

The Radical Difference – John 2: 13-22
Sermon prepared and preached by Rev. Don Hammond
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I suspect just about everyone would like to live their life in such a way that their living will make a good difference in and for the world. Sometime ago I tried to no longer use as illustrations in my sermons the stories of the great contributors of the world - like Jonas Salk, Mother Theresa and Mahatma Gandhi. I decided that comparing the great deeds of such people to the rest of us is not fair, because few people rise to great heights of accomplishment and greatness. After all, there are very few people that make medical discoveries that rids the world of a dreaded disease. There are few people that begin massive changes in society. There are few people that lead the way to world peace. It simply isn't fair to compare the lives of such giants, whose contributions the entire world is grateful for, and expect us to incorporate that into our lives.

Then there is the other side of this coin. The basic call of Jesus and the Church is that we are all expected to break out of our lives and into a higher plane of living. The message of the Church is that God has created all of us uniquely and wonderfully, and that we are all capable of doing something with our life that will move this world closer to the way God wants it to be - but to do that we will need to be *Radically Different*. I am going to tell you a story about an unusual man whom I was fortunate to meet and do business with. I have no idea what his faith life was like. I have no idea if he professed any spiritual belief at all, but I can tell you this much - he was a man who made a good difference in this world and that he was *Radically Different*.

Frank Brock was a banker. Did you ever expect to hear a sermon begin with a story about a man who made a *Radical Difference* and who was a banker? Frank Brock was the man's name, and he was the President of the First Bank of Troy, in Troy, Idaho. I would doubt that anyone here even knows where Troy, Idaho is. Troy is about 10 miles east of Moscow, Idaho where the University of Idaho is located and from where I received my undergraduate degree.

I needed to establish a bank account. Other students and friends told me that the best and most student-friendly bank would be found in Troy. Though it was 10 miles away, it was worth the drive, I was told. I heard stories about that bank and its President and I must confess that never before or since that time have I heard any stories about banks or bankers as I heard then

Frank Brock was not only the President of the Bank but every work day you could find him standing behind the teller bars of that tiny bank on the corner. There were three teller cages on the left and one straight in front as you walked in the door. Frank Brock was always in the one straight in front of you. He was an old man, and he really did look like a banker, at least what I characterize as the look of a banker. There he was taking care of business with the customers. One of the trademarks of the bank was that the bank would not bounce an overdraft check from any of its customers. Though we were always careful with our resources, there were times when this poor college student valued knowing that a check would not bounce.

Twice during my college days I ran into financial pinches. The first was when my car broke down 500 miles away, and I did not have nearly enough money in the bank to pay for the repair. The repair shop would not do the work until I produced proof that I could pay. I assured them the bank would cover my check but they did not believe me. I called the bank and spoke with Mr. Brock and told him of my situation, and he asked to be put on the line with the shop manager. The conversation ended and the manager told me that the bank president told him that I was good for any check that I wrote. Mr. Frank Brock rescued me. Repaying the loan was, of course, my highest priority when I returned home.

Sometime later I had an opportunity for a summer job with the U.S. Forest Service but I was required to have logging boots with steel tips. They were expensive and I did not have the cash. I visited Troy and Mr. Brock said to me, "the money is now in you account." I repaid that loan with my first paycheck. I would have gone hungry before I would have failed to repay his trust in me.

Nearly everyone I knew in college had similar stories of the 1st Bank of Troy and Mr. Brock

That little bank in a community of less than 600 people had over 6,000 active account and customers in 45 states and around the world as far away as Pago Pago.

One day a man entered the bank and robbed it. He was captured and spent 3 years in prison. Two years after he was released from prison he went looking for Mr. Brock. He entered the bank and went to the teller's window where Mr. Brock was standing and asked for a loan to start a business. Mr. Brock loaned money to the man who only a few years earlier robbed him. "He learned his lesson, I don't hold past mistakes against him. He is a much more stable individual now," Brock said.

In the late 1970s, while I was the pastor at a nearby congregation, Mr. Brock died. I wanted to attend his memorial service. When I arrived, the building was overflowing and hundreds of people were standing outside just to be among those who wanted to say "thank you" to a simple banker.

