

Alive: The Spirit Conspiracy

Colossians 3:12-17

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I might not be standing here talking with you if it hadn't been for that pebble of faith that was dropped into the life of my life-long friend, friend, Mark. My relationship with Mark goes all the way back – and I mean way back, to Junior high and High School. I've had all these years to really appreciate what God was up to in his life so that I could understand what God has been up to in my life. Today, I want to help you think about how God has been, is, and will continue to be at work in in you, through you to touch the lives of others.

Mark is the one who first showed me, in some very authentic ways, what being a Christ-follower looks like; he showed me what the love of God looked like in a person's life. Raised in an environment that was - let's just say - filled with all kinds of challenges that could have conspired against him, Mark discovered a way forward fueled by the resurrection power of Jesus Christ in his life. It was remarkable. Mark hadn't always been a Christ-follower. I knew him "before." And the transformation from the "before" version to the "after" version was so inspiring, so captivating to me that I had to know more. So, for three years, Mark gently drew me in and shared the story of what God was up to in his life. Every story, every conversation, every example of what God was up to in his life was like a little pebble being tossed into the pond of my life. And those little ripples went all the way to the edges of my soul.

Little did I know that there was a conspiracy going on. It was a Spirit Conspiracy. God was stirring in my life through Mark's story. Mark knew something then that I would, in time, come to know myself: There are circles, concentric circles of people that the Spirit of God wants to touch and bless with love, and we're the ones through whom the Spirit wants to work. Our mission is to conspire with the Spirit to bring love and blessing to others. That's what Mark did for me. That's why I'm here right now. That's how God works. God works through one to touch another. When we all play our part, God brings

blessing, love, life, and more life to the world. That is the Spirit Conspiracy.

In the passage from Colossians 3:12-17, the Apostle Paul challenges Christ-followers in every local faith community with some practical teaching about being partners in the Spirit Conspiracy and how to bring blessing, love, life, and more life to others. So, here's what I want to do: I want to read this passage for us, untangle three complicated words, then help you see three circles of influence in your life where God is calling you to be more intentional about entering the Spirit Conspiracy.

As God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. Bear with one another and, if anyone has a complaint against another, forgive each other; just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in the one body. And be thankful. Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly; teach and admonish one another in all wisdom; and sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs to God with gratitude in your hearts. And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.

You've heard the word 'Conspiracy' several times today. Unfortunately, that's one of three highly charged words that have endured more than their fair share of misunderstanding. To understand how God calls us into a Spirit Conspiracy, we must understand the original meaning of the word Conspiracy. The source of this word is rooted in the idea that people who conspire are thinking in harmony, so close that they even breathe together.

The word "Conspire" is made up of two Latin words: "con," the prefix, which means "with," and "spira," which means "to breathe." So, to conspire with the Spirit is to breathe together in unison or in accord with the Spirit, as in singing. "As in singing"... I like that. Hold on to that. We'll come back to that. My friend Mark was conspiring, breathing with, singing in concert with the Spirit. The Ripple Effect of what God was up to in his life impacted my life. And you know what, I got to believe this is having an effect on your life right now, as well.

But there's more. Mark also engaged in what we have often called "outreach" or "evangelism." Those are the other two words that have become so misunderstood. Unfortunately, outreach and perhaps especially evangelism have suffered at the hands of people who have misrepresented their responsibility. Instead of gentle ripples of love and compassion, people who have weaponized the bible have so misrepresented God that I don't even think Jesus would want to be a Christian.

But the essence of outreach and evangelism is simply sharing with another person the exciting story of what God is up to in your life and doing that without an agenda. That's what Mark did with me. Telling the story is the natural, fun part. But having an agenda is dishonest, problematic, and manipulative. As human beings, there is a characteristic in us that when we are excited about something, we naturally want to tell people about it. When it comes to matters of faith, when we have an insight, we want others to be excited by it too. What tends to happen is that over time, we begin to see ourselves as the expert and try to convince others that we are right. Then, we quit listening because, of course, we have convinced ourselves that we are right. We stop looking for new truth. So, what has happened to the word "outreach" is the same thing that has happened to the word "evangelism." Both words tend to be heard as triumphalism – the attitude or belief that a particular doctrine, religion, or culture is superior and should triumph over all others. Somehow, the way of Jesus – known to be gentle and characterized by servant love – became associated with force, power, coercion, and even fear.

I learned from my friend, Mark, that the most powerful way we can reach out is with a heart of compassion and love, which leads by listening and serving, not by trying to prove something or convince others that we are right. For Mark, it wasn't a program to complete; it wasn't a 4-Step process of jumping through a set of religious hoops that weren't there, trying to get me to behave a certain way, talk a certain way. Instead, my friend Mark was just part of the Spirit Conspiracy to bring blessing, love, life, and more life to a circle of people in his life, and I was in the circle that God was pouring love into through Mark.

