

I start each day with the Bible and Mountain Dew. As part of my daily quiet time, I read four devotional guides. One of these follows the traditional lectionary. I also read the classic devotional by Oswald Chambers entitled *My Utmost for His Highest*, which challenges me each morning to surrender my life to Jesus Christ. Over the years, I have varied the other two devotionals to get different insights. This year I am reading a devotional by William Barclay, the great Scottish theologian, and the *Daily Bread*.

Several years ago, I read *Grace Notes* by Philip Yancey. While this was not my favorite devotional, occasionally Yancey said something that caught my attention. In one reading, Yancey recounted a visit he made to South Africa in 2004 where he met a remarkable woman named Joanna. As a student she worked for change in apartheid and then saw the miracle that no one had predicted, the peaceful dismantling of the old system.

Instead of taking her new found freedom for granted, Joanna next decided to tackle the most violent prison in South Africa, a prison where Nelson Mandela himself had spent several years. Gang members controlled the prison, strictly enforcing a rule that required new members to earn their admittance to the gang by assaulting undesirable prisoners. Prison authorities often looked the other way, letting these “animals” beat and even kill each other.

Alone, this young woman started going each day into the bowels of that prison. She brought a simple message of forgiveness and reconciliation trying to put into practice on a smaller scale what Nelson Mandela and Bishop Tutu were trying to establish in the nation as a whole. She organized small groups, taught trust games, got the prisoners to open up about the details of their horrific childhoods. The year before her visits, the prison had recorded 279 acts of violence; the next year there were only two. Joanna’s results were so impressive that the British Broadcasting Company sent a camera crew from London to produce two one-hour documentaries on her.

Yancey asked her how she was able to transform this prison. Her reply caught him off guard: “Of course, Philip, God was already present in the prison. I just had to make Him visible.” Did you hear that? God was already present; she just made Him visible! As I reflected on this statement, I thought what a great mission statement, not only for a prison in South Africa, but for us here at High Desert. God is already here, in the most unexpected places. We just need to make God visible.

Throughout the gospels, Jesus calls us to be His witnesses; to make God’s love and grace known to all we meet. Listen to how Jesus describes it in the fifth chapter of the Gospel of Matthew, verses 13-16.

Read Matthew 5:13-16

The *Message* has some interesting paraphrases of this passage. Here's a few: "Let me tell you why you are here. You're here to be salt-seasoning that brings out the God-flavors of this earth. You're here to be light, bringing out the God-colors in this world. God is not a secret to be kept." Did you hear that? Not only are we to make God visible, but we are to add flavor and color to this world; to make life worth living, not only for ourselves, but especially for everybody that we encounter. Now there's a mission statement!

Now I have used this illustration before, but it's worth repeating this morning. At a missionary meeting some young people were discussing this passage from Matthew 5:13: "You are the salt of the earth." One suggestion after another was made as to the meaning of "salt" in this verse. "Salt impacts a desirable flavor," said one person. "Salt preserves from decay," said another. Then one girl brought a sudden hush to the room when she said: "Salt creates thirst." Her statement got everybody thinking: "Have I made anyone thirsty for the Lord Jesus Christ?" The question for us this morning is: "Are we making God and His Son Jesus Christ known to the world in such a way that we create a thirst, a desire to know them?"

So, how do we do this? Of course, one way is how we live our daily lives. As I have said before; we are "Living Bibles." Some people will never read or even pick up a Bible, but if they know you are a Christian, they will watch how you react to the problems and situations that come up in everyday life. They will read you, and how you react will have a definite influence on their opinion of God and Jesus Christ. Will Rogers said that we must live in such a way that we are not ashamed to sell the family parrot to the town gossip.

A man was being tailgated by a stressed out woman. The traffic light turned yellow and he did the right thing by stopping even though he could have beaten the red light by accelerating through the intersection. The tailgating woman was furious and honked her horn, screaming in frustration as she missed her chance to get through the intersection.

While she was still in mid-rant, she heard a tap on her window and looked up into the face of a very serious police officer. The officer ordered her to exit the car with her hands up. He took her to the police station where she was searched, finger printed, photographed, and placed in a holding cell. After a couple of hours, she was escorted to the booking desk where the arresting officer was waiting with her personal belongings.

He said: "I'm very sorry for the mistake. You see, I pulled up behind your car where you were blowing your horn, making inappropriate hand gestures, and cursing a blue streak at the car in front of you. Then I noticed the "What Would Jesus Do" bumper sticker, the "Choose Life" license plate holder, the "Follow-me to Sunday School" bumper sticker and the chrome-plated Christian fish emblem on the trunk. Naturally, I assumed the car was stolen."

The point is: can people see Jesus in our words and actions? Does our behavior reflect our Christian beliefs? Do we just act like Christians only on Sunday morning when we are in church? There is a poem that goes like this: “You are writing a gospel, a chapter each day, by the deeds that you do, by the words that you say. Men read what you write, whether faithless or true. Say, what’s the gospel according to you?”

We write the gospel and make God visible by following Jesus’ command in John 13:34 - “A new command I give you: Love one another. As I loved you, so must you love one another. By this all will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.”