I found it amazing that a banker, a person who deals with numbers, understood that the numbers were not nearly as important as his customers. Frank Brock was a man who knew his customers, and was always willing to take the risk that his customers were good and responsible people. He made a *Radical Difference* in the lives of many. He was a man who had a profound effect upon others and he did it all from behind the teller bars inside a tiny bank in Troy, Idaho.

The Gospel lesson we heard today tells us that Jesus became really upset. Heck, though many people don't like to hear it put this way, Jesus became openly angry and hostile. The results of his anger were that he acted like a tiny tornado on the Temple grounds. He ripped apart the tables that were filled with money. He overturned the cages of the pigeons that were being sold to the poorer people who could not afford a larger sacrifice. I have this image of him running around yelling nasty names at the vendors and throwing anything in his path to the side. This is not an image people like to have of Jesus. Most

people prefer the “nice” Jesus, you know, the one that is always helping, healing, smiling at the children and giving hopeful words.

Jesus was upset, but what he was upset about was that so much more was expected of his people than what they had become. So much more was expected of them to be the people moving in and showing a different direction than selling pigeons. So much depended upon them and they were not living up to it. So much depended upon them to be examples of a different way and they were not measuring up to it. So much was dependent upon them being counter-cultural and instead of them being that, they succumbed to their culture and were fitting-in just fine, thank you. That is what Jesus was steaming about.

I have resolved at this time in my life to no longer be a defender of the Church. I believe the Church has not nearly the need for defenders as it has need for critics. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the Lutheran pastor who stood against Hitler and the Nazis wrote:

Do not defend God's word, but testify to it.”

Too often the Church looks just like the rest of the world. Too often the Church becomes more invested in defending our own culture and political systems than we invest in being a counter-culture for a new world.

Some years ago I had the privilege of attending a significant lecture event that is known for presenting the most provocative of Christian thinkers. The keynote speaker was such a person. To some of my friends in ministry he has been a hero. His lectures were filled with venom for the failings of the Church, mostly for the Church failing at being the counter-culture and leading the way to a new world. Later that day the lecture schedule had a gathering for conversations with him, a time for questions. There was something that troubled me. With anxiety I asked him my question: “Whom do you listen to Sunday after Sunday?” He turned beet red and responded “I don’t attend church.” I became angry. Critics of the Church belong in it. They don’t belong outside throwing stones at it. The Church can only improve when we who are in it call it to task.

Jesus never separated himself from Judaism. He was born, lived and died a Jew. He was faithful with his responsibilities to the synagogue and when he

arrived in Jerusalem, he went to the Temple. He did not go there to be angry, he went there to be faithful, and he became angry because what he saw was something other than what their God called them to be. They were expected to change the world; instead, they conformed to the world.

What is counter-cultural? *“Do not defend God’s word, but testify to it.”* Testify to it by holding the Church accountable for being what we were created to be. We were created to be servants and stewards of each other, the ground upon which we walk, and the air that we breath. We have been created to be messengers of peace among people. We have been created to end injustices and hate. We have been created to speak truth when untruths are more popular. We have been created to be the voice that declares that our God does not discriminate against people because of their race, culture, gender, sexuality or anything else that people have been blessed with as a gift from God. If we fail at that, then we are doing nothing more than selling pigeons on the temple steps

Frank Brock was quite a man, but I don’t believe he did anything that anyone of us could not do. He came to the rescue of people that the rest of the world didn’t even know, much less care about. He came to the rescue of people who needed a little help. He came to the rescue of even a man who once pointed a gun in his face and robbed him.

One of the last things Jesus said before he left for Jerusalem was that if anyone was going to be one of his then what they needed to do was feed the hungry, cloth the naked, welcome the stranger and visit the prisoner.

Doing any of that will not make anyone a Mother Theresa, or a Mahatma Gandhi, but it will make us faithful Christians, and we will never have any tables overturned and be accused of selling pigeons.

“Don’t defend God’s word, but testify to it.” That is how to make a *Radical Difference*.

Amen.