

Living Dangerously

A Sermon by David Barker

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Scripture: Acts 5:27-32

John 20:19-23

There was a time living as a Christian meant living dangerously...

Jesus has been murdered, and for all you know the people who murdered Jesus are looking for you

- you are in a small house, the windows shuttered and the doors locked because you are terrified
- your beliefs, the way you've chosen to live, are a threat...contrary to so much of what the prevailing world order considers "normal"
- you pose no physical threat, certainly no militaristic threat...but what you believe fundamentally changes lives
 - new values, new morals, a new ethic, a new way of understanding the world and why you're in it

Jesus appears in your midst: *As the father has sent me, so I send you*

- the Greek word you hear is *apostello*...I *apostello* you, Jesus says...I apostle you
- and so you are sent...unshutter the windows, unlock the doors...out into a world that Jesus promised would hate you because they hated him...because the message you carry, on which you've staked your very life, is so dangerous
- and because your message is dangerous, *you* are dangerous

But it's *always* been dangerous...from the very beginning, God calling people and God sending people...

- that's what God does—God is a *calling out* and *sending forth* God—and that's what it means to be God's people...you are called and you are sent
- from Abraham to Joseph to Moses to Joshua to David, to the entire Israelite nation...God calling God's people and sending them forth with a message...a message that is dangerous
- and with the message, an admonition: you cannot live like other people live because you are *my* people, and that, too, is dangerous
- and one day, God sends out Godself, becomes flesh and goes forth as Jesus of Nazareth...the Jesus of Nazareth who calls disciples and apostles and sends *them* out...
 - who calls Paul and Baranabas and Timothy, dangerous people all... dangerous people with a dangerous message

And all along, the people called and sent pay a price for being dangerous...they are ridiculed, they are rejected...they are jailed, beaten, stoned, and starved...many, in fact, pay the price of life itself

Yet they went...wherever people were and the Good News of Jesus Christ wasn't, they went

- they planted churches, and those churches called and sent forth more people
- no denominations, no ecclesiastical structure to speak of, no such thing as professional clergy
- in fact, if ever there was a time when the idea of the priesthood of all believers was more reality than theory, it was then
 - because then, virtually by definition, to be a Christian was to be a missionary, because everywhere you went, few, if any, had heard the message
 - to be a Christian then was to live dangerously
- and the church of Jesus Christ grew...from one man to twelve men to seventy to 3000 to tens and hundreds of thousands...from a little town in Palestine called Jerusalem until it encompassed what was then the majority of the western world...

So: a time when living as a Christian meant you lived dangerously, and the church of Jesus Christ grew...

Which leads to this question: is there anything about your life as a Christian today that is even remotely dangerous?

- has the message, the basic message of the Good News of Jesus Christ, changed?
- is the message any less countercultural, any less contrary to what the world itself espouses?
 - is the *message* of Jesus Christ any less dangerous?
- so if not the message, what about the messengers?
- if we turn to the 21st verse of the 20th chapter of the Gospel of John, will we find Jesus' words have changed?
 - are they no longer, *As the father has sent me, so I send you...*I apostle you
- the message hasn't changed, the command hasn't changed, so what, then, indeed, about the messengers?
 - what happened to *us*?

What happened to us was February 27, 380

- admittedly, it seemed like such a good idea at the time, a win-win for all involved, certainly for the church of Jesus Christ
- a good idea and such a simple one: make Christianity the official religion of the Roman empire, the Christian church the only recognized church
- and so it was decreed...February 27, 380...Emperor Theodosius I: to be a Roman citizen was to be a Christian
 - if you were born, you were baptized...you went to, lived by, became an integral part of...church
 - it was never questioned because there was no decision involved...it was simply how it was
- churches were still planted, but all as extensions of the Roman church
- buildings were built, professional clergy arrived to staff them, and people came...diligently, faithfully they came because that's what you did...church was as much a part of your life, your identity as your work or your family

And *that* meant something profoundly significant:

- after February 27, 380 Christians were no longer missionaries...they were church members...they were citizens of the empire and members of the church
- a message once so dangerous because so at odds with the state was now the official policy of the state

Over time, much changed...17 centuries of change...

- the Reformation, the Enlightenment, humanism, the development of scientific knowledge...
- church and state were no longer one...human beings, not God, became the measure of all things...truth was no longer revealed through Scripture but discovered through intellect...indeed, the very concept of truth was up for grabs...all truth became relative
- and there were wars...border wars...civil wars...world wars...genocide...and, in their wake, the question: maybe this whole God thing was wrong from the very beginning
 - because if there really is a God, how can there be such slaughter?

But through all those centuries of change, Christians were still church members...build a church, open the doors, have programs and ministries, and people will come

--instead of taking the message to the people—*missional* church—you provide the place, the programs, and let the people come to you—*attractional* church

--therefore, we ask the question, what happened to the messengers? and the answer is simply this: we quit listening to Jesus...we listened, instead, to Theodosius I

--we listened to, sit rather than be sent...invite rather than initiate...do maintenance rather than mission

--we have our churches, we open our doors, we offer programs and we say to the world, if you come to where we are and tailor your needs to what we do, you're welcome...you will find God here with us

--that's the idea of church I grew up with...the idea most of you grew up with...

