

“WHY DO THEY DO THAT?”

Based on Philippians 2:5-11
preached on Palm Sunday - April 5, 2009

Today I start with a confession. I am old and often out of touch. That's difficult for me to say but I have to say it because it is the truth. A funny thing happens as our bodies get older. Our minds think that we're still 22. But eventually we begin to look at those in their late teens and early twenties and realize that it is extremely hard to identify with them. We don't know how they're thinking, or what they're thinking. Recently we have had news near and far about teens sexting one another, and I wonder "What are they thinking?" I have seen kids wearing pants with a belt around their thighs and I wonder, "What could they be thinking?" I have seen young people texting one another even though they are sitting two feet apart and I wonder, "What are they thinking?" But that only leads me to think that I am old and out of touch.

Growing up, seeing someone with a tattoo was fascinating. Parents would warn not to do that because you would be marked for life. Yet today, tattooing is such an ordinary thing. People of all ages, from all walks of life are sporting tattoos, some that can be seen and others that cannot. Often I wonder how someone who would back away from getting a tetanus shot would pay someone to inject them with ink a few hundred times. I don't know why they would do that, but they do. And then others get branded. What's that all about? I mean, we tie up cattle and hold them down so we can brand them. We have to do that because no self respecting cow is going to volunteer to be branded, but we do it all the time. We even pay someone to heat up a piece of metal and then hold it against our body. In Junior High shop class I was trying to solder some stupid project, and know that shop was never a strong field for me, when this chalk block fell over and the melted solder poured over my fingers. When that happened, I said many things and probably a fair amount that was said should not be repeated in church, but I am sure that I did not say, ACool. Maybe I out to pay someone to do that to me again." Why do people do things like that?

That takes me to piercings. When I was young, about a million years ago it was a big deal for girls to have their ears pierced, and for guys it was unthinkable. Today ears are pierced 2, 3, 4 times, maybe more, and then we looked for other things to pierce. We pierce noses and eyebrows, belly buttons and cheeks, and even tongues and other parts that are not so visible. What would possess a person to do such a thing? Understand, it is their body and their choice, but I look at some people with studs sticking out all over their face and I begin to hurt. I don't understand. Why would they do that? And so I did some research. In her blog, a woman named Layla wrote, *"I think tongue piercings are very sexy, and it's always been my favorite piercing on someone else. So, I thought it would suit me well. On top of this, the thought of having my tongue pierced has always been the scariest of all piercings to me. Therefore, what better [thing] to have done? I also needed to get pierced again, since my last piercing was quite painful, and I felt I needed to prove to myself that piercing was an experience I enjoyed. Well ... this piercing was perfect for that."* She then went on to write about her piercing experiences.

So in that I learned that for some, body-piercing is sexy, scary, enjoyable, pretty, a "rush." The experience is one of "good, strong, yet pleasurable pain." It is being practiced by people who are longing for new sensations, even painful ones. And yet Layla went on to say, *"I am a gentle soul, and I deserve to be treated as such. I am a kind-hearted person who tries to show respect for others and, in turn, I deserve to be treated with respect and kindness. I am open-minded and intelligent, and prefer to be surrounded by*

others who also are. I am an adventurous soul I believe that the purpose of life is to share your love with others and to watch it amazingly come back around to you, and to have a lot of FUN: Life is your playground I believe there is a power greater than myself, and that the goodness in others just needs to be nurtured in order to show itself.”

Having discussed this subject for some time, you might wonder, "What's the point? What does this have to do with church, or with Christ?" Good question. But it leads me to another good question. If you saw Layla on the street or in your neighborhood, if you saw her with a pin through her cheek and ring by her nose, if you noticed this young woman with a piece of metal imbedded in her tongue, would you think about inviting her to church? Is there a place for Layla in the church today?

In “Christianity Today,” Dwight Ozard wrote, *“The greatest mission field we face is not in some faraway land. The strange and foreign culture most American evangelicals fear is not across the ocean. It's barely across the street. The culture most lost to the gospel is our own children, and our own neighbors. We live in a culture that can't say two sentences without referencing a TV show or an Internet site; a culture that can't remember what it was like to have to get up to change channels.”* It's a culture more likely to know what Simon said on “American Idol” than to know why Sarah, the wife of Abraham laughed; a culture more likely to have a body pierced and decorated with ink than it is to know why our life needs to be covered by the blood of Christ. And sadly, it is a culture that we have stopped evangelizing, and a people from whom we have turned away.

