

Jeff's Jottings
October 18, 2019

But Have You...

The question came out of the blue, in the midst of an otherwise random conversation about baseball playoffs and juicy lucys and too-early Minnesota snow. "Do you think," my friend earnestly asked me, and then he paused, clearly searching for the right words. "I mean, you know, what you do. Your work. You know, churches." He paused again. "Look, I'm sure what you do is good and important and all."

"But, um...have you made any difference?"

My friend asked a good question, don't you think? And he is hardly the only one. More and more, I hear from all kinds of thinkers, theologians, bloggers, and preachers the language of insistence: a push for a more committed, more transformational, more all-in, more stand-apart church. Less just showing up. Less cheap grace. Less compromise with consumerism. Less compromise with nationalism. Less luke-warm faith. Less doctrine, fewer church fights, more action. A social consciousness to change the world.

Have you made any difference?

Maybe it's because I am now old enough to have meetings with a retirement planner and have to pay close attention, old enough to start looking back on a career and wondering. Maybe it's just how I'm wired. For whatever reason, my friend's question has remained immediate this past week, frontal-lobe fresh. Has my work really matter? Did anyone or anything really change because of my ministry? Does the church work? In these days of societal discord and climate catastrophe and the seeming re-ascendency of white supremacy, does the Gospel transform people?

Have you made any difference?

Maybe that's not what you're thinking about these days at all, and if not, I apologize for these too-public musings. For what it's worth, here's what I told my friend in that moment, though I suspect what I am writing here is a little less halting and meandering than the way it came out. I think I said that looking for the impact of my work is not like looking for an on-off switch, when one moment someone was this, and now they are that. I believe some people would say my ministry has "changed" their lives, though I suspect more would use the word presence than ministry.

Mostly I think this, I said: that the problem with human behavior, mine and yours, is more serious than we usually think. And that people can change anyway. That we live and breathe a faith that is both insistently realistic about human nature and is boundlessly hopeful about the possibility that people can change. That change is possible not because the problem is slight; it is possible because, with God, all things are possible.

But have you made any difference?

No, I said. And yes. Because I know God has. I know—though it is knowledge of the heart, not the head—that the spark, the love, the grace that brings change, burns hot in the heart of God. And amidst my own good intentions and missteps alike, I have caught enough of it that God has touched me and has been able to use me for God’s purposes.

Anyway, that’s what I said. I don’t know if it was a good answer or a right answer. I’d be happy for your wisdom. I only know that, after some moments of silence, my friend said simply, “Thanks, that helps.”

And then he asked who the Twins should sign in the off-season. Not a clue.