

Making Ripples

Introduction: – I got the title for today’s message from Mike Breaux’s book called *Making Ripples*. And in it, he raises a very significant question for us to consider this morning. And that question of deep and profound significance is this: How do you get into the water?

When you are standing on the edge of that swimming pool or at the shore of the ocean or some lake, how do you get in?

One strategy is the gradual acclimation approach. You know, you could just stick your big toe in and say, “**Woo, that’s cold!**” Then once your toe is used to the water, you move a bit deeper into the water until it is up to your calves and say, “**Woo, that’s cold!**” Then once your calves are acclimated to the water, you move a bit deeper into the water until it is up to your knees and say, “**Woo, that’s cold!**” Then your thighs, Woo! Then your waist, woo! Then your stomach, chest and finally your head, Woo!

That a strategy that I’ve used to get into the water before, and it is just miserable, isn’t it? It is just a series of uncomfortable moments that strung together makes for a miserable experience.

But there’s another strategy that is just head and shoulders above that strategy for getting into the pool. Do you know what it is? Let me give you a hint.

Illustration – Video Clip from *The Sandlot*.

The cannonball is way better and way more fun. We get that running start toward the edge of the pool, then just when we are at the edge of the pool we jump as high as we can. And while we’re midair, we tuck and just wait to hit the pool. And when we hit the water, we send water flying everywhere and in the pool the water just ripples out, hits the sides and comes back in.

The ripples just continue going back out and then back in, back out and back in again. Depending on how good we are at cannonballing, those ripples just keep going. And if the sides of the pool weren’t there, those ripples would just keep going and going and going long after we made our splash.

Mike Breaux suggests that is what God has this in mind for us as well. That God tells us, “**Trust me – jump. Make a splash with your one and only life, and we can make ripples together. Live your life in such a way that you touch someone else’s life. Then they’ll touch someone else’s life, and they’ll touch someone else’s life – and long after you’re dead and gone, the ripples will still be going.**”

Paul put it this way in the first half of 2 Corinthians 5:20, “**We are therefore Christ’s ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us.**” We are to live and breathe as if God himself were making an appeal through us to everyone who surrounds us each and every day.

Think about how crazy it is. There are numerous ways God could make his appeal to people. He could use skywriting with the clouds or stars. He could personally visit people in dreams. He could take over televisions and broadcast his appeal. He could commandeer the entire Internet including mspace to talk with people about himself. And for sure it would be more dramatic and effective and manageable than people.

And for those of you who are just checking out GracePoint or God for that matter, you're probably in complete agreement. Maybe you've experienced that confusion of understanding God when a follower of Christ has tried to explain him to you. Maybe you've experienced that disbelief in what they say and how they explain it because it seems more like myth than reality. And it would be so much more clearer to you and so much more believable if God were just to show up and tell you himself. And maybe that's why you're here this morning and it is my hope you hear from God.

But believe it or not, God already has. God chooses to make his normal appeal through ordinary people who follow Christ like me and others here this morning. He invites the follower of Christ to cannonball trusting him to draw people through us as he makes his appeal through us.

Sometimes that means we share the whole story of God and Jesus Christ and when the person hears it, they cross the line of faith and embrace Jesus for forgiveness and direction. Other times, that means sharing the whole story of God and Jesus Christ and just being a piece of their faith journey toward Jesus Christ. And still other times, many other times, that means just helping to point people a step closer to that line of faith.

So here's the question for us: how do we position ourselves in the culture to make ripples? How do you and I put ourselves in a place where we can point others even just a step closer to Jesus Christ?

This past week I was talking on the phone with my friend Tim Lucas from New Jersey who leads a church called Liquid Church. And I am indebted to him for his thoughts on how we reach people because his ideas and strategies at Liquid have seeded my own. And I was reminded and pointed back to some the basic strategies, some of the fundamental postures we can take to create ripples in our world.

So I would suggest that there are three postures, three strategies if you will, that you and I can take to create ripples in our world.

Invest in Relationships: The first posture is investing in relationships. Turn with me to Colossians 4:5. Paul is writing this church languishing in prison because he invested himself deeply into relationships to make Jesus Christ known throughout the ancient world. But notice what Paul says about handling relationships with outsiders, people who are outside of the church and people who are far from God. READ COLOSSIANS 4:5-6.

