

HEARTBEATS Staying Connected 2/13/2023

Dear Friends in CHRIST,

ONE AT ONE – *Every day this week beginning on Tuesday, February 14 you are encouraged to pray for one minute at one o'clock. This week, pray for the people of Turkey and Syria who have experienced devastating destruction and loss because of earthquakes. Pray that rescuers may quickly find those who are still alive but trapped. Pray for comfort for those who have lost loved ones or homes. Ask GOD'S blessing on those who are serving to search for survivors and to care for those who are in need.*

So, if we can no longer count on migration to bring new people to our congregation (my previous article), what are we to do?

If you read the Acts of the Apostles in the Bible, you'll quickly recognize that these early Christians were passionate and energetic in their efforts to tell others about JESUS. In part, this was because they believed that JESUS would come back within their lifetimes and wanted to make sure as many people as possible were ready for HIS reappearing. But it wasn't just about the future, about what would happen when JESUS did return. They also believed that the Christian life offered something powerful and meaningful for life now. So, wherever they went, they looked for opportunities to talk about JESUS and tell others about GOD'S love in CHRIST. Matthew did it in Egypt. Philip the deacon told an Ethiopian about JESUS and he told it when he returned home and his nation became believers. Thomas talked about JESUS in India. And Paul shared the good news of CHRIST in Asia Minor and Greece and Italy and as far as Spain. Christians wanted everyone to know.

Then in 337, Emperor Constantine became a believer. When the emperor becomes a Christian, so does the rest of the empire. After Constantine's conversion, Christianity became the religion of the entire empire and everyone in the empire were now Christians (even if they weren't and didn't follow Christianity in their worship practices). As a result, the need to evangelize, to share the good news became less of a priority. And, over the course of history, nations have declared what religion every one must or should follow in varying degrees.

In the United States, freedom of religion meant that there was no one religion or denomination. And while our country was founded on Christian values, everyone here is free to worship whatever religion they choose, or not. Over time, that freedom has led families to become less involved in church and worship so that increasing generations are unchurched. The internet has also provided opportunities for people to find and sort of design their own belief systems based on what makes them feel comfortable. And the judgmental behavior of some practitioners of various religions, including Christianity, have led many to simply reject religion all together.

So, what are we to do?

The culture we live in now is not all that different from the time in which the first century Christians lived. There are many gods out there, things to worship and place our trust in. There are mixed feelings about Christians and Christianity. There's a lot of misinformation about who JESUS is and what Christianity offers. And JESUS still hasn't shown up yet.

But Christianity offers something that I believe the world needs. The Christian life has a quality that should, would, and could be a true blessing to people. Many today struggle to find meaningful, lasting relationships. Christian congregations offer a place where people can come together and have these impactful connections with one another. Further, the Christian life gives meaning and purpose. We find value and direction as we seek to serve others because of how GOD has served us. Many in the world regularly are told that they are undervalued or unloved. Yet the message of GOD'S unconditional love, in spite of past behaviors and mistakes, can powerfully change a person's life—if only someone would tell them.

We are no longer an immigrant church. We can no longer build our buildings and wait for people to show up. It's time for us to recapture the passion of the first century Christians. It's time for us to recognize what Christianity has to offer to people—to all people. It's time for us to put our trust in GOD'S leading and the SPIRIT'S guiding and look for opportunities to tell others that there is a place that can bring positive transformation, lasting relationships, and a worthwhile sense of direction to their lives. We know where it is because we have found it. Now it's time for us to let others in on the secret, because GOD never intended for it to be a secret. Rather it is a gift for us to share and to know that when we do, others will be blessed just as we have been. It's time for us to go and tell the good news.

In CHRIST'S love,
Pastor Jeffrey