

“Contagious—Heart, Feet, Hands”

We’re starting a short message series today called Contagious. There are certain aspects of being followers of Jesus that we need to come back to regularly and this is one of them. Being contagious about our faith.

Now, when you hear the word “contagious” that might not bring to mind the best images. Probably freshest in our minds is the recent swine flu scare. Haven’t heard a lot about it lately but it’s still out there along with other contagious threats like meningitis, and hepatitis, and AIDS. Scary stuff.

Other things are contagious too, you saw some of them in the video opener. Things like negativity, pessimism, discouragement. A little bit of those things go a long way in breeding more of them.

But the word contagious doesn’t have to be about diseases and negativity. Let’s turn this word toward the positive. Because lots of good things are contagious too. Things like joy. I’m around a joyful person and it makes me feel joyful. Courage, when I’m around somebody who is courageously facing something in their life, it makes me want be more courageous. Laughter is contagious. Take a look at that laughing baby one more time! That’s contagious in a positive way!

And love is contagious. Jesus said, **“A new command I give to you: Love one another as I have loved you” (John 13:34)**. We’ve been recipients of his love and he’s commanded us to share that love, to be contagious with that love. It wasn’t a suggestion, it was a command. Be contagious with the love that Jesus showed.

And that’s at the heart of this series. If we care about the world, if we take seriously what Jesus taught, we care if people know about Jesus, we care what they know about Jesus. We care enough to share what we know about Jesus and what we’ve experienced.

You need to know that you are a part of a church that is really, seriously devoted to reaching people who do not yet have an active faith in Jesus Christ. And I’ve given my life to that—to being a contagious Christian and leading a church that is contagious. I’ve given my life to leading a church that’s leading people to love God, to love other and to serve the world.

And if we’re going to do that we have to check our focus. If we’re going to be contagious about our faith and take part in leading people to an active faith in Jesus Christ, our focus must be external.

What do I mean by that? On April 14, 1912 the *Titanic* hit an iceberg in the North Atlantic and began taking on water. Lifeboats were readied and people found it hard to believe what was going on. I mean, the maiden voyage, an unsinkable ship, it couldn’t be happening. But it was and when people realized it, there was a panic. People headed for the lifeboats. There weren’t enough for everybody, but the ones they did have were deployed before they were full. Twenty lifeboats were lowered into the water. Of those twenty, most had room for more people. And even though the people in those lifeboats could hear cries for help in the water, they didn’t go back and pick those people up because they were afraid that those people would overload the lifeboats and be swamped. 19 of those boats rowed away from hundreds of people floating in the water.

But in Lifeboat 14, Fifth Officer Harold Lowe reacted differently. He transferred many of the people in his boat to other lifeboats and went back to the sinking ship to pick up more survivors. He couldn’t save them all, but he saved many from the sea that night. A survivor rescued survivors. He wasn’t content with the people in his lifeboat, he bent back to find others.

Yes, we care for the people in the boat, but we are defined by going after those still in the water. Our focus is external. We’re deliberate out being contagious with Jesus. We’re intention about leading people to an active faith in Jesus Christ. We do that by loving God, loving others and serving the world.

Now today, we’re going to look at the first habit of highly contagious Christians. This first habit is **“Highly contagious Christians connect to people.”** Some of you already do this well. Most of us need to do better.

I want to start by asking you: How does influence work in human lives? I mean, imagine a total stranger calls you out of the blue, and says, "You need to refinance your house, and I’m the guy to do it with." How many of you would likely sign up right on the spot? Or suppose somebody you’ve never met walks up to

you and says, "I know the person you should spend the rest of your life with — my cousin. And I've set up a blind date for the two of you this Friday, the day he gets out on parole. You can trust me. He's the one for you." Are you likely to go ahead?

When it comes to what matters to us — our finances, our relational lives, our futures — we don't usually put ourselves in the hands of total strangers. We listen to people. We build relationships then we gradually trust one another. Friends influence friends. And if this is true in general, and I think it is, it's especially true when it comes to spiritual issues. If people are going to be reached for Christ, for the most part they will not be reached by strangers. They won't be reached by televangelists. They won't be reached by the radio. They'll be reached, primarily, through friends.

Unfortunately Christians have a reputation of being pushy, arrogant, hypocrites when it comes to sharing the faith. That's why building honest, open, trusting friendship is so important. Because whether or not a friend accepts Christ, you're still their friend. Your friendship isn't contingent on them having an active faith in Jesus Christ. It's not like you bail out on them if they don't make some spiritual progress. Too many Christians have started up friendships for the sole purpose of leading somebody to God, and then abandoning them if they don't, or abandoning them if they do so they can move on to another target. How sad! How incredibly sad! No. We build friendships because relationships are key to life and they make it possible to share our faith.