How many times have people been turned off to God because of the bitterness, conflicts, and fights within the Church, the body of Christ? Because the church is made up of human beings from different backgrounds and opinions, there will always be some disagreements; that’s expected. We are not a cult where people follow one direction or one leader blindly. God gave each of us different minds and spiritual gifts that are to be used to build His kingdom; thus, at times these will come into conflict.

Jesus recognized this; He even had to deal with disagreements among His own disciples. But He tells us to disagree in love. The word He uses here for love is agape which we have discussed many times before. Agape love means seeking the best for the other person no matter what they have said about you; how they may have hurt you; or how much you disagree with their opinion or position. When the well-being of another person is just as important to you as your own personal well-being, then you are demonstrating agape love. You could call this respect; looking for the best in the other person and seeking a resolution that is best for all concerned. Think how much better our country and world would be if more people, especially those who call themselves Christians, practiced agape love every day. As the late Louie Armstrong sang: “What a wonderful world it would be!”

Listen to how an ancient writer described the early Christians: “It is incredible to see the fervor with which the people of that religion help each other in their wants. They spare nothing. Their first legislator (Jesus) has put it into their heads that they are brethren.” An early Christian writer also said this: “It is our care for the helpless, our practice of lovingkindness that brands us in the eyes of many of our opponents. “Look,” they say, “How they love one another! Look how they are prepared to die for one another.” This is why, when the Apostle Luke was describing the Early Church in the second chapter of Acts, he wrote: “Everyone was filled with awe; people in general liked what they saw; and the Lord added daily to their number those who were being saved.” God was already there; the Early Church just made God visible through their love and respect for each other!

Finally, we make God visible by following the command to love our neighbor as ourself. When Jesus was asked who is our neighbor, He clearly demonstrated in the Parable of the Good Samaritan in Luke 15 that everybody, especially those in need are our neighbors, whether they live next door, across the street, in another state or across the ocean. Jesus taught that concern for the welfare of others was at the heart of God's will for each of us. In the Parable of the Sheep and Goats in Matthew 25, Jesus makes it very clear that we will be judged by how we respond to those in need. The criteria for dividing the sheep and the goats in this parable is not that the sheep confessed faith in Jesus Christ and the goats did not, but rather that the sheep had acted in tangible and loving ways towards the poor, the sick, the imprisoned and the vulnerable, while the goats had failed to act. The question is: do we stay in our cozy comfort zones and safe sanctuaries or do we go into the world and make God visible to others through our acts of kindness and outreach? Do we take advantage of the opportunities that God gives us each day to make Him visible?

As Christians we are called to reflect God's love to a world that is desperately in need of hope now more than ever. We are called to be His hands and feet, His faithful servants. As a church, we are called to missions. Missions was throbbing at the heart of God when He sent His Son Jesus Christ to die for the world. As someone said: "Missions didn't begin with the Great Commission. It began with God so loved the world that He sent His only Begotten Son."

Through our missions program, we are trying to make God visible here in Rio Rancho and throughout New Mexico as He opens up new opportunities for us. We continue to spread God's love by providing food through the Pantry, feeding the homeless through the Interfaith Bible Center in the International Zone of Albuquerque and the Nazarene Church in Gallup. This year we started providing 25 boxes of groceries each month to the homebound residents of the Navajo Nation.

Our Feed New Mexico Kids program is providing over 500 food packages to students at five local students so that they may have nourishing food over the weekend. In addition, 2400 gift bag snacks were distributed to the teachers and staff at the schools in Rio Rancho during planning sessions to show our appreciation for all they do. Our three-year support of St. Joseph Mission School continues as we removed and replaced 88 feet of sidewalk and will be constructing a concrete pad next month adjacent to the cafeteria. In a few weeks we will start collecting shoeboxes to send to children all over the world under Operation Christmas Child and serving at the Asbury Café during the State Fair.

One area where I hope to expand our outreach in the coming weeks is visiting and checking in with those who are in the hospital, rehab facilities, homebound, and living in local retirement communities. Currently we have a dedicated team of volunteers who lead worship services each Sunday morning at MorningStar. Tony Smith is teaching Bible studies at Fairwinds and

MorningStar each week. We are contacting other retirement communities to see if they are interested in us leading worship services and Bible studies there. As we increase our contact to these individuals, we need more volunteers. If you are interested in helping make God visible through this ministry, please complete the insert in the bulletin.

A Kindergarten teacher asked her students to draw a picture of what was important to them. In the back of the room, Johnny began to labor over his drawing. Everybody finished and handed in their picture but he didn't. He was still drawing. The teacher graciously walked back and put her arm on his shoulder and said: "Johnny, what are you drawing?" He didn't look up; he just kept on working feverishly at his picture. He said: "God." "But Johnny," she said gently, "no one knows what God looks like." "They will when I'm through," he replied. Will people know what God is like when we are through?

I hope and pray that we will all try to make God visible by how we live our daily lives; how we show love and respect for each other; and how we love our neighbors through our many outreach projects. John Wesley said it well: "Do all the good you can, by all the means you can, in all the ways you can, to all the people you can, as long as you can." Folks, God is already here; it's our job to make Him visible! Amen