

Punk'd
Matthew 9:35-38; 14:14; 15:32

Where I thought that many of you might have seen several of the shows I have referenced in this series, this final show is probably an unknown to most of you, unless you have teenagers in the house. It actually went off the air a little over a year ago but the shows continue on occasion in the MTV broadcast world.

Like most of the shows on MTV, a network originally created to talk about and show music videos, it now has a significant collection of unfortunate "real-life" television shows. To say the least, for someone my age, the shows are a mess, as are the people on them. I stopped watching MTV completely about 10 years ago as the language became intolerable for me.

Punk'd is the brainchild of heartthrob Ashton Kutcher. His claim to fame was the 70's Show and the fact that he is currently married to a much older Demi Moore. Ashton grew up in Homestead, Iowa, where his family still resides, and is a regular at Hawkeye football games.

The show's premise is to Punk (trick) celebrities. The shows are very elaborate as they attempt to catch people off guard in embarrassing situations. As you can imagine it often brings out the worst in people, including use of their very limited English language. It is not very funny and often borders on what I would call mean and vicious. There is no attempt for anything meaningful to occur...they just want to Punk whoever it is they have selected as their victim for the week.

As we draw this series to a conclusion we have looked at some real life series that are an attempt to bring real quality to life. They are life affirming and gratifying to watch. Many of the other shows do nothing but waste your time as they attempt to show life in the worst light they can. Punk'd is of the later variety.

A show like this stands in stark contrast when we look at the series of scriptural readings for today. In each reading we see Jesus expressing compassion for those he encounters. Whether they are beaten down by life, hungry, or hurt, Jesus stops whatever he is

doing and makes their need his greatest concern. This is a model of life that seeks to only serve, never to hinder or to injure.

Now for those who watched this series faithfully you might be thinking, oh what damage does this do really. After all it is only a little more edgy version of something like the TV classic Candid Camera. And there is a certain amount of truth to this. But if you go to YouTube or other sites that post home videos, there are hundreds of postings of people creating their own version of Punk'd that go way over the top, often injuring people in the process. You see, the real danger is not in the entertainment value, it is always in opening the door for people to consider trying it out in the real world. And many walk through that door at great cost to others!

Creating havoc in someone's life for a laugh is not something we see modeled in the Bible. Can you imagine if Jesus' had been a practical joker? Take the raising of Lazarus. It would have been a quite different story if Jesus had arrived at the side of Lazarus and declared Lazarus alive, only to tell the family he wasn't serious, he was Punking them, Lazarus was still dead! You see this edge of meanness that underlies fooling someone else. There is no compassion in it.

Jesus was constantly telling and showing his followers that life was not about personal gain at someone else's ultimate cost: life was fully about serving one another.

In Matthew 15:32 we have this wonderful scene where the thousands are gathered on the hillside and Jesus begins to talk with his disciples about how they will feed the masses. This was not a planned event by any means. The reason the crowds were following had everything to do with what happened preceding this passage. In Matthew 15:21-31 we find Jesus healing the Canaanite woman (the one who reminded Jesus that even the dogs get the scraps from the table), and then he spends what must have been days healing "the lame, the maimed, the blind, the mute, and many others". For days he had been reaching out in compassion to bring healing to the hurting and now his only concern was feeding them. How easy it would have been for Jesus to turn away and say to his disciples, "it's not our business, we have done enough, let them fend for themselves". However, this was not the way of Christ. Even at a great personal cost he stayed and served.

Let's put this in a more modern setting. Let's suppose you got up early, before dawn, one morning to go work on a Habitat Home. You took off a day from work, unpaid, spent hours in the hot sun working on a home for a person you never met, and then at the end of the day, when you were worn out and ready for rest, someone comes up to you and says, I need you to help with another project. You are already worn out, but you decide I can stay for another hour or two. Before you know it, it is very late. As you head back to your car someone else comes to you and says, we don't have anything to eat at my house, would you go get something for me to have for dinner? You are dead tired, you have already given up a day's wages, and now they are asking for you to spend more of your hard earned money to buy this stranger dinner? Somehow you take a deep breath, drive to the nearest Kentucky Fried Chicken, grab a bucket with all the trimmings and drive back to the work site where you deliver the meal. It is now really late and you are absolutely beat. Before you can get away another person sees you and says that their plumbing is backed up and would you come and try to help them fix it?

As you can see this set of circumstances would test the metal of any good person. At what point in this scenario do you finally say no! Then look again at this scripture, Jesus never says no. At great personal cost he gives and gives and gives. Even against the advice of his fellow travelers, he stays until the last request is fulfilled.

Of course, Jesus was the perfect human being with a healthy dash of divinity. We can't be expected to do what he did, can we? No, we can't! But we are called to try.

There is an old story about two brothers that talk about this spirit of compassion and generosity.

Two brothers worked together on the family farm. One was married and had a large family. The other was single. At the day's end, the brothers shared everything equally, produce and profit. Then one day the single brother said to himself, "It's not right that we should share equally the produce and the profit. I'm alone and my needs are simple." So each night he took a sack of grain from his bin and crept across the field between their houses, dumping it into his brother's bin.

Meanwhile, the married brother said to himself, "Its not right that we should share the produce and the profit equally. After all, I'm married and I have my wife and my children to look after me in years to come. My brother has no one, and no one to take care of his future." So each night, he took a sack of grain and dumped it into his single brother's bin. Both men were puzzled for years because their supply of grain never dwindled. Then one dark night the two brothers bumped into each other. Slowly it dawned on them what was happening. They dropped their sacks and embraced one another.

It is this type of giving of yourself that brings meaning and joy to life. Elbert Hubbard, a writer, philosopher, and artist who lived at the beginning of the 20th century has this great quote that sums up much of what we have been discussing this morning as he states,

"Life in abundance comes only through great love."

If you really want to experience the fullness and joy of life it is never found at the cost of another human being. Real joy, real meaning, a real life of faith is always found in service, in compassion, and in love for all we meet.

Reality Faith has little to do with what we see on television these days. In fact, reality faith is not always easy to find because it is not self-serving, it does not draw attention to itself. Reality Faith's value is in the little things each day that people do for each other just because.

We will always be someone's apprentice, always wanting an extreme makeover of our lives, trying to be a survivor one more day, while trying to hold to what we can control while we really need to be a big loser, giving control to Christ. Whether you are a housewife, or a business person, a grandparent, or a new father, life is not about gaining by Punking another, it is in giving that we find our real reason to get up in the morning.

So take your faith out of its Sunday morning box and let it shine for all to see. We are people of a Reality Faith, but it is only real to the world if you risk living it everyday!