So God's plan for his church is that it be people who have the character of Jesus and because they have the character of Jesus, they love the people that Jesus died for. So we are always seeking to build friendships with people who might not have an active faith.

John Ortberg and Bill Hybles talk about some important characteristics of Christ-followers who are ready to be contagious. They do this by using different parts of the body. They say that the first one, the most important one, is the heart. Does my heart care about what God's heart cares about? If we're going to be contagious about our faith, this is key.

So I want to ask you to do a real honest heart check. What's most important to you who are Christ-followers already? Your personal comfort, your wants being catered to, being able to sit in your same seat each week. Our is a priority for you leading people to an active faith in Jesus Christ? Research shows that most Christians will never lead someone else to an active faith in Jesus Christ. It's like we find a connection to God and we're so happy about that that we never think about providing a bridge for someone else to walk over.

That's a heart problem. And do you know who has a heart problem? I do. Not all the time, but more of the time than a care to think about. I try to always be sensitive to extending an invitation to people to connect in some way, "Come to church, jump into a class on Wednesday Night, join us on this community project." But sometimes, the truth is my heart gets cold. Sometimes I find it easier to stay in my own little orbit and not take risks, not exert the effort or the energy that's involved in developing friendships. Sometimes I just focus on my own convenience and my own comfort. Sometimes, I'm the one with the heart problem.

And maybe some of you are too. So maybe some of you need to pray about this today. God is in the heart transplant business. That's one of the great promises in Scripture. God says, "**I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh**" (Ezekiel 36:26, NIV). God will take away your heart of stone, and replace it with a heart of flesh, a heart that's warm and soft and beats fast for what God's heart beats. Maybe you need to confess today and ask God for a new heart. That's the starting place. And you know, God loves it when his people pray that prayer: "Lord give me a heart for people who are far from you." God will answer that prayer. God will give you a heart like Jesus' heart. And for some of us, that's what we need.

But it's not just about the heart, it's about the feet. The question here is, "Do my feet take me where Jesus' feet took him?" Where did Jesus' feet take him? They took him to all kinds of people. In fact Jesus loved to go to people that the good religious folks had written off as lost forever. Jesus' feet took him to parties at tax collector's houses, to dinners attended by prostitutes, to the country of Samaria where a respectable religious leader would never go, to lepers and pagans — just to people, to every kind of people. And Jesus' feet got him into serious trouble.

Pious religious people called Jesus a friend of sinners? And that's not a lovely little title. The prostitutes that he was with--they really did sell their bodies for sex, lowering the moral standards of a nation. The tax collectors that Jesus hung out with really were corrupt traitors who sold out their own people for some money.

Jesus was the friend of people on the fringe. His feet took him to them, and Jesus loved them. And the religious leaders hated Jesus' feet. They didn't understand his feet, but God loved his feet. I love this verse in Romans 10:15, "**How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!**" (Rom 10:15, NIV). Jesus' feet were so beautiful to people far from God that one day a woman who thought she was lost beyond hope fell at those feet. She bathed Jesus' feet with her tears, and she dried them with her hair because those feet brought Jesus to her. You and I have got to have feet like Jesus' feet. It's important to fellowship with other Christians, but we've got to agree to get out of the holy huddle regularly.

Now let me say this. For most of us, this does not mean so much that you have to start going to new places. For most of us, this means that we need to start forming relationships in circles where you already find yourself. You do this in a way that fits your world. For example, when you just do ordinary, everyday things like getting a haircut. Talk to that person, get to know him or her. If you have kids in sports talk to the other parents that are around. You can find out a lot about the spiritual condition of somebody's heart just by watching how they respond when their kid plays soccer. Cultivate friendships and strike up meaningful conversations about family and parenting by just caring for people while you're doing what you'd be doing anyway.

Another thing that most all of us do is eat. One of the things that you can do is just go to the same restaurant and cultivate a connection with somebody that works there. Get to know them. Start to pray for them. Maybe it's joining a health club; maybe it's having the neighbors over for dinner. It'll look different for everybody, but it really is possible. You really can have feet like Jesus' feet. You can have feet that take you to where people are far from God because they're all over the place.