Bringing God's love to others is what this is all about. That's the key. That's the point of what Paul was writing in his letter to the Colossians. As followers of "The Way of Jesus," we get to be part of the Spirit Conspiracy to love and bring blessing to the circles of people in our lives. Now, those people may choose to follow the same way, or they may not. We're not responsible for that. But the one thing that may move them to follow "The Way of Jesus" is the experience of grace, mercy, and love that they encounter from the people who carry the love of Jesus. Our call is to influence the world, from those closest and most immediate to the farthest reaches of the universe. And our influence is through blessing and loving, not through winning converts to our team. If people learn love from us, they are part of the Spirit Conspiracy, whether they know it or not! That is the good and surprising news that we get to tell.

So, let's make this practical. There are many circles, concentric of influence into which God calls us toss pebbles in order to create ripples of love and compassion. I want to help you think about conspiring with the Spirit to create ripples of blessing, love, life, and more life to three of those circles: family, friends and neighbors, and those who are difficult to love.

The closest circle of influence rippling out from the center is our family.

Let me invite you to bring to mind those closest to you; your family. We often take our families for granted. We just naturally assume that they're there for us. And so, we sometimes don't even notice how they love us. But if we're honest, no one is better positioned to hurt our spouses, partners, parents, brothers, sisters, and children than we are ourselves. But the reverse is also true – that we are better positioned to support, love, and encourage our families than anyone else. But it takes some vulnerability. To be part of the Spirit Conspiracy is to practice a willingness to give when we don't want to; it means saying out loud the beauties we observe as well as naming the hurtful experiences so that healing and forgiveness can happen. In the most intimate circle of our families, we are challenged to live grace at every moment. To do that, Paul writes in Colossians 3:12-14, "clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience, to bear with one another and, if anyone

has a complaint against another, forgive each other; just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive." To join the Spirit Conspiracy is to put on the clothing of blessing, love, life, and more life to those closest to us.

Another circle rippling out from the center is the circle of friends/ neighbors.

The proximity of our neighbors puts us in a unique position to pay attention to their needs. Most of the time, neighbors are easy to love and serve. When we're attentive to them, we discover their needs, dreams, and desires are things we may hold in common. Those needs, dreams, and desires may be entry points into their lives and ways of making connections that may lead to conversations about all kinds of things, like what God might be up to in your life. They may have lawn care needs, home repair issues, pets that need attention, or mail to bring in. Paul writes in verse 14, "Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony." We see everything differently when we clothe ourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, patience, and forgiveness. When we join the Spirit Conspiracy by putting love into service, there's a kind of bonding that takes place. And when that bonding happens, there's a new harmony.

The third circle of influence rippling out from the center is the circle of those who are difficult to love.

The outer ring of the Spirit-led Conspiracy is the circle of strangers, others, perhaps those most difficult to love. It's always a challenge to be compassionate and open to people we think of as different. That creates a gap. Let's be honest. There will always be people who are prickly, curmudgeonly, and just plain difficult to understand, let alone be with. We might ask, why do they act that way? What's their problem? Why do they behave that way? Truth be told: They might be asking the same questions about us!

You've heard the phrase, "Hurt people hurt people." When I've talked with students about bullies in school and mean people in their lives, it's always helpful to consider what makes them that way. Are they hurting? Are they sad? Are they fearful? Do they feel hopeless, friendless, or even unsafe in their lives? People who experience any number of those

things usually strike out at those around them. Hurt people hurt people.

But to be part of the Spirit Conspiracy is to safely consider ways of responding to hurting people and do so with compassion, peace, and even gratitude. In verses 15-16, Paul writes, "... let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in the one body. And be thankful. Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly; teach and admonish one another in all wisdom; and sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs to God with gratitude in your hearts." It may be a stretch to think that we'll be singing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs to God" with our enemies. But let's remember, with God, all things are possible. And that's why the Spirit Conspiracy is about bringing blessing, love, life, and more life to the world.

So this week, I'd like you to think about how you will conspire with the Spirit and breathe together in unison with the Spirit. Then, ask yourself two critical questions.

First, ask yourself, "Who is your 'Mark?'" Who has shown you what being a Christ-follower looks like in very authentic ways? Who first showed you what the love of God looked like in a person's life without some hidden agenda or making you a project. Spend some time giving thanks for God's work of rippling love through that person to you.

Second, as you breathe in unison with the Spirit, ask yourself, to whom will you bring blessing, love, and life in each circle of influence in your life? How will you share the exciting story of what God is up to in your life with them?

In every circle of influence in our lives, we can be part of the Spirit Conspiracy spreading quietly within our world for life and goodness. Are you reaching out to be part of this Spirit Conspiracy? Which circle of influence are you called to work on? Where is the Spirit nudging you?