

Marketing Jesus
John 1:29–42
Saturday, January 15, 2023

Let us pray: Not my word, but *your* word be spoken, O Lord, that we might *see* you and *know* you and *love* you, in Christ. Amen.

How many of you watched the *60 Minutes* interview with Prince Harry last Sunday? (Don't worry, I'm not going to talk about the interview.) How many of you saw "the commercial"? At one point during the broadcast, there was a commercial with Ron Reagan, son of former President Ronald Reagan. He was promoting an organization called The Freedom from Religion Foundation, an association of atheists and agnostics that work to keep church and state separate. And that's fine. That's not what stood out. What stood out was the way that the commercial *ended*. He ended it by saying, "Ron Reagan, lifelong atheist, not afraid of burning in hell."

I thought, "That's an odd way to end a commercial about keeping church and state separate." What does burning in hell have to do with it? Why mention that? At first it came across as kind of smug, almost arrogant. But the more I thought about it, the more I wondered, "Is that what people think about us?" Is that all that they think Jesus and his church and a life of faith are about – either avoiding or burning in hell?

I remember years ago having a conversation with a man who was a Christian, and at one point he said, "You know, the only reason I believe is because I'm afraid of fire." It took me a second; I didn't understand what he was saying. What does fire have to do with it? But then I realized, he's saying that the *only reason* he is a Christian is because he doesn't want to go to hell. And I asked him, "That's the *only reason*?" To which he said – and I've never forgotten this – "What else is there?"

When I was in college, every time I went home for break and then back to school, I would have to drive the stretch of Interstate 65 that runs from the very bottom of Alabama to the very top. It is a long, boring stretch of road. The PA Turnpike is *scenic* compared to this. It's a little over four hours of nothing but pine trees and clay and flat road. But there are billboards all along the way that, since I was a child, captivated me. The first one was this big hand-painted sign on the side of the road that said, "Go to church or the devil will get you!" Then there was, "Jesus or hell!" and others along those same lines.

But when I think about that, I can understand how people *outside* the church think that *that* is all we're about. If that is the only message they are hearing – a big billboard screaming at them to repent so they don't go to hell – then I can understand why Ron Reagan said what he did in that commercial. He's saying, "I don't need *faith*, I don't need *Jesus*, because I don't believe there is a hell, so I'm not afraid of going there." When that understanding of faith is all you're presented with, it's a very easy conclusion for them to come to.

And you might say, "That's not how *we* understand faith, and that's not the message that *we* are giving the world about Jesus." Well, what *is* the message that we are putting out into the world about Jesus? What are we telling the world that a life of faith is about? Why does it matter? Why is what we do here important? Because if messages like those billboards are the *only* message that people are *hearing*, then it's no wonder that's what they think faith is all about. What are we telling the world about Jesus? How are we *marketing* Jesus to the world?

That word *marketing* is not one that we usually associate with Jesus. It feels too *commercial* or *consumerist*, like Christ is a *commodity*. But last year, a \$100 million ad campaign was launched

called, “He Gets Us.” There are TV commercials, online ads, and billboards designed to convey the message that Jesus Christ gets us, understands the joys and struggles and beauty and pain of our lives, because he lived it, too. It is not promoting a single denomination or congregation. If you go to the website, you can chat live with people, send a text message asking for prayers, and get connected with someone in your area who can help you learn more about Jesus. You can read articles with titles like, “Did Jesus Have Fun?” “Was Jesus Ever Lonely?” “Was Jesus Ever Stressed?” “What Would Jesus Think of Teen Moms?” “Why Did Jesus Cry?” “Jesus Didn’t Feel Welcomed by Religious People Either.” “How Did Jesus Deal with Injustice?” “Jesus Was a Refugee.” “Jesus Invited Everyone to Sit at His Table.”

Now, Jesus is not a *brand* that needs to be *sold*, but however you feel about an ad campaign for Christ, can you feel the *difference* between a commercial that ends with, “Not afraid of burning in hell,” versus one that ends with, “He gets us”? Do you feel the difference in the message that that puts out into the world about Jesus? That’s what *marketing* is. It’s about how someone or something is *promoted*; the message that is put out into the world about them. *Why do I like this person or thing, and why should you?* The word that *we* use for that is *evangelism*. It comes from a Greek word that means, “good news.” How are we telling the world the good news about Jesus Christ? *That* is something that people of faith have been doing for thousands of years.

John the Baptist was the first marketing campaign for Christ. Before Jesus even *began* his ministry, John was out there saying, “He’s coming! One is coming *after* me who is *greater* than me! I baptize you with *water*, but *he* will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire.” And then when Jesus shows up, John announces, “Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world! This is the Son of God!” He’s right back out there again the next day telling people, “Look, here is the Lamb of God!” Two of his disciples hear this – two of *John’s followers* hear

this – and they leave John to follow Jesus. He markets himself right out of an audience. But John doesn't mind, because he has *always known* that it's not about *him*, it's about *Jesus*. It's not about building up his own following, it's about pointing people to Christ. He even says later, "He must increase, but I must decrease."

