

I think the two words that most public radio listeners dread are “pledge drive.” My understanding – which may be wrong – is that public radio has three funding streams. They get some money from the government. They also rely on support from sponsors, such as corporations or foundations. In return these sponsors are acknowledged and thanked on the air on a regular basis. Technically these aren’t commercials, although sometimes they come pretty close. Usually though they are much shorter and much less disruptive than the advertisements on commercial radio stations.

Three or four times a year public radio stations also hold “pledge drives” asking listeners to make a pledge of support so that the public radio stations can keep the programs that listeners like on the air. Staff members interrupt the programming several times each hour to ask/plead/beg for support, reminding listeners of the quality of the programming and comparing the cost of a pledge to a daily cup of coffee or a movie ticket or a magazine subscription. They offer coffee mugs or sweatshirts or cd’s as gifts to encourage people to make a pledge and become members. I suppose pledge drives work, but they are annoying.

Now I love public radio. I’ve got a coffee mug. I’ve got a sweatshirt. I’ve got a rack of cd’s. I’ve been to see “Prairie Home Companion” and “Mountain Stage.” I listen to “Morning Edition” on my way to work and “All Things Considered” on the way home. To be honest I haven’t pledged to West Virginia Public Radio since I’ve been back but I probably will when the next pledge drive comes around.

When asked, most people can tell you why they listen to public radio. Some will tell you without being asked. Maybe they like the news it offers. Maybe they like “Fresh Air” or “Car Talk”. Maybe they like listening to classical music or the opera. There are lots of reasons to like public radio. I was thinking though that most of us are probably better evangelists for public radio than we are for Jesus Christ. We can tell you why we like public radio and encourage you to try it out. However we struggle to put into words the difference that Jesus makes in our lives. Maybe we can talk about our church or our pastor or our choir. Those are good things to talk about. Or hopefully they are good things to talk about. Sometimes people complain so much about their church or their pastor that you wonder why they still go to church or why they haven’t switched to another congregation.

But when it comes to Jesus, we don’t know what to say. I think sometimes even pastors struggle with this. We may be able to talk about the essential tenets of the Reformed Tradition or explain the different forms of church government, but we will often hesitate when it comes to talking about Jesus Christ on a more personal level. A study by Duke University found that American pastors said that their greatest frustration in ministry was their inability to convey the Gospel in this culture.

To be fair many of us have grown up in the church so that we take this for granted. Being a Christian just seems natural to us. But increasing numbers of people don’t have that experience. Going to worship on a Sunday morning seems like a sacrifice because it takes up what little free time they have. All they know about Christianity is what they see on TV. To them God seems angry and Jesus comes across as judgmental. It’s no wonder that they’re skeptical if not hostile when it comes to Christianity.

We need to be able to better articulate our faith and talk about the difference that Jesus makes in our lives. Here’s what I’d say: To me Jesus is a friend, a guide, a listener, a teacher. He is someone who does not abandon me or give up on me. He is someone who waits for me when I procrastinate and when I’m paralyzed by fear. He is someone who leads me day by day and even hour by hour. He helps me see the best in other people and points out the flaws in my own thinking. He encourages me to keep trying, to be patient with myself as well as with others. He has a bigger picture and a better plan for my life. He believes in me more than I believe in myself. My life is better because of Jesus. He gives me hope that there’s more to life than what I know and he helps me have faith that what comes next will be better than what’s here now.

I know I can do better than that but it’s a start. What difference does Jesus make in your life? And are you a better evangelist for public radio than you are for Jesus?

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