. Maybe. I’ve certainly experienced personal frustration in ministry. But I think my concern is deeper than that. For a long time, I’ve wrestled with the idea that I’m not ministering the way that Jesus would if he were living my life. And this is unsettling, because I’m utilizing the same approaches that were handed to me through local church ministry since I was 5 years old. How could those be un-Christlike?

Taking a closer look, one can see that the typical Bible-belt conversation around the how-to of ministry presupposes an Evangelical American model. This framework holds as its supreme value the oratory preaching of the Gospel message. This takes on a very particular form; gathering a group of people (small or large) so they can listen as you announce information about the Gospel to them. Mega-church and little local congregations alike operate from this speaker-audience centered presupposition. I am not arguing that disciples haven’t been made from this approach, but my current context begs the question:

What if our American Evangelical framework is not actually Jesus’ universal template for ministry?

Interestingly, my vocational crisis usually emerges before, during, or after a youth service or chapel group. When I have done my best to make the service engaging, fun, and interactive, I look out at groups of girls and boys who all speak Christianese, have bible verses memorized, and who have, at one point or another, said a prayer of salvation. They almost always show me tired eyes and blank faces. On the cusp of my vocational breakdown I ask, “Why are they so lethargic in their faith?” After many conversations and desperate prayers, a half-answer has emerged:

Because we live in a society that is drenched in Christian language and ethics.

Most students have heard some form of what I’m sharing with them plenty of times already. Sunday morning services, grandma’s lectures, television preachers, the Christian radio-station, Christian staff workers, Salvation tracts, billboards, the sign-holders downtown... the list goes on. There’s no question that for many young people, the services and Bible studies that I facilitate get lumped in with all of these. I am just another voice in the mix trying to talk about a Jesus they’ve already heard so much about. Worst than that, my voice gets associated with the doomsday salvation tracts and the lady with Pink hair on Christian television.

This saturated environment presents unique challenges. On one hand, my work is cut out for me just trying to sift through the distorted religious ideas that kids have pulled from billboards. On the other hand, I am pouring out a glass of water on a land that is flooded. How helpful is it going to be to keep the flow of Bible information going when they are already inundated with it? Most of these kids KNOW all kinds of information and yet their lives are still in shambles due to abuse they’ve suffered or behavioral issues they feel powerless to overcome.

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DAYS OF HOPE



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We are currently scheduling speaking engagements. If you are interested in inviting one of our chaplains to come and share with your church, class, or community group, let us know!

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Give a Fool a Match . . .

by Jon Wells

"I set the admin building on fire! Man, they were angry about that fire I started!" Marvin* said with a big smile.

"Yeah, I set some stuff on fire," Will* replied. "I have wrecked like 5 cars too."

"Yeah I wrecked some cars. . ."

"But I didn't just wreck them, I rolled a couple of the ones I wrecked . . ."

I asked Will how he rolled several cars, and he answered with a big smile.

"Drinking and driving. . . and I been kicked outta like six foster homes."

"Oh, I been kicked outta some foster homes . . ."

This bizarre brag fest continued for over half an hour, as each young man continued to list their greatest antisocial achievements. Back and forth they went, mentioning arrests, court sessions, failed foster care placements, angry judges, residential placements, and runaways. Eventually it got personal.

"I am oppositional-defiant." Marvin declared

Not to be outdone, Will shot right back, "I have a conduct disorder!"

It seemed that there were a lot of exaggerations mixed into the stories that were flying across the table. The braggadocio was thick, and the escalating antisocial declarations seemed completely disconnected from any remorse. These two just rattled on as if their litany of foolish choices were humorous rather than sad. Any responsible adult sitting at that table would surely feel some kind of need to remind these guys how bad their choices had been. I resisted the temptation to wag my finger at them, and decided not to intervene with the usual dressing down that such conversations deserve. Eventually Marvin and Will ran out of ammunition. Marvin grew bored with the storytelling and wandered off to the other side of the unit. I began digging further into Will's story. This nineteen year old young man had been bouncing around in the system for most of his teen years, washing out of one placement after another. And he was standing on the verge of being flushed out of the juvenile system and right into some serious consequences. I tried to explain to him the difference between the two.