Paul instructs us to be wise in our relationships, not haphazard or random or casual, but wise and intentional in our relationships with outsiders, not as projects but as people made in the image of the God we worship. We are to invest in relationships with outsiders. This was Jesus' practice and lifestyle throughout the gospels, which we talked about last week. That Jesus sought out people who were far from God and invested in relationships with them.

So grow those relationships by honestly sharing stories about life and faith back and forth. Develop those relationships by asking real questions about all of life back and forth. Cultivate those relationships by just spending time together over dinner and dialoguing back and forth. Paul tells us to invest in relationships with outsiders.

Think about your relational circles right now. Think about the people whom you already know from the workplace, from school, in your neighborhood, at the businesses you frequent, and from friends you've made. How many come to your mind right now? One? Two? Three? Four? More?

Illustration – In my own relational world, there are my neighbors Vali and Mela, and Chip and Sharon. There are people that I hang out with and talk with at work like Dave, Dave, yes there are two Daves in our offices, and there's also Julie and Karen.

Now, I don't know all the circumstance of where you live and what you do. But just think about it. You are the only one in the world with that relational network. There's no one else with your connections and your relationships. So could it be that that is the very place God has placed you in particular to create some ripples? Could it be that you and I are a uniquely shaped pieces to God's puzzle of creating ripples in this area? Absolutely. Why do I say that?

Because inevitably when you and I develop those sorts of relationships, there will be God drenched moments where opportunities to talk about spiritual matters arise. It is inevitable. Questions about why you do what you do will come up. Questions about what you believe will bubble to the surface. Discussions about who God is and what he's like will pop up. Promptings from God to ask a question or to raise an issue will spring into your heart.

And whenever that happens, Paul says to take the chance and be as clear and as kind and as compelling as you can possibly be. Or in his words, have a conversation full of grace and seasoned with salt.

Illustration – Just this past week, I took my car in to get it serviced. And as part of the service, they provided a courtesy shuttle to take me from the shop to the office and then vice versa at the end of the day when my car was ready. So at the end of the day, this courtesy shuttle picked me up to take me to the shop to pick my car up.

And the driver was great. He was asking me questions and we just seemed to hit it off. In the midst of our conversation, it came out that I am the pastor of GracePoint. And usually whenever that happens, I can see giant walls erected that just kill conversation.

But not with him. He asked all kinds of questions about me and GracePoint and what we believe, and so I got the chance to explain all of that as best as I was able. And he kindly listened to my perspective about Jesus and he even offered me some great advice about being a pastor. It sounds so ordinary, but it was one of those God drenched moments that Paul points to for us to seize.

Maybe those moments are moments to share God's story in Jesus Christ and how to reconnect with God through Jesus. Maybe those moments are moments to tell people about how Jesus died for their sin and how by merely asking Christ into our lives we can be restored to God in a relationship with him.

But maybe those moments are just shedding light a little bit more clearly on what God's like. Maybe those moments are moments of just chipping away at preconceived notions of what it means to follow Christ. Maybe those moments are moments of just raising questions. But watch for those moments as you invest in relationships with outsiders.

To make ripples in this area, we invest in relationships with outsiders.

Invite to Mingle: The second posture is to invite outsiders to mingle. There are a couple of examples that come to mind immediately. The first one is in Luke 5:27. So turn with me to Luke 5:27.

READ LUKE 5:27-28. Jesus invited this tax collector, this lowest rung of the sinner ladder in Jesus' day, to be an apprentice of his, a disciple of his. And Levi, also known as Matthew who ended up writing one of the gospels of Jesus, gives up his post and follows Jesus. So what do you suppose is one of the first things that Levi would do? Throw a party with Jesus of course! But notice who Levi invites to rub shoulders with Jesus in verse 29. READ LUKE 5:29. Since Levi was far from God as a tax collector, he knew tons of other tax collectors, people who were far from God. So Levi sets up a party where his friends that are far from God can rub shoulders and hang out with Jesus. Levi doesn't tell them about Jesus, he just invites outsiders to a place where they could mingle near Jesus.