But it's not just our hearts and it's not just our feet, it's also about our hands. Jesus' hands were constantly extended in service to people who didn't yet know his Father. In John chapter 13 Jesus has his last meal with his disciples and he does something shocking. He washes his disciples' feet. It just wasn't done. The teacher, the Rabbi, the master did not wash the feet of the disciples, it was supposed to be the other way around. This is one of the last things that Jesus did before he's capture and crucified. Of all the things he could have done in those final moments with his disciples, he washes their feet. Why? Because he wanted them, and all of his followers to take on the posture of servanthood in the world. He said, "**I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you**" (John 13:15, NIV). His last act with his disciples. He's saying to them and showing them, "This is what it looks like to follow me. Serve the world. Then the world will see me."

Jesus just kept extending his hands — healing lepers, washing feet, clasping his hands in prayer, right to the very end of his life when he took a nail in each hand for the sake of every sinner that ever lived.

So how are you serving? I've got to tell you that I'm struggling with this right now. I'm trying to define what serving means for me. I'm on the board of Watered Gardens. I'm on the board of Ascent Recovery Residences. I'm on the Joplin City Council Task Force on Homelessness. I sit in a lot of meetings, but I wonder if that's not a cop out for putting my hands where they need to be; for getting personal in how I serve my neighbors, my city, people I know, and people I don't. I worry that I'm disconnected because while I serve on all those boards, I rarely spend time down at Watered Gardens serving meals, or cleaning up, or organizing clothes or household items. I rarely spend time with the men at Ascent. I spend little time with the homeless of Joplin.

Christianity spread like wildfire, especially early on. Why? Because Christians served their neighbors. During the plague of the early 4th century, Christians were seen as the most loving people on the planet because they were unafraid of serving the sick and dying, even when they were sick and dying themselves. They gathered the hungry together and fed them, the buried the dead that others had abandoned. The world watched as followers of Christ gave of themselves, served, not for the purpose of leading people to Jesus, but

because serving is what followers do, and some people see that, and some see Christ and follow him themselves.

People don't care how much you know until they know you care. We show we care in how we serve our community, our neighbors, people in need.

So take a look at your hands. How often are they extended to serve to someone? Maybe you have a neighbor that you could do an errand for. Maybe there's somebody at work that feels discouraged, and these hands could write him a note. Maybe there's a lonely person in your world that needs to be reached out to. Are your hands doing what Jesus' hands would do? Are they. We're contagious through our hands.

If we're going to be contagious, we develop real, honest, friendships with people who do not yet have an active faith in Jesus. And we do that with our hearts, our feet, our hands.

One final thought: You all get the same junk mail that Janet and I do every day. It seems like we are always battling piles of junk mail, so we try our best to go through the mail everyday and recycle the junk mail so it doesn't sit around. But I had an interesting experience a while back. I've shared this before. Prior to recycling all our paper we had the ritual standing over the garbage can in the kitchen and the ritual trashing of the junk mail. Janet's better about this than I am. She's particularly good at throwing away the electronics catalogs so I don't drool all over them.

I'm sure you get those postcards every so often with the faces of two missing children on one side and coupons for something on the other. If you've seen the kids you're supposed to call a number. Well, I'm throwing the junk mail away—this is before we started recycle--and I see this postcard with two missing kids on it and I pitch it in the garbage. But when I throw it into the garbage can it lands face up so that those two kids are staring up at me from all the trash and coffee grounds and egg shells. I'm looking in my garbage can at two kid's faces. I ask myself, "Why don't you care about them? Why don't you care? They're missing." Do you know what I answered? "Because they're not my kids." They're not my kids. But if those kids were my kids, I'd be out there personally putting those little cards in every mailbox I could find anywhere. I'd be searching high and low. I'd be talking to everybody. I would be on a mission if those were my kids! But they're not my kids, so I throw them in the garbage.

You see, every person who is far from God is one of God's missing kids. And Jesus was on a mission when he came. He said of himself, "**For the Son of Man came to seek and to save what was lost**" (Luke 19:10, NIV). His mission was

to seek and to save the lost. And he calls me to be on a mission to reach his lost kids, and he calls Saint Paul's to be on a mission to reach lost people. And he calls you to be on a mission to reach his lost kids. There's no nice way to put this: A church that doesn't care about people who are far from God, isn't really a church. And a Christian who doesn't really care about people who are far from God, isn't really a Christian.

So the challenge in all this is for us, if we call ourselves Christ-followers, is to be who we claim to be. To be Lifeboat 14, to be people who partner with God to share good news, to be the kind of people who work on our hearts, and our feet, and our hands.

We need to learn and relearn this, because we forget. Let's be contagious about Jesus in the most loving, authentic, servant-hearted ways. And for today that is the Good News. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.

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