"When a fourteen-year-old steals and totals a car, he gets treatment. He goes to a children's treatment program. When a nineteen-year-old does the same, the outcome is very different. . ."

It seemed pretty evident that there had been a lot of voices in Will's life warning him of these things, all to no avail. I literally sat there with this young man in silence for a few minutes before the next piece of our conversation began to materialize.

I was reminded of a specific verse, and immediately realized that it was for Will. I excused myself, walked to the staff office and retrieved a piece of paper and a pen. I took the time to write this verse on the paper:

"When I was a child, I talked like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I put the ways of childhood behind me.
1 Corinthians 13:11"

On the back of the paper I wrote a simple phrase, 'Ways of Childhood.' Below that I made a column of numbers, then returned to Will at the table.

"I made something for you. You can tear it up, or throw it away, or make a paper airplane out of it. But I would suggest that you take a look at this verse and begin making a list of the childish stuff that needs to be left behind in your life."



*In order to protect the privacy of the youth we serve, the names in this and other articles have been changed.

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“Pieces” Part II: Will Power

by Sean A Wilson

I was walking through the halls on a Saturday morning, and came across a few residents outside on a unit rotation. The weather was warm and many of the kids inside seemed restless. I sat and spoke with a young man whom I will call Terry. (name changed for privacy) We talked for about half an hour. Terry is a slender young man and he was speaking about losing weight. I didn't know why he thought he needed to lose weight.

Terry kept saying, “If a person is overweight it's because they have no will power . . . It's the same as cigarettes.”

So I explained to him that his conclusion is not necessarily true. I asked him, “Is the reason you are in the facility due to a lack of will power?”

He said, “No, I have a real problem”.

I explained that there are those who may have a medical condition which leads to weight gain, some could be poor eating habits, some could be because of the type of medicine they are prescribed, and others are dealing with other issues such as depression.

“That's why they have heart attacks because they are overweight.” Terry replied.

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To Preach or not to Preach Continued . .

Since I've started at Days of Hope, I've continued to use John 1:14 as a guide to my work, “*And the Word became flesh and dwell among us...*” This passage has served as a launching point for my understanding of the tangible way that God interacts with us. He refuses to stand at a distance and give us information (the law) but joins us in our humanity in order to transform us by loving relationship and then ascends to the Father, bringing us along with Him. Throughout the Gospels we see that Jesus is not setting up church services or Torah study programs. He certainly preaches sermons, but much of his time is spent healing people who are diseased, speaking to his disciples in private, interacting with the people he comes across. For Jesus, it seems that announcing the Kingdom is not reduced to a practice of oratory presentation. It is embodying God's Kingdom in the most basic interactions that he has with hurting people. So, when it was appropriate to preach, Jesus preached. But He didn't need a formal preaching setting in order to announce the Kingdom. In fact, his most overt and powerful act of ministry was one in which he was led like a lamb to be slaughtered, where he “opened not his mouth” (Isaiah 53:7).

The answer to my “crisis,” seems to be that of John 1:14; *Word becoming flesh*. If God had to live out his law in front of us in order to draw us in, perhaps the best way to announce God's Kingdom in a post-Christian culture that is flooded with biblical information is to live out our new lives in Christ in relationship to those we serve. Maybe instead of giving more information, we should live as disciples who take that information seriously. The practice of our faith can be so subversive to the consumeristic systems of the world that Gospel conversations become inevitable.