Many of our members, maybe even many Christians instinctively pause and even step back when we see someone with multiple piercings. But isn't it ironic that we come here to worship one who has been pierced in the extreme. Shouldn't we then make even an extra effort to invite those who are marked and pierced as well.

It's funny how the times change. Long ago, body-piercing was Christ's fate and now it's a contemporary fad. Holes in hands and feet then, holes in tongues and eyebrows now. Now I don't want to draw too many parallels between the then and now because Jesus certainly wasn't making a fashion statement when he *“humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death - even death on a cross.”* But Jesus did empty himself not only for us, but for the sake of all humanity, even those who adorn their bodies with multiple metallic objects.

The question is, how can we best make a connection between the Pierced One on the cross and the pierced ones in the streets? People with studs in their tongues are welcome in church because Christ died as much for them as for you or me. But how do we reach them? It is only by following Jesus on the path of emptying ourselves, and taking the form of a slave. Unless we serve the people around us who are quite literally, the “Awalking wounded,” those people will never see the power of our Servant Lord.

The piercing that is being done across America today is far removed from the piercing Jesus experienced. Today, piercing is done because it is sexy and scary, enjoyable and exotic, painful and yet pretty. It is being practiced by people who are looking for experiences on the very edge of everyday life, sensations that are both stimulating and scandalous. Those around today who have been voluntarily pierced

apparently want to experience life to the fullest, but do they really know how to do that, how to experience the fullness of life? Often they pierce themselves to feel something intense, and they know no other way to go about it. But we know, don't we? Oddly enough, the cure for this need to participate in body-piercing is a relationship with the One who was pierced. Life that is enjoyable and exotic, painful and pretty, comes from following the Savior, who emptied himself so he could become a slave.

Of course they did not puncture the ear of Jesus. No. Like a common criminal they pierced His hands and feet and side. By submitting Himself to the will of the Father, He “*emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death - even death on a cross.*” It allowed Jesus to become one with each of us and all of us, and He gave us the model of how we are to relate to the style-searching, stimulation-seeking, body-pierced persons around us today. This humble approach is not some passing fancy. It is close to the very heart of God. The extreme humiliation of Christ occurs when He empties himself of divinity, and takes on the form of a slave. Yet it does not cancel out His divine nature. Quite the contrary. It reveals the true essence of divinity, and demonstrates that love is at the very heart of who God is and what God does.

Will we be able to reach the pierced ones who live among us today? Will we find a way to serve them? Will we discover ways to minister to a generation that has been fractured by family brokenness, and raised without religion? Will our attempts to be an active, loving people help to water the seeds of faith that are lying dormant deep within them? The question is, how can those seeds be activated? Under what circumstances?

Seeds of trust and faith may appear to be dead in some people today, but given the proper conditions, they can also suddenly bloom. Men and women who look for the fullness of life in piercing parlors can find it in caring congregations, if they are accepted with the love of God. Fans of tongue studs who are looking for a life that is enjoyable and exotic, painful and pretty, can find it in a relationship with a Savior who had nails in his hands and feet. But this relationship will come only if the Christian community, the body of Christ, first reaches out with humble and sincere concern; only if we reach out with compassion and love.

To the walking wounded around today we must say in word and deed, AOf course people with pierced body parts are welcome in our church. For God not only knows my pain, He knows the pain within you as well. He knows it. He has experienced that and more by being pierced and hung on a cross. But we don't have to pierce ourselves to experience the fullness of life, because abundant life was gained for us when Jesus allowed His own body to be punctured. We don't have to punish ourselves with guilt, because Jesus bore our guilt. We don't even have to struggle to be perfect before offering our lives to God, because Jesus has already made the perfect offering. We don't have to make fashion statements, just faith statements. We don't have to pay penalties, because Jesus paid it all for us.”

So if you are walking through a mall and see someone whose eyes, ears, nose, cheeks, and chin are pierced, when you look at someone and begin to ask, "What made them do that to themselves?" Pause for a moment to remember the one who was pierced on the cross for you and for them. Why did He do that? He did that to draw us to Himself. To empty Himself that we might know and experience the fullness of life in all its pain and pleasure. And in that spirit, in that love, reach out to pray for them, and maybe even

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invite them because there is always room in our church for those who have been pierced. Now go forth and let them know. And in your life, may it be so. Amen.