--in spite of the fact it's precisely the opposite of what Scripture tells us to do, of what Jesus himself modeled for us to do, it's what we've done and what we and thousands of other Christians continue to do

--even when it worked in terms of getting people to church—and, admittedly, for a long time, it got people to church—it was never in line with the Lord's intentions

--Jesus never told his followers to go forth and make church members... Jesus told his followers to go forth and make disciples

--Jesus never told his followers to go forth and hire professional clergy to do ministry...Jesus told his followers to go forth and teach all the world the very things they themselves had come to know were true

--what happened to the messengers is we quit being missionaries and became church members

--what happened is we quit living dangerously

The challenge now is we live in a world where attractional church no longer works, where opening the doors and offering programs is no longer enough

--even though 80% of Americans identify themselves as Christian, less than 20% of that number attend church regularly

--every year 2.7 million church members quit going to church

--of American youth engaged in church to some significant degree when they are teenagers, 70% will have left the church by the time they are 22

--and in the generations born since 1984...those who most represent the future of the church...less than 5% even have attending church on their radar screens

--it isn't something they ever even think of

--so it is that Jessica was commenting the other day on the number of kids she knows who not only don't go to church, they don't even know what happens in a church

Generations born in the last 20 or 30 years are significantly less likely to believe a person's faith in God is meant to be developed by involvement in a church

--it isn't a consequence of culture...we can't blame it on lax morals and loose living

--the fact is, these same generations place an extremely high value on service and helping others...on actually living what you profess to believe

--and the majority of them have a high opinion of Jesus Christ...

--but they have a low opinion of Christians and Christianity and the church, which they see as judgmental, hypocritical, and self-serving

My brothers and sisters in Christ, these are the future, the mission field, of the church today, and I ask you: what, do you suppose, are our chances of attracting *them*?

--if our mission field is people for whom church attendance is not even on their radar screen, continuing only to do attractational church, no matter how well we do it, won't matter

--we can have the prettiest buildings, the best Sunday school, the best preaching, ministries for every conceivable people group and life situation...and it won't matter

--it's tantamount to being in the horse-drawn carriage business across the street from Henry Ford and his Model Ts

--we can make the best horse-drawn carriage on the planet but the world is driving cars

After 2000 years of being central to society, to people's lives, the church finds itself increasingly marginalized, faced with a world desperate for the message with which we've been entrusted

--a situation, in other words, not that different from when Christianity was no bigger than 11 men in a small house in Jerusalem

--were Jesus to materialize in *our* midst right here, right now, would his message be different?

--would he say to us, forget about the mission field...forget about the future...just hunker down and keep doing what you've been doing

--or would he say what he said 2000 years ago: *As the father has sent me, so I send you*

--God is still a *calling out* and *sending forth* God—to be God's people still means we are called and we are sent

--not with a Bible in one hand and a time and talents pledge sheet in the other

--but simply to come along side people, to help them, living among them, our very lives manifesting the presence of Jesus Christ

--living in *their* midst what, typically, we've expected them to come and find in *our* midst

--it was God's way to grow the Kingdom then...and, more than ever, it's still God's way today

Now, do not hear what I'm not saying

- first, I'm not saying this is about saving the church...this is about faithful discipleship
- Jesus does not need us to save His church...Jesus needs what Jesus has always needed: disciples to take the Good News to the world...the mission field...
 - it just so happens the mission field isn't somewhere else any more, it's right here...it's not just across the ocean, it's across the street
 - the days of taking it for granted that citizens of the empire are citizens of the Kingdom are over
- Jesus needs us to rethink who we are, what we are, why we are, beginning with reminding ourselves why God sent Jesus in the first place and why, together, they sent the Holy Spirit

- second, I'm not saying this is either/or...it's both/and
- acknowledging traditional, attractional church will not reach the future of the church doesn't mean we stop doing it
 - for so many Christians...for many of you...you who have grown up with traditional, attractional church...you for whom that *is* church...
 - your understanding, your history, your faithfulness is to be honored and nurtured
 - the church was built on your shoulders...were it not for your conviction and commitment, we'd have no church to rethink
- and there will, in the years to come, continue to be some to whom traditional, attractional church speaks
- so we continue to do traditional worship, Sunday school, Bible studies, church-centered ministries
- but, at the same time, we move to reclaim the idea of church as Jesus always intended it to be and as the early Christians practiced it...*missional* church
 - attractional *and* missional

And so, the third element in a vision of what it means to be church, what it means to be the Lord's heart and hands right here, right now...

- the first element: we are called not to be served, but to serve
- the second: a new scorecard of what constitutes success, based not on church growth but community impact and community transformation
- and the third: attractional for where we are...missional for where we're going

Some will say we're compromising for the sake of culture...that, instead, we should stand firm

I say we're transforming for the sake of the Kingdom...that God is using what's happening in the culture to call the church back to what the church was always meant to be...dangerous? yes...frightening? a bit...but so incredibly exciting...