

Beware your message on the run

Coming back from a run one morning this summer, I did what I usually do, and walked the last couple of blocks in order to cool down. It was a little warmer than usual that day, which meant I was sweating more than usual, and when I sweat a lot from exertion, my face turns bright red. (My basketball buddies say it's more of a purple.)

When I got within a block of my house I passed my neighbor, who is usually working in her garden when I walk by. Typically we just wave and share a meaningless greeting. But this day, she caught me off guard.

"You don't make running look very attractive," she said, peering over her glasses, giving me a pained look.

It made me laugh at first.

"Really? You don't look at me and say, 'Wow, I can't wait to look hot and exhausted like that guy?'" I asked.

"You look miserable," she said.

When I got home and cooled off, I got to thinking about what she said.

The Sunday School class I teach at my church has been going through Philip Yancey's most recent book "Vanishing Grace: What Ever Happened to the Good News?" He wrote it out of a concern about how we represent our faith to others.

"We are called to proclaim good news of forgiveness and hope, yet I keep coming across evidence that many people do not hear our message as good news," he writes.

Of course, when I am running, or cooling down from a run, I am not trying to get others interested in running. I do it for myself. I am not trying to send a message of anything, except for the occasional "Get out of my way!"

But as a Christian, I AM sending a message all the time, whether I want to be or not, and whether I am aware of it or not.

Is it a message of mercy, forgiveness, healing, compassion, humility, gratitude and love?

Is it a message of judgment, condemnation, superiority, condescension and arrogance?

Both messages are often done in the name of the gospel. Which one is good news?

Yancey tells of a friend who was on the staff of a large metropolitan church, who took a side job as a barista at Starbucks. When the conversation with one of his customers turned to religion, the customer said, "When Christians talk to you, they act as if you are a robot. They have an agenda to promote, and if you don't agree with them, they're done with you."

Who were the people attracted to Jesus? People with secrets, like the woman at the well. People who were hungry and thirsty. Sinners. People who knew there must be more to their lives than just getting through each day. Rich people who wondered, "Is this all there is?" People who had exhausted all of their resources and were being ground down by their world. People who were afraid.

Who were the people not attracted to Jesus? Religious leaders. Smug people who manipulated and took advantage of others. Demons.

When I first became a Christian at age 16, it was not because I lost a theological debate, or was told I was going to hell, or was sorry for my sins. I became a Christian because I saw people who were living at a level that I found desirable. I wanted to live in the love they were living in. I wanted the freedom they had. I wanted the joy.

Because of their lives, they made Christian faith look attractive.

I understand why people don't want to follow Jesus, because what they've seen of Christians is all bad news. But



think of what a little salt and a little light could do to change a person's perspective.

Through our lives, people might be able to hear the words, "Follow me" and know that it's good news.



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