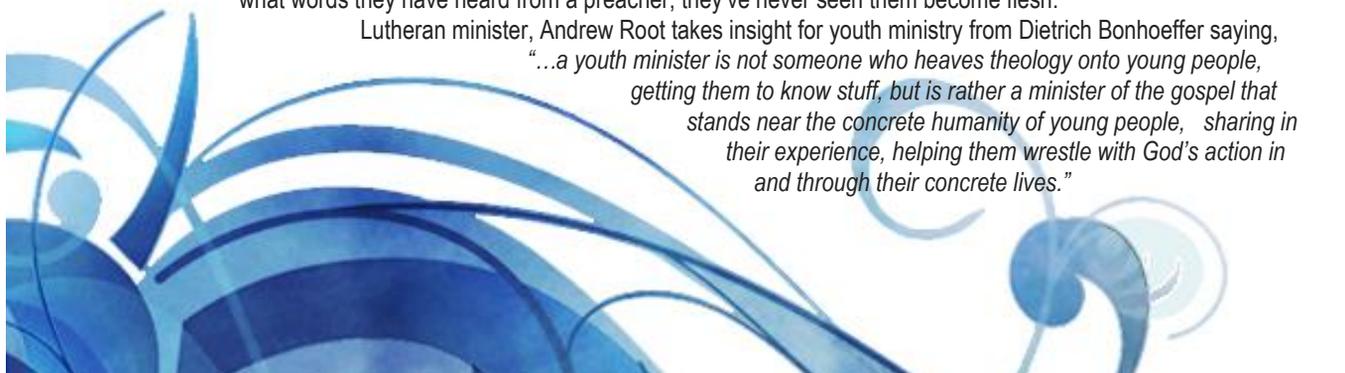
To be clear, I'm not saying that we should never do Bible studies or listen to sermons on Sunday mornings. I value both of those avenues for ministry and participate in both. But it seems obvious that they are not the *universal* template for carrying out the ministry of Jesus. There are times in which this formal speaker-audience framework can actually miss the point of the Gospel altogether (Word becoming flesh)!

My crisis is not entirely solved. I don't have all the answers; maybe I never will.

Maybe I'm just doing a poor job of convincing kids of the good news. Or maybe they are minimally interested because no matter what words they have heard from a preacher, they've never seen them become flesh.

Lutheran minister, Andrew Root takes insight for youth ministry from Dietrich Bonhoeffer saying,

“...a youth minister is not someone who heaves theology onto young people, getting them to know stuff, but is rather a minister of the gospel that stands near the concrete humanity of young people, sharing in their experience, helping them wrestle with God's action in and through their concrete lives.”



Will Power Continued . . .

I told him, "You don't have to be overweight to have a heart attack." He just looked at me as if he didn't understand the simple fact that I had shared.

It seems that many times we can get to a point in our lives where we make excuses for our own behaviors, but lack compassion when it comes to considering others. This is where Terry is stuck, insisting that his problems are due to a 'real problem' while those around him are simply lacking in will power. Terry and I have had conversations like this before. He tends to speak with confidence on subjects he has limited knowledge of and spreads that information to anyone who will listen.

Like so many of the youth in this facility, Terry has had his life shattered by the things he has experienced. Broken pieces have a tendency to cut those who encounter them, depending on how

we handle them. How would you handle Terry? How do you show compassion while also correcting error? How carefully do you handle broken pieces in the lives of those around you? Just a few questions to think about as we continue to help pick up the pieces.

Give a Fool a Match Continued . . .

Will and I talked about this verse. We talked about how childish ways are actually OK for children- it is all they know. And childhood is a good time to learn that some things just don't end well. But eventually everyone has to come to a decision point where we realize our need to move on from old patterns. Perhaps in Will's case this turning point will come only after catastrophe. Perhaps it will take actual jail time, or a life altering physical injury to cause him to realize that his childish ways need to be abandoned. Maybe he will never move on from his destructive choices. I asked him how many years he thought it was going to take for him to get it- Will did not have an answer. I assured him that he will get there eventually, hopefully before too much damage is done.

As I left the cottage that night I pondered our need for these concrete decision points in life. So many of us as adults are still carrying vestiges of what Paul referred to as 'the ways of childhood.' We may not be totaling cars and starting fires, but I know plenty of adults who are still nursing childlike habits, myself included :(How tragic is it that we often require a large amount of pain to help us recognize our need for change? For many folks, that awakening occurs after it is too late to escape calamity.

Please remember to pray for these guys- it is easy to sit back and shrug and watch them barreling towards an obvious outcome. It is tempting to simply adopt an 'I told you so' attitude towards kids like Will and Terrance, especially when they are not receptive to any kind of admonition.

In the closing of his letter to the early church, Jude instructs us in how to reach out to all kinds of people who are careening towards a dead end. *Be merciful to those who doubt; save others by snatching them from the fire; to others show mercy, mixed with fear—hating even the clothing stained by corrupted flesh.*