**Dare to Be Extraordinary**

**FBC Albemarle**

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“I won’t be labeled as average.” This was written on the cover of the journal in Rachel's backpack she was wearing when she died. She wanted to touch lives, and not be your "average" high-schooler, while at the same time living life to its fullest–and enjoying it.

It's been sixteen years since Rachel Scott's death at Columbine High School on April 20, 1999. Her funeral drew the most viewers in television history at that time and she continues to touch millions of lives. She has reminded us all that life could be gone from us in a second and we should make the most of it.

Like all teenagers, Rachel struggled with doubts and frustrations. She expressed these, along with some of her most inner thoughts and feelings in her journals. Sometimes she wrote them in the form of poems and letters. Sometimes she addressed them to God. Now, those journals are what her parents read out of when they travel the country speaking about their daughter's life, and her values. They should encourage all of us to "pick up the torch" and start a "chain reaction" of compassion and kindness.

Rachel was a girl who was friends with everyone. There wasn't a soul who wasn't important to her. She loved her family, her friends...and the Lord. She was very active in her church youth group, and her love for the Lord was evident in the way she lived her life. Although she sometimes spoke to her non-Christian friends about Jesus, in one of her journal entries she wrote, "I don't have to say anything, they just see you in me".

Another journal entry reads: "I want you to use me to reach the unreached.” Another said, “I have this theory that if one person can go out of their way and show compassion, it will start a chain reaction of the same. People will never know how far a little kindness will go.”

Since her death, her legacy has lived on through programs like Rachel’s Challenge that our Albemarle Middle School has recently taken up to address bullying. However, Rachel’s message goes beyond just curbing bullying among students. Her message reflects Christ’s teachings in the Sermon on the Mount.

Imagine being on the mountainside as an outcast of society and hearing the words of Jesus. We probably would’ve found Jesus’ words puzzling. Israel, the chosen people, are challenged to realize that God doesn’t have favorites. That doesn’t make much sense if you are a Jew. For generations, you have been told that your race has been God’s chosen people. So, if you are the chosen race, doesn’t that mean that you are God’s favorite? But what Jesus said was that Israel wasn’t chosen in order to be God’s special people while the rest of the world remained on the outside looking in. Israel was chosen to be the light of the world, the salt of the earth. Israel was chosen so that, through Israel, God could bless all of humanity. They were chosen to be the vehicle in which God was going to demonstrate his love. Now, Jesus was inviting all Israelites, especially those who had been cast aside, to be the true light of the world by following him on the dangerous road of the kingdom.

Jesus knew that the road of God’s kingdom was dangerous. He knew what was to come for his own life, yet if a kingdom revolution was going to occur, it was going to take people who were willing to be extraordinary. So Jesus offered the Israelites (and is in turn offering to us) a new sort of justice, a creative, healing, and restorative justice.

One of the things I never allowed students to do was play pranks on each other on retreats. I knew that the first time the girls would steal the guys’ underwear, wet them and put them in the freezer, the retaliation by the guys would be of epic proportion. Being still young with questionable judgment at times, I didn’t want things to get out of hand. This was the very reason why “eye for an eye and tooth for a tooth” was enacted in Israel. It was better eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth than an escalating feud with each side going one worse than the other. This law was actually to keep things in check.

Now imagine hearing what Jesus said when he radicalized the law. Instead of seeking revenge with eye for an eye, Jesus said that it was better to have no vengeance at all. Jesus wasn’t teaching people to simply take abuse from others but rather find a creative way forward, reflecting the astonishing love of God. Jesus is saying, “Don’t be like everyone else. Don’t respond the way everyone else would respond. Be extraordinary because our Father is extraordinary. You can stop living life scared to lose your grip on your identity, your possessions or your position. You don’t have to live life always being afraid because in God’s kingdom, we are secure. In God’s kingdom, you always have enough. You’ll never lack for anything because I will always be with you. Don’t be ordinary. Dare to be extraordinary!”

This is what we should be assured of today: Extraordinary people live from the position of security and abundance. We need to be assured of the fact that we are in a stable place in the kingdom with a solid identity as one in whom Christ dwells and delights. When we see our lives through this paradigm, we realize that our value as God’s creation is immense and our world is safe because God is in control. We are free to give and to sacrifice our resources because in God’s kingdom, we have everything we need…we have more than enough.

The examples Christ gives in his teachings are not universal laws but rather kingdom principles that offer alternative responses that showcase God’s incredible love. To be struck on the right cheek, at that time, almost always meant being hit with the back of the right hand because people rarely used their left hand. That’s not just violence, but an insult. It implies that the person being hit was in the inferior position, perhaps a slave, child or a woman. What should be our response? Jesus suggests offering the other cheek, which implies: hit me again if you like, but now as an equal, not an inferior. In this way, you are actually standing up to the person without retaliating with force.

In Jesus day, the rich would take the poor to court because of an unpaid debt. Often times, because the poor had literally nothing but the clothes on their backs, they would have to use that as collateral to borrow from the rich. So when they were taken to court, the only thing the poor had to repay the debt was his shirt (tunic). Jesus said if they want your shirt; offer them your outer coat (cloak) as well because we don’t live in a position of scarcity. We live in abundance so we can stand up to our accuser by exposing them their greed.

In Christ’s next example, we see the reality of Israel being under Roman rule. Roman soldiers had the right to force civilians to carry their equipment for one mile. But the law was strict; it forbade the soldiers to make someone go more than that. So Jesus says to not only carry it for one mile but carry it for two. The guiding principle in the kingdom is love and love seeks the good of others. Therefore, stand up to your oppressors by killing them with kindness.

James Bryan Smith writes, “God is with us – so the need to retaliate is diminished. God has an endless supply of resources – so the need to hang on to possessions decreases. God is looking out for our needs – so we can take the time to go the extra mile. God is the real owner of all we have – so the need to hoard and protect it diminishes. Kingdom identity (I am the one in whom Christ dwells) and kingdom awareness (I am in the strong and secure kingdom of God) are the keys to doing what Jesus calls us to do.”

Lastly, Jesus says to love our enemies and pray for those who persecute us. This obviously is not our natural response. We don’t want to love our enemies and the last thing we want to do is pray for them and ask God to bless them. So how do we follow Christ’s command to be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect? We follow the example of Jesus who opened up a new way of being human so that all who follow him can discover it. When his enemies mocked him, he responded in the way of love. When they challenged him, he told quizzical, sometimes humorous, stories that forced them to think a little differently. When they struck him, he took the pain. When they put the heavy wooden cross on his back after enduring the excruciating lashes, he carried it out of the city to the place of his own execution. When they nailed him to the cross, he prayed for them.

N.T. Wright says it more eloquently than I could ever say: “The Sermon on the Mount isn’t just about us. If it was, we might admire it as a fine bit of idealism, but we’d then return to our normal lives. It’s about Jesus himself. This was the blueprint for his own life. He asks nothing of his followers that he hasn’t faced himself. And, within his own life, we can already sense a theme that will grow larger and larger until we can’t miss it. If this is the way to show what God is really like, and if this is the pattern that Jesus himself followed exactly, Matthew is inviting us to draw the conclusion: that in Jesus we see the Emmanuel, the God-with-us person. The Sermon on the Mount isn’t just about how to behave. It’s about discovering the living God in the loving and dying, Jesus, and learning to reflect that love ourselves into the world that needs it so badly.” Don’t be labeled as ordinary. Dare to be extraordinary, just as Christ is extraordinary.