

What Shall We Liken This Generation Unto?

But whereunto shall I liken this generation? It is like unto children sitting in the markets, and calling unto their fellows,

And saying, We have piped unto you, and ye have not danced; we have mourned unto you, and ye have not lamented.

For John came neither eating nor drinking, and they say, He hath a devil.

The Son of man came eating and drinking, and they say, Behold a man gluttonous, and a winebibber, a friend of publicans and sinners. But wisdom is justified of her children.

Matt 11:16-19 KJV

It has been twenty-five years or so that I first started working with high school youth. I was barely an "adult" when I started, and now I'm marrying off my first born and have graduated my last born. I think my season of a high school youth leader is wrapping up. I have books to write and other mandates to fulfill, and I sense it's the closing of this chapter.

I was on the phone earlier today with one of my first students I ministered to. I was her cabin counselor at a week long summer camp in 1992, in the heat of the Midwest in cabins along a lake. She attended a school with a graduating class of thirty in a small farming community about twenty minutes from my town, and thirty minutes from the school I ministered at. Somehow we maintained our relationship that morphed from student/mentor eventually into adult friendship. She's lived and worked along the Gulf for almost a decade now, and we are still very good friends. She is my son's godmother.

After twenty-five years of watching teenagers struggle with their identity, search for meaning and purpose, and roll with the inevitable tides of maturing, it is a bittersweet closing. Teens are quite possibly my favorite age group. They have the ability to communicate, but with the uncertainty of knowing their real thoughts and feelings. It's a constant joy and occasional challenge to exchange ideas and introduce concepts. I find them fresh and real and relevant, unassuming and still able to take in new or different ideas without being defensive. If they trust you. And that is the key. If they don't trust you, they don't listen; they don't learn; they don't receive.

And teens have lots of reasons to not trust. Not trust adults, not trust new ideas, not trust peers, not trust themselves...

In the past two and a half decades of working with emerging adults, I have a few observations:

America is a post-Christian culture now. It has been a swift descent into this arena of popular opinion, defiant selfishness, and general unbelief. Twenty-five years ago there was a consciousness in the youth of what God thinks, who God is, what He may want from humanity. That does not exist today in the status quo. The morality of the Bible is ridiculed and rejected. Christianity, by and large, is not respected, adhered to, or sought out.

American teens are tired of American school. They're tired of the charades and hypocrisy. They are unstimulated, uninterested, and uninvolved in their own education. They find most of school irrelevant to life, and the politics of the school system suffocating. They are burned out on tests and testing, rules and agendas, a form of police state and prison mentality. Very few of them know what they want to do when they leave school or how they're going to get there.

They cannot tell me where Syria is on a map, what's going on in the Middle East, or the first Ten Amendments of the US Constitution. They don't know and they don't care. If they know, it's incidental – not because they have an interest. They cannot articulate world events or local concerns. School is a place of survival for some, escape for others, and a necessary evil for others. Very few teens find school preparatory for their future.

Very, very, precious few teens today can think an original thought or critically. Deductive reasoning and common sense are all but absent. There is a herd mentality, but it's unrecognized within because they think they're thinking independently. Logical presentation of facts and data points are often lost, as basic deductive reasoning is almost nonexistent. A + B has ten different answers, and none of them are "wrong".

If they happen to be of the minority that embraces education, they embrace it hook, line and sinker. Every theory that is presented to them they absorb as veritable fact. The system rewards those who don't question it and punishes those who do, which weeds out the trouble makers in the process. Those who question do not receive the accolades or reward as those who don't. Bright and subservient students are elevated to leadership roles and pushed up the ladder to the next level, so that by the time they arrive at their "higher education", they are a virtual classroom of obedient minions, ready to further the cause of whatever field they've selected or been selected for.

Teens raised in the church most (or all) of their lives have a basic grid for morality, but question it frequently because of the social pressure to conform. A majority of them reject the Bible's morality to conform with the status quo. A shocking majority of church-raised teens have limited Bible knowledge and understanding. Their foundations are shaky at best. They could not tell me who Abraham, Moses or David were. They had

a sketchy understanding of Noah. (This is generally speaking.)

The greatest hindrance to believing teenagers' faith walk is distraction. Their day is so full of activity and pleasure seeking that there is little to no time or energy left to pursue weightier matters of the spirit, or to develop a personal relationship with God. Technology has taught this generation instant gratification on a level prior generations knew nothing of. Waiting on God is laborious for those who can instantly stream the latest movie. Straining to hear His still small voice is too much work for those who communicate via InstaGram and SnapChat. They quite simply don't have a grid for how to listen, wait, watch, or learn. They struggle to see the relevance in reading an ancient manuscript because they've not been taught the value in seeking knowledge.

