

## Welcome

One of the biggest teen movies of the 90s just got a gender-bent reboot last year. How many of you are old enough to remember *She's All That*? The 1999 film features Freddie Prince, Jr. as the most popular guy at school, dared by his best friend Matthew Lillard to risk his reputation on dating the least popular girl at school - Rachel Leigh Cook.

Last year, Netflix released *He's All That*, featuring the TikTok generation. Can the most popular girl in school survive dating a total loser?

I think we like these stories because we've all felt like outsiders at some time or another. Most of us feel a lot more like the loser than the popular kid. So we like stories that remind us that the loser isn't really a loser - they're a really great person who's just like the popular kids, they just don't buy into all that popularity stuff.

Except, at the end, the new couple (spoilers... these are rom-coms) are still largely at the center of the school's social circles.

And *that* reveals something worth exploring today. Because we're going to see that the early church wasn't popular. Especially in the first decade or so of its existence, we were comprised almost entirely of losers and outsiders, to the point that people who were popular - or at least normal - didn't want to be associated with us.

So... when did the Bride of Christ get *She's All That*-ed? What did we lose in the process? And how can we recover what we lost?

## Message

Welcome to Easter-tide! Our series between the resurrection and Pentecost - the day we celebrate God's gift to us of the Holy Spirit - is called RECONNECTED. We're asking what it looks like to be plugged in - both to God and to the world to which God calls us.

What are the practices, attitudes and orientations God calls us to and gifts us with that enable us to be a church that engages and cares about the world around us?

For these questions, we're going in the book of Acts, which recounts the beginnings of the church. How did we go from a group of scared people who fled from the authorities when Jesus was arrested to a group that faced down persecution and fearlessly spread the good news of Jesus' resurrection to the world around us?

I hope we find a reflection of ourselves in those transformed disciples. I hope this series stretches our imagination about what is possible in our city, in our families, in our world today.

How can we recover the same sort of bold faith we in those first followers in the wake of Jesus' resurrection?

We began by reflecting on the impossibility of our call - that to accomplish God's mission we must make it a point to be gathered together, to worship and let God's Holy Spirit form us.

Last week, we saw how easy it is to focus on ourselves rather than on the world to which God calls us.

Today, I want to ask a question that might seem obvious but it's one we too often don't seriously consider:

What do we mean by 'the world'?

After all... there are more than 7 billion people in the world... and not even a thousand of us. So we can't mean the *whole world* when we say 'the world.' And even if we were to take the pattern we saw last week - Jesus sends the disciples to 'Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria and the ends of the Earth', that would mean something like, 'Rowlett, larger Dallas, Texas and the ends of the Earth' (you online folks do the same - your town, your city/state). Rowlett has something like 70,000 people in it. DFW is over 7 million.

That's... well it's too many people.

Turn with us to [Acts 5](#).

Those first followers of Jesus faced the same problems. How many do you think were gathered in that upper room praying together? 20? 30? And they faced a city of thousands. A nation of tens of thousands. A world of millions. And it's not like they had social media - getting even a letter to Rome cost something like \$500 in modern currency. And those first Christians weren't exactly rolling in dough.

So what did their early efforts to spread the good news about Jesus look like? Or maybe a better way to ask is, "Who actually cared? Of all the people in Jerusalem, who paid attention?"

The apostles were performing many miraculous signs and wonders among the people. And all the believers were meeting regularly at the Temple in the area known as Solomon's Colonnade. But no one else dared to join them, even though all the people had high regard for them. Yet more and more people believed and were brought to the Lord—crowds of both men and women. As a result of the apostles' work, sick people were brought out into the streets on beds and mats so that Peter's shadow might fall across some of them as he went by. Crowds came from the villages around Jerusalem, bringing their sick and those possessed by evil spirits, and they were all healed. -- Acts 5:12–16 (NLT)

So all the apostles - those are the 11 disciples plus the guy they promoted to replace Judas, and the rest of the believers met together regularly at the Temple court. But Luke tells us that 'no one else dared to join them.' Now, in Luke/Acts, when Luke uses language like this, he's typically referring to what we might think of as 'regular people'.

Today, it'd be the people who are married with 2.5 kids. Middle class folks with steady jobs, the politicians and influencers.

Of course those categories didn't apply in the same way in first century Jerusalem, but it's the people who are at the center of culture.

How do we know? Well look at what Luke tells us next: even though 'nobody was willing to join them', all kinds of people were still showing up. So the people who were showing up were the people who were on the margins. Poor from nearby villages, people who were sick or demon possessed - people who weren't allowed to participate in regular society. (These people were considered ritually unclean. They were literally not allowed to enter the Temple, to participate in mainstream life. They were less than citizens.

People on the margins.

*These* are the people who flocked to the good news about Jesus.

Which makes sense, doesn't it? After all, Jesus was crucified by a collaboration of Roman and Jerusalem authorities. And it's clear from the first several chapters of the book of Acts that the Jerusalem leaders were still actively opposing the fledgling Jesus-movement.

