

In March of 2015 the Twitter verse was buzzing when famed prosperity gospel preacher Creflo Dollar announced to his congregation that he needed a new private jet to continue his international ministry. Not just any jet a top of the line Gulfstream in excess of \$65 Million; billionaires are on the waiting list for this jet. The social media backlash was immediate and widespread within hours of the announcement the campaign was scrubbed clean from the website and a statement of “sorry but not sorry” was released to the general public. ¹

1 Thessalonians 2:1-8

You yourselves know, brothers and sisters,^[a] that our coming to you was not in vain, ² but though we had already suffered and been shamefully mistreated at Philippi, as you know, we had courage in our God to declare to you the gospel of God in spite of great opposition. ³ For our appeal does not spring from deceit or impure motives or trickery, ⁴ but just as we have been approved by God to be entrusted with the message of the gospel, even so we speak, not to please mortals, but to please God who tests our hearts. ⁵ As you know and as God is our witness, we never came with words of flattery or with a pretext for greed; ⁶ nor did we seek praise from mortals, whether from you or from others, ⁷ though we might have made demands as apostles of Christ. But we were gentle^[b] among you, like a nurse tenderly caring for her own children. ⁸ So deeply do we care for you that we are determined to share with you not only the gospel of God but also our own selves, because you have become very dear to us.

Those living during Paul’s life would have skeptical of him maybe even cynical. As Paul and his companions would have rolled into town they would have begun preaching at the local synagogue and after a few days he would begin appearing in other parts of the city. Arguing and explaining the gospel, but if you were living during this period when the talk of the town was an itinerant preacher saying that a man who died as a traitor who most people had not even heard of was God. You would be wondering why would this guy even attract a crowd? You might even stop to see if he was as good as the last huckster that showed up. You would be waiting for the moment when he asked you to open his wallet or your purse. But with Paul that moment never came. What was even more astonishing in spite of this repeatedly Paul managed to upset the local population so much so that they ran him out of town. Imagine what it would like to have a village or a town run you out. But Paul didn’t go to the next town and change his message; instead he went to the next town telling them the same things. He was a on a mission to please God in spite of opposition. Paul is very clear in his message to the church at Thessalonica he loves this church and he loves the time he spent among them. It may have been difficult

¹ https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/acts-of-faith/wp/2015/06/03/pastor-creflo-dollar-might-get-his-65-million-private-jet-after-all/?utm_term=.05c8f183a5fc

but Paul spoke the words he was given and lived the among them. His description of his life among them is beautiful, we were gentle among you like a nurse caring for child. Paul came not with a heavy-handed attitude but with love as one who cares for children, this is the most sacred duty, an awesome responsibility to care for a little one. He came loving like that. He then goes onto say not only did we share the gospel but our lives. As one commentator put it “all changers of lives have been people who have mingled themselves with their truth. “ Paul was so lost in his truth that to know Paul was to know Jesus.

This calling of life sharing and truth sharing is not only Paul’s call but our call as well. That we should be so transformed by knowing God that to know us is get to glimpses of God. Yes I know we are all works in progress, pressing onward, in spite of our limitations, sins, and our faults. But we are called to share this truth.

Sharing the gospel with our lives means we need to listen first. Listening is a lost art, social media would like to convince us that we are all reality stars in our own self produced show. I firmly believe that if Richard Foster rewrote his book of spiritual disciplines alongside meditation, fasting he would include the discipline of listening. Listening is hard; most of us walk around with a super computer in our pockets that rewards us with a little boost of dopamine every time we pay attention to it. But to share the gospel, to share a life is to listen. It is listen to those we don’t agree with, listen to those we don’t understand, listen to those who have different experiences than we do, listen to those who have different pain. To listen is to recognize the humanity in another person; it is to recognize the God given spark of creation in one another.

Two years ago the youth group went to New Orleans for a week of service. We spent time all over the city volunteering in schools to help them prep for the year, working in a homeless shelter trying to drywall an entire room, but for me one of the most meaningful deeply moving experiences came on our free day. Naturally we went on a swamp tour and saw lots of animals, but in the afternoon we went on a plantation tour. But this tour was a little different, this was a plantation tour of Whitney Plantation, the tour is from the perspective of a slaves.² In fact there are statues of children all over Whitney, these are statues of children as they looked when they were freed during the emancipation. The tour guide told us of the horrors of those that lived and died working that land. Part of the tour you step into a memorial garden, I remember being moved as I read the names and stories of those that had died there. Many of those stories still haunt me, but one in particular stayed with me. The guide shared how many of these people after being kidnapped or sold would be transported to places like Ghana, they would be kept in dungeons in castles built specifically for the slave trade. Hundreds of people would be kept in these horrible over crowded dungeons. The guide shared how at one castle the governor had a family chapel built directly over the dungeon. This idea is almost unimaginable; praise of God within feet of the suffering of the children of God. People enslaved, while others sang of salvation. The body of Christ shared with

² <http://whitneyplantation.com/history.html>

broken bodies below. Listening to one another another's pain leads to glimpses of understanding, understanding helps to share our lives together. Sharing with the gospel with our lives means we have to ask questions of one another and seek to connect to the community and the ever-changing world around us. In about two weeks we will celebrate the 500 anniversary of the reformation when Martin Luther launched the great protestant experiment. It is hard to believe that our presbytery has been around for 300 of those years. The reformation was fueled by the sudden exchange of ideas through the printing press. In the last decade the speed of the world has substantially increased with exchange of ideas and elimination of barriers. It is a changing world and some commentators have described us as living through the second reformation this time without the nail holes in the door. In 2001 Mark Prensky a consultant and inventor, described this shift with two terms Digital Natives and Digital immigrants. Basically he claims that this current generation is a group of digital natives meaning they never known a time without digital technology and that they are speaking a digital language. Those of us a little older are Digital Immigrants meaning we grew up without digital technology and we may speak a digital language but we speak as an immigrant. We have an accent, we may misunderstand what is being communicated to us and at times we may completely miscommunicate. There is nothing wrong with being a digital native or a digital immigrant, but we cannot assume we have shared experiences and we cannot assume we understand each other unless we ask questions and seek to effectively communicate. These changes in culture are leading to changes in the institutional church. The future is different, not bleak or scary but different; God is faithful to the church. One small congregation experienced this first hand.

The Heritage Presbyterian Church in Wisconsin.³ The congregation is about the size of our youth ministry. The church was aging but enjoyed meeting together. One day the water in the building was deemed unsuitable. The church tried digging a new well and several other fixes. They knew if they didn't find a solution soon they would lose their certificate of occupancy, the church tried and tried but they couldn't find a solution they would have to sell the building. Now you might think this is a sad story but it is not, the church spent a year reflecting on their identity, as they read scripture, and prayed and asked questions they realized they were more than the four walls. In December they voted to sell the building. The pressing question was "where they would go"? So the session began moving worship to non-traditional settings trying them out, trying to discover what would connect with their community. They cleaned out their building and as community decided what would come with them and what would be sold or given away. In the mean time they sold the property. The funds were allocated to an endowment fund. The congregation found a non-traditional site and meets weekly the congregation uses the endowment fund to provide clean drinking water both locally and internationally. God was faithful to them in their ups and downs. The church of Jesus Christ continues to move forward. God is found when we share our lives

³ <http://pres-outlook.org/2017/10/free-church-god-calls-us-real-estate-free-congregations-story/>

together, when listen to one another, and ask questions of one another seeking to connect to the changing world around us. That is our calling. Let us pray..