And they are dying. Dying to be heard. Dying to be understood. They spend eight or more hours a day being told what to do, what to think, what to believe. Their social interactions are a competitive field of jockeying for acceptance and position. Their home lives are often chaotically out of control or controlling to the point of suffocation. Very few people have taken the time to hear their hearts, help them with their thoughts, substantiate their worth, quell their fears, or explore their talents. They don't know who they are or what to do. Our most powerful meetings are small groups, when they have to soul search and share their hearts. They need help articulating their thoughts and sorting through their emotions. They are consistently confused or discouraged or both.

They care about a lot of things and they want to care, but they're woefully misinformed by society. An hour or even a two hour youth meeting once a week is not enough to change the tidal wave that covers them almost every other waking hour of every day.

Over the last 25 years, unequivocally the most profound moments I've witnessed youth having are a couple things:

When they unplug from society for more than 48 hours, they are able to witness God first hand. They can sense Him; they can feel Him; they can hear Him. They encounter Him when they unplug. I honestly know of no exceptions. Every single teen I've ministered to over the last two and half decades, when they remove themselves from social media, phones, computers, TVS, and daily routine **and** have an atmosphere of nature and the Word of God, encounter God. Unbelief is silenced in that atmosphere. Doubts are stilled. The world fades and God becomes real.

And they know it. They want to get back to it. It becomes an altar in their memory of the time or the place they encountered God.

We have to teach this. We have to demonstrate this. We have to give opportunities for this.

The other profound moments are when they get a glimpse of their worth. When they finally grasp the enormity of their deliberate place in life, when they feel like someone has heard them, understood them, and loved them anyway, they are changed. The very act of listening to them without judging them begins to dismantle the hardness of all the years of striving. They need to explore ideas in a way that helps them learn about themselves, rather than dictates to them.

If you're on the outside (i.e. they are not your teen), you can help them by asking them what they think about things. Give them time to think about it before they answer, and then acknowledge and validate their answer. If their thinking is off (and it often is), ask gentle questions that will help them see things differently without criticizing where they are right now. Help them articulate their feelings by giving them permission to feel authentically, and not how they think

they're supposed to feel. Don't tell them what to think and don't invalidate their feelings. Ever. Don't do it. Don't give them answers to questions they aren't asking, and don't give them answers to the questions you may have asked. Let them formulate their own answers and only give your opinion when they seek it. They need to be heard by adults more than hear them, at least for awhile. Help them find their voice, and as they learn how to articulate, their thinking will clear up along the way. After awhile (varies by teen and their life circumstances), they will begin to trust you. When they begin to trust you, they will want to know your thoughts, and that is when you can make the most impact in their life. Don't rush this process.

If you're on the inside, if the teen is your own, evaluate their trust in you. If it is low or nonexistent, follow the advice in the above paragraph, but with hypersensitivity. Accompany this process with humility and acknowledge any failure or mistakes of your own as they come up. Genuinely seek forgiveness. Seek to understand more than to be understood. Listen to their thoughts without criticism, validate their feelings, and let them be who they need to be. You do not have to agree with them to love them. You do not need to make a stand on every issue you think they're off on. If you can prove yourself trustworthy, if you can demonstrate you care about their feelings more than being "right", if you can listen more than talk, you have a chance at building their trust. They will test you. They will say outlandish things that may not even be what they really think or feel, just to see if they can trust you to not overreact or come down hard on them. Let them sort out their thoughts and feelings without prejudice on your part. Believe in them. If you are consistent and patient, they will begin to value their exchanges with you, and you will gain opportunities to speak into their lives.

If you can get to this point, you are at a great place. You

will find they may change your life more than you change theirs. You may find your ways of thinking change as well. You may find they challenge you in ways to make you more real, and you may be the better person for it. You may find God in new and different ways you have not known Him before.

Generally speaking, this generation does not trust anyone. They have been betrayed by their peers, their parents, their authority figures, even themselves. If you can teach them how to trust God, the years and years of deception will begin to unravel. That formerly angry or rebellious or indifferent teenager may very well become the truth seeking radical that does not settle for the status quo any longer. They may be the confident adult that questions the trite answers of a corrupt system and causes the ripples of change this world desperately needs.

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