



# The Trinity Pulpit



## Sitting Before You Speak Ezekial 3:1-16

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Do you ever feel like you walk a tight rope between church and your life? There are some of us feeling at home when we are here and then there are some who feel more home away from here. There are sometimes we hear one thing at church and another at work, school, or from our culture and the two are so at odds; we wonder, "Where do I live?" How we encounter the people around us as Christians has always been a difficult task. Jesus was accused of being a drunkard and a friend of sinners, because he could be found in the homes and the company of those whom the religious leaders considered sinners. John the Baptist lived a life completely removed from his culture and the people said he was crazy, a mad man. How do we share our faith with a culture that is not a faith culture? How do we engage the culture without "watering down" the message of Jesus? Let me suggest that we must sit before we speak.

This is the example of Ezekiel in Ezekiel 3. Ezekiel was Jeremiah's contemporary. While Jeremiah was called to speak to the leaders of his day and spent most of his life in Jerusalem in the temple and the palace, Ezekiel was called to speak to the lay people of his day. He was called to go and speak the word of judgment to those who were already in exile. The message that Ezekiel had to speak is described as sweet to the taste yet bitter in the stomach. The suggestion is that God's message is right, it is sweet; however, when you realize that you must share it with those who have rejected the message, it can become bitter to speak. Yet, Ezekiel was ready to share this message with those who were in exile in Tel Abib, near the Kebar River. We are told that Ezekiel was transported there by the Spirit and when he arrived, he did not begin to speak; he did something else. The text tells us that he went

to where the people were living, he sat among them for seven days and he was overwhelmed.

Ezekiel had just had a moment with God where God had spoken to him and personally given him a message to share with God's people who have rebelled against Him. Ezekiel's experience is so personal and real that it is described as "eating a scroll." This message had become a part of Ezekiel. You would think that once he arrived at Tel Abib he would be ready to begin to speak, but that was not the case. He came to the people, he sat among them, and he was overwhelmed.

I want to suggest to us this morning that Ezekiel teaches us how we are to engage our culture with the message that is sweet yet bitter. Ezekiel teaches us something about living our lives with conviction yet approaching others with compassion. Let's look at this passage again as we consider sitting before we speak.

Ezekiel reminds us of the importance of identification. Ezekiel, we are told, was transported to Tel Abib at the River Kebar. Ezekiel went to where the people were living. Now, let's remember who these people were. They were those who had suffered exile as a result of their sin and rebellion against God. They had experienced personally the result of their sin. Ezekiel arrived and lived with the people. The first step to engaging someone is identification.

The first thing we must do if we are going to share our faith with others is we have to go where they are. The old paradigm was "Come to church," our whole message was "How people needed to come to church."

The new paradigm and the example of Jesus is “The church goes to the people.” Jesus models identification for us.

Jesus comes to us. He becomes like us. He completely identifies with us. He knows our human weaknesses, temptations, physical limitations and even death itself. Jesus came and lived where we are living. As one person put it “Our message is not so much ‘You should come to Jesus,’ as it should be ‘Jesus has come to you.’”

Our first step in identification is to go to where people are living. In the book *An Emergent Manifesto of Hope*, Nanette Sawyer tells the story about her new work on the West Side of Chicago. When she was placed there by the Presbyterian Church she was told to go and rethink church. Her first job description literally said, “Drink cups of coffee with people.” She learned the people, their fears, their disappointments, their pain from poor church experiences; she learned that healing could come, but it could only come through Christ and it came in community.<sup>1</sup> This is not diminishing the church; it actually is reminding us of the importance of the church. The first step in sharing our faith is identification.

Leonard Sweet tells us that our culture can be described in four terms: experiential, participatory, image driven and connection. Sweet maintains that to identify with the world around us we must understand these terms.<sup>2</sup> Our culture wants experience. It is true we do not engage a culture that is non-spiritual, just non-religious. It is not that they do not believe that Jesus died and rose again, they just wonder if he is the only one. It is not that they disagree that Jesus is the way, they just are not sure he is the only way.