Or take a look at John 4:28. Jesus has just gotten finished having a shockingly honest conversation with a woman by a well in the middle of the day. She was trying to hide from everybody in life, but Jesus still found her and engaged in a dialogue with her. And after she has this heart-to-heart with Jesus, notice what she does. READ JOHN 4:28-30. She doesn't know that much about Jesus, but she invites everyone she could to rub shoulders and hang out with Jesus. She invites outsiders to a place where they could mingle near Jesus.

The examples here point to taking a posturing of inviting outsiders to places or events where they can mingle near Jesus. It is the art of inviting and bringing outsiders to places or events where they can encounter Jesus, even through other people like here at GracePoint.

Invite outsiders to mingle with other Christ followers. Invite outsiders that you develop relationships with to a service here on Sunday morning to encounter Jesus here. Make a whole morning of it when you can meet them here at church and then go to lunch with them. But invite outsiders to mingle here at a service.

And if that feels a bit scary, I'm there with you. I know the fear of inviting someone or bringing someone to church, only to sit there with them and cringe at some of what I hear or how things are said. I've experienced it when I've invited people to church with me.

But let me let you in on something here. I'm inviting along with you. So as I prepare and think about what I'm going to say and how I'm going to say it, I'm thinking of communicating to my friends that I've invited as well, some of whom may even be here this morning.

Will I be perfect all the time? Will I never cause you to cringe with your friend on your arm? Of course not because I'm not flawless. But I will do my best to be as clear as possible, to be as kind as possible and to be as compelling as possible.

But I also know that part of the hesitation to invite our friends has to do with the fact that we don't know what's coming. I mean we don't want to invite a friend who has issues with the church always talking about money to a service where we're talking about money. So if you look in your program and you check out our website at gracepointne.org, you'll know what is coming up next week as well as what the next series will be.

In fact, the next series is called *Searching for God Knows What* that will begin the first week of October and it is a series based on Ecclesiastes where some real honest questions about life, faith and God are raised.

We've even created a business card invitation for you to use to invite. I carry them around with me so that if the opportunity arises, I am able to give it out and invite people here. So grab some in the back or in the café afterwards or get some from your Life Community and just carry them around so that if the opportunity arises, you can invite outsiders to a service here.

But if you know that they aren't ready for a service or wouldn't connect with what we're doing here on Sunday morning, invite them to other places where they can mingle with other Christ followers.

Invite them to one of the family events that the Tuesday night Family Life Community is hosting. Invite them to one of the non-threatening socials that your Life Community is throwing. Or throw a party or dinner yourself and invite your friends here at GracePoint and people who are far from God to mingle.

To create ripples in our area, we invest in relationships with outsiders and invite outsiders to mingle with other Christ followers.

Serve with Grace: The last posture is to serve with grace. Turn with me to Mark 10:42. Two of Jesus' apprentices or disciples, James and John asked Jesus whether they could have the most prominent places in his kingdom. They basically were powering up and positioning themselves for influence and prestige. And as you can imagine the others weren't too happy about it because they probably wanted those places of power. So Jesus calls them together to clarify what prominence and prestige and influence looks like in his book and in following Jesus. READ MARK 10:42-45.

Jesus points to the place of influence and the normal place for his followers as serving with grace. You see, we can talk about grace and kindness all we want. We can also point to God's grace and kindness all we want. But many times to gain the credibility, to gain the right to be heard, we have to demonstrate grace in action. We have to show grace in action because grace is utterly uncommon in our world.

Illustration – Philip Yancey wrote about a conversation that he had with Gordon MacDonald where Gordon MacDonald posed a question to Yancey: What is the one thing the church has to offer that the world cannot get anywhere else? MacDonald notes that after all, you don't have to be a Christ follower to build homes for the homeless, to feed the poor or to donate to charity. You don't have to be a Christ follower to try to effect political change or to pass social legislation. There are any number of other traditions and teachers that offer wise moral instruction. So what's the one thing the church has to offer that the world cannot get anywhere else? Gordon MacDonald's answer: grace.

Where else can our world go to find grace because we don't necessarily live in a grace filled world? Normally, you get what you paid for. If it's too good to be true, then it's probably not true. No free lunch. Tit for tat. What goes around comes around.