So for all those folks in the mainstream, it was going to cost them if they were spotted in Solomon's Colonnade. They were happy to watch from a distance, to think good thoughts about all those nice, poor Galilean peasants and their teacher (who I guess is okay now? That's nice!). But they weren't willing to *disrupt their lives* to receive Jesus' good news.

The people on the margins? Well, their lives were already disrupted. They were *already* on the margins. They had nothing to lose and everything to gain by receiving this news.

This was true of the first few hundred years of the Church - Romans didn't like Christians, but they tolerated us because we cared for the sick, and for children who had been abandoned by their parents.

When Rome was sacked by the Visigoths in 410 CE, the nobility fled. You know who stayed to care for those unable to flee? Christians.

Throughout history, our faith has been most vibrant, most alive, when it's been good news for those at the margins of our culture.

## BREAK

I'm sure you're already saying, "Wait a minute... that's not *all* of how the Church has behaved. It's not the *majority*! What about the Crusades? What about when the Church authorized and encouraged the Slave Trade? Or the conquest of the Americas?"

Turn with us to [Romans 6](#).

This is in Paul's letter to the church in Rome, and he's meditating on how Jesus' death and resurrection set us free. So I want to read this passage with those objections in mind:

Since we have been united with him in his death, we will also be raised to life as he was. We know that our old sinful selves were crucified with Christ so that sin might lose its power in our lives. We are no longer slaves to sin. For when we died with Christ we were set free from the power of sin. And since we died with Christ, we know we will also live with him. We are sure of this because Christ was raised from the dead, and he will never die again. Death no longer has any power over him. When he died, he died once to break the power of sin. But now that he lives, he lives for the glory of God. So you also should consider yourselves to be dead to the power of sin and alive to God through Christ Jesus. -- Romans 6:5–11 (NLT)

We are no longer slaves to sin. When we died with Christ, we were set free from the power of sin.

What does it mean to confess that, knowing that many Christians throughout history lived in such a way that Jesus' good news *wasn't* good for many they encountered?

Was Jesus' good news good for the Muslims and Jews at the end of Christian swords?

Was Jesus' good news good for the Africans enslaved by Christian slavers?

Was Jesus' good news good for the Native nations destroyed, relocated and reeducated by Christian presidents, soldiers, settlers and pastors?

Now, here's where it gets easy to do a couple of things. First, to look back and say, "Well, they weren't *really* Christians."

We're not in a position to say that. And more than that, what we're *really* trying to say is that we're better than they were. We like to imagine if we lived back then, we'd all be abolitionists, waging war on the side of justice.

And that's a question we can't *really* answer. What we *can* do is look at ourselves, today. We can ask: is the good news we're telling good news for the most vulnerable in *our* culture?

Are we more interested in the margins, or the center?

Are we fiercely, unapologetically anti-racist? Are we working to educate ourselves and our circles about the insidious sin of racism in our individual spirits and in our systems?

Or: here's one that legitimately haunts me. I like to imagine I'd have been an abolitionist back in the day. But my whole life is built around machines - computers and a smartphone - that I know for a fact were built with child- and slave-labor. We all know that.

But we just pretend we don't, because our *whole society* is built around having access to these machines. And besides, those people live in another part of the world, under different governments.

I'm not functionally any different from a Northerner in 19th century US who was careful not to question where his young nation's massive wealth came from - after all, it wasn't like he was ever going to spend the weeks it would take to travel to the South and see one of those cotton plantations for himself.

Or like my ancestor who settled in Eastern KS on land my family still owns. Who likely worked really hard not to think about who had been there before the government just gave him the land in exchange for 'settling' it.

How many churches have kept our mouths shut over the last five years, afraid of offending the wealthy donors who keep our doors open, lights on and salaries paid? Despite the clear evils and injustices we see at our borders, in our courtrooms, on our streets.

Do we dare to ask, "Is our news good for the margins?"

Do we dare to work to identify who the most vulnerable people in Rowlett are? To ask if we're good news for them? To ask how we might become good news for them?

The reality is that Jesus' invitation to new life costs us. It *might* cost us friendships, as we choose to stand with those at the margins. Much like the citizens of Jerusalem, people today might marvel from afar at our faith but be unwilling to stand with us.

Jesus' new life might cost us financially, as we reorient how we spend our moneys to be in line with Jesus' kingdom values.

Jesus' new life might cost us personally, as we continually uncover bigotries, biases, assumptions and prejudices formed by the centers of our culture rather than by Jesus himself.

But if we have the courage to face these questions, my friends, we become like the church in Acts. We can become God's love made tangible. A source of good news for all who are willing to identify themselves with a crucified Jesus because they have found the new life, the true life, waiting for us on the other side of the cross!

## Communion + Examen

Jesus invites us to his table, to be identified with him.

What about Jesus is good news for you?

Where does Jesus' good news challenge you?

How is God calling you to the margins of our culture this week?

What does it look like to say Yes to God's call this week?

## **Assignment + Blessing**

Deeply uncomfortable. No answers, just an invitation to wrestle with these questions together.