We live in a world where the term “sinner” has lost its meaning. Sweet maintains that we are the last generation that will engage a culture where the term “sinner” has any meaning. He asks how we will engage a culture that does not understand sin. The answer is “Experience.” We must introduce them to an experience with the living God.

The second term is “participant.” The people of our culture want to participate, which really means they want choices. The third term is “image

driven.” That does not mean that we simply are worried about image over content. It means that the way we think and make choices has changed. We are moving from being rational and thinking people to feeling people. When we think, we do not do so with words but with pictures. Jesus knew this. Jesus told stories; he used metaphors to explain the Kingdom of God. Those who are searching for God are searching for a God that can be experienced, chosen and felt. The last word that Sweet mentions in describing our culture is connection. We live in a world that is connected and wants to connect. There is something in the human spirit that cries for relationship, connections and community.

I feel as though most of the time the church in our culture is in a defensive stance. We are afraid. We are afraid because in most denominations, including the Southern Baptist Convention, attendance, baptisms and interest in the church is down. We worry about the church being able to change to meet a changing culture. Truth be told we are really more worried about changing to reach a changing culture. What change would be required of us if we are going to reach a changing culture? Do we have to sing different type songs? Do we need to meet more or less or here or there? All of these questions miss the point: these are program questions; these are “church” questions.

What we need is intentional identification. We need to go to where people are living. We need to stop thinking about life and spiritual life. There is really only one life. There are not two lives we are living; we just have life, and our lives must include those who need to know Jesus.

There is a graph that was developed by Bill Hybels who was the guru of church growth in the 1990s. What he discovered was that the longer a person is a Christian the fewer non Christian people he or she knew.<sup>3</sup>

In some rural churches you can still find those attendance boards. If you grew up in a church like that, you remember what they looked like. There was enrollment, attendance, last week’s attendance and offering. The church I grew up in had some other things on the board, e.g., Bibles brought. Some of you might remember the old offering en-

velopes and on the envelope was Bible brought, Read Bible Daily, Offering, Staying for Worship, and Contacts Made. Maybe what we need is a new big board with a few important categories: numbers of cups of coffee with a friend, new relationships developed this week, encounters with new people this week, and number of people I told a story about Jesus.

I want to ask you how long has it been since you had a conversation with someone about Jesus? How long has it been since you had a serious conversation with anyone who is not a Christian? How many new people did you meet this week? Ezekiel went to where they were living. Identification.

The second step is understanding. He not only went to where they were living but he sat among them. There is a sense of someone who did not just pass through but went and sat down, listened, and understood who these people were. We need to identify with people, but we also need to understand them. Understanding has to do with listening. Ezekiel was sent to speak a message but before he spoke he sat among them. He sought understanding.

To understand people we need to engage in what one author calls 3D Living: Develop Friendships, Discover Stories and Discern Next Steps.<sup>4</sup> We need to develop friendships. That is part of identification. However, the next step is essential – discovering stories. People want to tell you their story. They want to tell you about a hard time they had at work. They want to tell you about something their child or grandchild did. They want to tell you about a struggle they are having with a relationship. If you listen long enough they will tell you their moments of pain, frustration, and also their hopes and fears. The key is to listen. Before we speak our message we need to listen if we are going to understand.



According to his biographers, Francis of Assisi was a fastidious young man. He was horrified by poverty and by all forms of suffering, but nothing raised his revulsion so much as leprosy. If he chanced to see a leper while he was out riding, he would dismount, hold his nose, and send a messenger to give some alms. Then one day, at the beginning of his conversion, he came unexpectedly upon a leper on the road. His first impulse was to recoil; then, he remembered his desire for discipleship. “He slipped off his horse and ran to kiss the man. When the leper put out his hand as if to receive some alms, Francis gave him money and a kiss. This was for Francis a significant turning point in his understanding of Christ. Now that he had identified

himself with Christ and with the lepers in action and not merely in theory, his practical understanding of the incarnation deepened in direct proportion to his active obedience.” In St. Francis of Assisi’s famous poem *Make Me an Instrument of Thy Peace*, he states, “Help me to understand more than to be understood.”