When's the last time you've been in rush hour and seen grace? In the words of John Ortberg, "**How often do people roll the windows down and say, 'Grace to you. I forgive you for cutting me off. I turn the other bumper. You ask for my lane, I'll give you the shoulder as well?'**" Hardly.

When's the last time you've been to Fenway and seen grace when the umpire blows a call? Have you ever seen anyone stand up and say, "**The umpires are human too, so we understand mistakes can happen. So let's forgive the ump.**" And then the crowd instantaneously, begins to chant, "**Forgive the ump. Forgive the ump. Forgive the ump.**" Hardly.

Grace in action is utterly uncommon in our world. Grace in action legitimizes what we believe to outsiders and to the world. And it is grace in action, serving with grace that Jesus points to as normal for Christ followers and the place of influence.

In all honesty, that's why we did the Moldovan orphanage project where we filled 100 backpacks full of supplies for orphans. We needed to have some more grace in action where we did something that gained us nothing but dispensed kindness and grace to others.

In fact, a few months back when I was inviting someone to GracePoint, one of the first questions they asked me was whether we reached out to the community. She didn't use the words, but she was asking, "**Are you the type of church where grace is in action?**" And so I told her about the elder care project we did with the town of Andover where we took some elderly people to the grocery store. We did it to help the town start a volunteer project like that. And as soon as I said that, it was like she instantly said yes to GracePoint. Why? Grace in action.

So we're going to continue to offer opportunities like that throughout the year. But we can do this even in our personal lives as well and in the normal rhythm of our everyday lives.

When Jenny and I lived in New Jersey, we lived in a half of a duplex. Our neighbor on one side of us was an older single woman. And our neighbor on the other side was an older married couple. So whenever it snowed, I not only scooped my walks and driveway but theirs as well. And before you get impressed at all, you probably scoop more snow at your house than I did with my duplex and theirs as well. Simple in the normal rhythm of my life.

Last year on Labor Day, our neighbors, Vali and Mela spent the day on their roof re-roofing their house. And it was boiling hot that day. So Jenny decided to make brownies and get some ice cream for them. So she and Samuel went over to Vali and Mela to give them a refreshing summer dessert after a backbreaking day in the sun. And after she did so, they invited more of the neighbors over and we had an impromptu party in their house. Simple in the normal rhythm of life.

So look for opportunities to do good to the people all around you. If you're going to get a cup of coffee at Dunkin' Donuts or Starbucks, then buy a cup for some of your co-workers. If you're fixing some dessert, make a bit more and invite neighbors over to eat with you. If you see someone sitting alone, offer to sit next to them as company.

Look for opportunities to do good for people around you, to serve with grace in the normal rhythm of everyday life.

Conclusion: To make ripples in our area, we invest in relationships with outsiders, invite outsiders to mingle with other Christ-followers and serve outsiders with grace to demonstrate who Jesus is.

Illustration – I think back to some ripples that God has created through me and I'm so very ordinary and so very awkward. I think back to college when I befriended a guy named Greg who ended up crossing the line of faith in the midst of our friendship. Then later that same year, Greg brought over his friend, Greg to hear about Jesus and then another crossed the line of faith.

I think to my time in Belarus when in the midst of everything else I was doing, I got to befriend and invite and serve some of the Belarusians and out of that crowd, Vadim and Oxana crossed the line of faith and many others who didn't cross the line of faith but in some small way, I was a part of pointing them a step closer to Jesus.

I think back to New Jersey where I befriended and invited and serve outsiders like Judy, Miles, Ryan and John who haven't crossed the line of faith, but in some small way I tried to help them take a step closer to Jesus.

And even now, I'm doing the same thing. I'm just befriending, inviting and serving because God will create ripples when I do that and those ripples will last long after I am dead and gone. And he will do it in your life as well.

But there's the catch with any great cannonball: we actually have to jump in to make a ripple. We have to risk it and jump in. So go ahead: take a dip. Get a running start, jump, tuck your knees and cannonball. Create ripples in life where your life touches another life that touches another and make ripples all over your relational world that will extend on into the Andover area into the world and to the next generation. So jump and just watch the ripples God will create in your wake.