

“They are nasty, racist, violent, and greedy. They are thieves, prostitutes, robbers, and murderers. They are all gang members.” Doesn’t sound like a group that many of us would want to hang around? Doesn’t sound like a group you would want to do business with? Certainly doesn’t sound like anyone you would want working for you if you operated a business. But in Mimi Silbert’s business model, these are exactly the people that she hires.

Mimi Silbert operates several businesses in San Francisco under the umbrella of the Delancy Street Foundation. Silbert’s new hires typically have had 18 felony convictions. They have been homeless for years, and most are lifetime drug addicts. Within hours of being hired, they are working in a restaurant, moving company, car repair shop, or one of the many other Delancey companies.

There are no therapists. There is no professional staff to oversee these new hires. There are no donations, no grants, and no guards. Just a remarkable strategy of influence that has changed the lives of 14,000 people over the past 30 years. Of those who come to work under the Delancey Foundation, 90% never go back to drugs or crime. Instead, they earn degrees, become professionals, and change their lives. Forever.

One of the employees in Delancey is named James. Like many of the 500 residents who live on the campus, James was a career criminal and drug addict before coming to Delancey. And like most, he started young. After 4 years as a regular runaway, criminal, and drug abuser, James turned 10. By that time, the state of Illinois was fed up with him and put him on a plane out of Chicago and told him to not come back.

James was flown to Oakland, California where he took up residence with his father near the docks. The first lesson his dear old dad taught him was how to shoot heroin. The next 25 years consisted of violent crime, drug abuse, and prison. Six years ago he was convicted of yet another violent offense and sentenced to 16 years of prison with no hope of parole. That was when he asked to join Delancey rather than serve his entire sentence.

Today James is professionally dressed and has not had any drugs or alcohol for 2 years. How did this change occur to someone who was down such a hole?

Mimi Silbert discovered if she was able to influence a small group of people of change a couple of behaviors, then they could set the world on fire. She discovered that if she could impact a few lives that this would spread and impact others. And so that is what they do.

To transform these ideas into realities, each resident is placed in charge of someone else the very first week. For instance, if you are a resident who was homeless and strung out on crack a week ago, you are assigned to a resident who has been in the program for only a couple more weeks than you who teaches you how to set a table in the restaurant. A week later, someone newer comes into the program and you are put in charge of that person. Each person is responsible to help others bear good fruit.

Today we have read about the appearance of John the Baptist as recorded by Matthew. Matthew doesn't slowly introduce us to John by recording the miraculous story of the birth of John the Baptist. We don't get any of the details found in Luke's gospel about how Elizabeth became pregnant at an old age and how his father Zechariah agonized over issues associated with his birth. We don't get to read about the angel visiting John's father and reassuring him that his prayers would be answered. When Matthew introduces us to John the Baptist, John comes tearing into the room and calling people a pack of snakes and yelling at them that they need to repent.

And unfortunately, this image of John is the image that many people outside the church have of those of us inside the church. Many folks outside the church see Christians as people who stand against things rather than stand for things. They see us as righteous hypocrites who would rather be against something rather than for something positive in our culture. They see us as people who would rather shout at people across a chasm that they should repent rather than as people who are helping others bear good fruit.

But if we re-read this text of Scripture, John says that people of faith should be people who help others bear good fruit. And simply claiming Abraham as our ancestor or a cross on our front or a cross around our neck is nothing. God can raise up children of Abraham from the stones of the ground.

So the question before us today is this. How are you helping others bear good fruit in their lives? How are we in the church helping others bear good fruit? Are we providing the resources and support so that others outside of ourselves bear good fruit? Or do we care only about ourselves? Are we focused on our survival? Are we focused on what we think we want? Or are we focused on helping others bear good fruit?

Mimi Silbert felt led to help others bear good fruit rather than poisonous fruit by identifying two behaviors and working to correct those behaviors. People around us are suffering and many are bearing poisonous fruit. Folks are suffering from unemployment, starvation, AIDS, family break ups, loneliness, grief, homelessness, war, and in prison?

Our neighbors are yearning for help to bear good fruit. Are we willing to accept this challenge? Are you the next Mimi Silbert? So if we are, what is our next step? The first step is to listen. Listen to God. Listen to the Scriptures. And listen to the yearnings of our neighbors. People in our schools, in our places of work, in our neighborhoods. Maybe as we listen, we will discover where we are called to help others bear good fruit. And as we help others, we may find what we are yearning for as well. AMEN.

---

-Patterson, Kerry et al, *Influencer*, Vitalismarts, McGraw-Hill, NY, 2008

-Text: Matthew 3: 1-12

-Given: Dec. 5, 2010 in Allison Creek Presbyterian (York, SC)