We can make friends and we can listen to stories, but to truly understand we must take time. It takes time for us to really build relationships with others as we hope for the opportunity to share Jesus. Identification takes effort, and understanding takes time.

There is another word that describes Ezekiel: compassion. Ezekiel lived with the people, he sat among them and there is this comment with one word . . . overwhelmed. Ezekiel was overwhelmed. Was he overwhelmed by his task? Was he overwhelmed by the pain of the people? Was he overwhelmed by the stories of the people? Was he overwhelmed by God’s actions of judgment? The answer to all of these is probably “Yes.” However, I do not want to look at what overwhelmed Ezekiel as much as I want to understand what sitting and listening did to his understanding of his role as messenger.

Ezekiel arrived ready to give the word of judgment, but became overwhelmed. The result was that God reminded him of his role – to be a watchman. He was to keep those who were wicked from choosing wickedness. He was the watchman who was responsible for others. Let me suggest that Ezekiel was changed by his time with those in exile. His message did not change but his spirit was changed. Ezekiel came to see his message as that of compassion: it was not simply about God's judgment; it was an essential message to keep people from destruction. The message that seemed so bitter he came to understand as a message of warning that for purpose of helping those who had turned from God to turn back to God.

When identification is a part of our lives and understanding is a part of our lives, the result is compassion for people. Our message does not change. Please understand that the message is unchanging. The message is that God loves all people and wants to have a relationship with them. Our message is that God loved everyone so much that Jesus came and gave his life on the cross and rose again, and if we believe in Jesus Christ, we can have a relationship with God now and for eternity. However, there is a warning in our message. Our warning is that if you reject Jesus' love and act on the cross, you will spend eternity separated from God in a place that was never designed for you and me but for the Devil and his angels. Yet, by our stubbornness and our rebellion, we can choose to be separated from God or we can, by faith, choose to have a relationship with Jesus.

Please understand that the message does not change. However, the purpose of our message and the spirit of the messenger are changed when we learn to sit before we speak.

When we sit before we speak, we learn to love others like Jesus loves others. When we sit before we speak, we value others like Jesus values others. When we sit before we speak, we mourn the pain of others like Jesus mourns all of our poor decisions and consequence of our sins. When we sit before we speak, we will get a new appreciation

for the importance of the Christian message and the urgency of the Christian message. It will become personal and it will involve not just “the world” or “the culture”, but it will be about friends coming to Christ.

We live in what one scholar has called an “attraction economy.”<sup>5</sup> What is essential in every realm of life is whether something is attractive or not. What we need is an attractive Christianity. I want you to know that the only attractive Christianity is where Jesus is lifted up. The church is sadly suffering from a “Jesus Deficit Disorder.”<sup>6</sup> What our world needs to see is not us but Jesus. They need to see the Jesus who is the friend of sinners. They need to see the Jesus who liked to eat in the homes of friends. They need to see the Jesus who was as comfortable with the tax collector as he was with the Pharisee. They need to see the Jesus who left everything in heaven and came to be with you and me. He identified. They need to see the Jesus who spent time with his creation. He understood. They need to see the Jesus who did not come to condemn the world but to save the world. He showed us true compassion.

My friends, when we identify with others and understand others then, we are changed to be like Jesus. Our words of condemnation become words of compassion and others see Jesus. It all begins when we, like Ezekiel, take the time to sit before we speak. ✿

<sup>1</sup>Nanette Sawyer, “What Would Huckleberry Do?” in *An Emergent Manifesto of Hope*, editors Doug Pagitt and Tony Jone (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2007), 48.

<sup>2</sup>Leonard Sweet, *Post-Modern Pilgrims* (Nashville, TN: Broadman and Holdman Press, 2000).

<sup>3</sup>Bill Hybels, *Just A Walk Across the Room* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Press, 2006), 61.

<sup>4</sup>Hybels, 60.

<sup>5</sup>Leonard Sweet, *So Beautiful* (Colorado Springs, CO: David Cook Publishers, 2009), 18.

<sup>6</sup>Sweet, *So Beautiful*, 22.

