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Preaching: Ronni Verboom

Mark 7:24-37

“How do you feel about Barney?”

Ten or more years ago, I noticed little kids were wearing t-shirts, carrying backpacks and lunchboxes, even sporting shoes and socks bearing the picture of a smiling purple dinosaur. Since my own kids, at that point, were in their mid-teens to twenties, I wasn't aware of all the newest fads for preschoolers. However, it wasn't long before I learned about Barney and his T.V. show. I even watched a few minutes of it back then. After our son and grandson came to live with us, I had numerous opportunities to watch Barney.

Usually you don't see parents cringing around their children's idols until the kids are pre-teen at least. But Barney may be an exception. Although parents approve of Barney's messages of love, sharing, caring, co-operation, it seems adults soon hit their maximum Barney tolerance level. They've had enough of the pre-historic, plush, beaming, singing fellow. The closing song on his show is really mushy, but its message certainly is compatible with what we as Christian adults try to teach our children:

*I love you, you love me,
We're a happy family
With a great big hug and a kiss from me to you
Won't you say you love me too?*

After a bit, this grates on our nerves and creates a kind of sugary- sentiment overdose. But Barney has continued to appeal to young children for over ten years now. What is there about Barney that elicits such an overwhelming positive response in our preschoolers?

Let's think about that.

Kids respond to loving attention. Kids respond to messages that are in tune with their needs, desires, wants, wishes. When our little ones are watching Barney, they KNOW without being told that all the creative energy, silly songs, and activity on the screen are fully directed to them. Their concerns are the CENTER of Barney's attention. As Leonard Sweet points out in Homiletics magazine, "No matter how much Barney 'bugs' us, we must admit that in achieving the goal of reaching and riveting little children with his messages and ideas, Barney has DONE WELL."

Rev. Sweet has coined a new term from these observations: the "Barney Principle". The Barney principle says that to DO WELL in any task, we must be aware of and sensitive to the needs of those persons we are trying to reach and involve. There are two other "Barney"s I've known in my lifetime, and they both DID WELL in reaching particular people in a particular time: Barney Rubble from.....*The Flintstones*, and Barney Fife from*The Andy Griffith Show*. So, you see, the Barney principle has been operative for a while now!

Who else do we know who knew how to DO WELL in the task of reaching people in unusual ways and out-of-the-way places? Friends, Jesus did this a lot. Our Gospel reading for today tells about one such time. The Bible says that Jesus went from Tyre and Sidon to the Sea of Galilee "through" the region of the Decapolis. The region of the Decapolis, much of which is modern Jordan, is by no stretch of the imagination on the way to the Sea of Galilee. Jesus went WAY out of his way, and that detour brought the deaf and mute man his healing.

In that foreign territory, Jesus reached out to the man in need. Taking him aside, he gently tended to his needs and healed the man. Those watching were "overwhelmed with amazement". "He has done everything well," they said.

According to Rev. Sweet, Jesus was the master of the Barney Principle, and the people who make up the church today need to embrace this principle also, if we want to DO WELL in reaching our neighbors with the love of Christ. God intends to make us more like Jesus- flexible, pliable, open to the NEW and DIFFERENT.

Sweet highlights one aspect of the Barney principle: If you DO WELL in achieving your goal, some of what is done will not match up with your OWN taste, enjoyment, preferences.

"How do you know you're DOING WELL with your children's ministry?" Rev. Sweet inquires. "The Barney principle says that you know your ministry with children is reaching them if there are parts of it that drive you right up the wall." (Your building is busy and full, there are times when kids swarm through the halls, laughing, happy, chattering with each other, sometimes even requiring some firm words of correction!)

“How do you know if you’re DOING WELL with your youth ministry?” Sweet continues. “The Barney Principle says that your ministry with youth is effective if some of the things they do, some of the language they use, does to you what the sound of fingernails on a blackboard does.” (Your small group may have to contend with young people having a loud discussion on the other side of your classroom wall!)

“How do you know if you’re DOING WELL with reaching the unchurched? The Barney principle says that your ministry with seekers and unbelievers is bearing fruit if you find yourself going places, doing things and participating in services you had no intention of going to, doing, or participating in.”

Rev. Sweet’s words challenge us. We don’t like having to deal with Barney if we don’t feel like it. We don’t like feeling uncomfortable in new situations. But we can’t get around the truth. God has a plan for us. His plan is that we will become more and more like Christ.

Jesus was adaptable and flexible. Jesus shows US how WE are to be available as instruments of God’s own Holy Spirit. God is the Potter. We are the clay. We must be pliable and soft. Hardened clay cannot be used by God.

The central core of Christ’s teaching regarding God’s love, justice, forgiveness and goodness never changed. But the WAYS and PLACES Jesus connected with and ministered to people reveal great variety.

In the synagogue, with learned scribes and rabbis, Jesus shared his vast insights and deep knowledge of scripture, law, tradition. With simple country folk, Jesus talked about workers in vineyards, sheep and shepherds. He put sinners- tax collectors, outsiders at ease. They invited him to their homes and he accepted their invitations. He shared food and deep conversation with these people. He obviously made women and children feel comfortable with him and free to approach him. In all situations and places, Jesus was able to DO WELL.

Friends, we are called to do the same thing. God has a plan for us: to make us more and more like Jesus. For him to shape us into Christ’s likeness, we must be flexible, pliable, WILLING- even to do things and go places that we would not normally choose for ourselves.

Church analyst Herb Miller raises an important question: “Do you want your congregation to be alive in 2025?” He suggests that if our answer is “yes” we have to be open to the new and different. Not only to some new and different WAYS of doing things, but also to new and different PEOPLE.

Rev. Sweet says it plainly: “...If everything that goes on in your church is pleasing to you, then you and people exactly like you are the only people your church is reaching.

What matters is that all your church does is done for Christ's sake and is 'DONE WELL'."

It's not just Rev. Sweet who cautions us about treating different people differently in the church. The New Testament letter of James teaches us plainly that God wants us to DO WELL by loving others, ALL OTHERS, as we love ourselves.

All of this can be disconcerting, even frightening. There are so many different WAYS to sing and worship and pray. There are so many types of different people. But folks, remember our purple, fuzzy, dinosaur friend. Loving our neighbors means we pay attention to their needs, even if our tastes don't run the same direction as theirs. Remember Jesus, and how he ended up in foreign territory, ministering to people he hadn't expected to include in his ministry.

So, how do you feel about Barney? You may love him or hate him, but he matters to many of God's precious little ones and accomplishes an important purpose of letting them know they are special, valuable, and loved.

Now, here's the deal. God wants us to remember HE is the potter, and we are the clay. God needs us to be soft, bendable, pliable, ready to be shaped. He call us to take ANY shape that will help us do his work, EVEN the shape of BARNEY.

Jesus is calling US to DO WELL, in the only way that matters. We will DO WELL in living and sharing the good news of Jesus Christ. Are you ready to BE BARNEY if God needs you to? Let's do it! Christ's Spirit will show the way!