The purpose of evangelism, sharing the good news about Jesus Christ, is not to build up our church or organization. It is to build up the Kingdom of God. It is not about drawing people to *us*. It is about drawing people to *Christ*. That is exactly what John does, and that is exactly what *we* are called to do.

But look what happens when those two disciples leave John and follow Jesus. Jesus turns around and sees them and asks, "What are you looking for?" Boy, there's a loaded question. "*What are you looking for?*" What are you looking for that has caused you to follow Christ? They don't even know how to *answer* it. They just say, "Where are you staying?" And Jesus says to them, "Come and see."

So they *do*. And then one of the men, Andrew, goes and finds his brother Simon and says to him, "We have found the Messiah!" And he brings Simon to Jesus. If we continued reading the rest of chapter one, we would see Jesus calling Phillip to follow him. Phillip then goes and finds his friend Nathaniel and says to him, "We have found the one that Moses and the prophets talked about, Jesus from Nazareth." Nathaniel says, "Can anything *good* come from Nazareth?" And Phillip says, "Come and see."

Come and see. When John's disciples asked Jesus where he was staying, he didn't just *tell* them, giving them *facts* and *information*. He said, "Come and see," and he *showed* them. When

Andrew tells his brother Simon, “We have found the Messiah,” he doesn’t make an argument to convince him of it. He brings him to Jesus to come and see. When Nathaniel asked Phillip if anything good could come from Nazareth, Phillip didn’t try to convince him. He said, “Come and see.” They weren’t given a commercial or a billboard or a website or a pamphlet. They were given an invitation and *shown*.

The best ad campaign for Christ is, “Come and see.” And what I mean by that is, the best ad campaign for Christ is not just *telling* people about Jesus, it is *showing* Jesus to people through your own words and actions and life. “Come and see Christ in me.” “Come and see the difference that Jesus Christ has made in my life.” Like St. Francis said, “Preach the gospel at all times, and when necessary, use words.” Let your actions speak *for* you about Jesus.

Now, we can’t let that be an excuse for *not* using words, because sometimes words are necessary. Sometimes we *have* to proclaim the good news of Jesus Christ with *words*. If people just see our actions and the way we live, they might not *know* what has made this difference in our lives, so we have to tell them. But, if we are just using words, and our actions and the way that we live don’t line up with those words, that is false advertising. And it reflects negatively, not just on *us*, but on Jesus.

The best ad campaign for Christ is not commercials or billboards. It is *you*. Your life. Your words. Your actions. It is the way that you say, “Come and see.”

And while it’s not about building up *churches* (it’s about building up Christ and the Kingdom of God), I’m going to let you in on a little secret here. Do you know how churches grow? That’s always a hot topic of conversation in churches. “How can we make our church grow?”

Churches do not grow because of the pastor. That's what we always *want* to be the case. "If we bring in an exciting, new, young pastor, that will bring young families into our church and help us grow." But churches don't grow because of the pastor. And this isn't just me talking. There are surveys and statistics to back this up. Churches do not grow because of the music program. Churches do not grow because of the building. Churches grow *because of you*.

If churches grow because of the pastor or the music program, what happens when the pastor or the music director *leaves*? If churches grow because of the building, what happens when the building falls apart? Churches grow because of *you*. People could walk through the doors of a dilapidated building and listen to a boring sermon and hear music that does not stir their souls, but if they feel welcomed and wanted and loved and a part of something, they're willing to tolerate a whole lot. Churches grow because of you. Because of the ways that you say, "Come and see."

Around 25 years ago, Jen was working in King of Prussia. She had grown up in the church and was feeling led back to the church, but she had visited a few and nothing felt right. She was talking about this one day with a coworker, and he said, "You should come to my church. I think you would really like it." He kept talking about it and inviting her. She said, "I don't really like going new places by myself," and he said, "My wife and I will meet you in the parking lot! We'll walk in with you, and you can sit with us!" And she *did*. And once she was *there*, the preaching and the music *did* happen to be good, so that didn't hurt, but she was surrounded by people who welcomed her and talked to her and made her feel wanted and loved her. People who showed her a different picture of Jesus than she had ever seen throughout her life. That church became her *family*. A few years later, I came there as an intern. We met, fell in love, got married. I am *here* today because someone 25 years ago said, "Come and see."

Who will *you* say that to, and what difference will it make in *their* life, in *your* life, and in the life of this church? *You* are the most effective ad campaign for Christ.

I don't believe that Jesus wants our faith to be motivated by fear. He says pretty often throughout the gospels that he wants our faith to be motivated by *love*. Love of God, love of neighbor, and how can I love both more? I did not commit my life to Christ almost 30 years ago because I was afraid of what would happen if I didn't. I committed my life to Christ because at a time when I was hurting and broken and *living* in fear, Christ came to me and said, "I am *with* you. I *love* you," and I was so *grateful* for the difference that made in my life that I said, "I will live for you."

Like Ron Reagan in that commercial, I am not afraid of burning in hell because I believe that Jesus Christ is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world; he lived, died, and rose again so that my sins are forgiven and I will live forever with him. And I will spend the rest of my life saying, "Come and see the difference that has made." *You* are a recipient of that same gift. How will you *show* it and *share* it with the world?