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Reading Shane Hipps' book "Flickering Pixels" he recounts his years when he was an advertising account planner and one of his clients was Porsche, the German auto maker. He describes his work this way: "My task was to hijack your imagination, brand your brain with our logo, and then feed you opinions you thought were your own."

Hipps continues,
"Much of what I did involved unearthing private, exploitable data from customers' lives—what we called "The Leverageable Insight." An effective ad tries to tap viewers' most intense and emotional experiences, the trigger for all consumer impulses. My job was to save people from feeling impotent, unattractive, or powerless by offering them a Porsche, which promised to fix those problems.

"I'm a slow learner. It took me a few years to realize that I was actually promoting a counterfeit gospel. Before you start judging, you should know I never offered cheap grace—the gospel according to Porsche will set you back between \$80,000 and \$150,000, depending on how much salvation you need."

The words that catch my imagination here are "counterfeit gospel." In a world where not only every consumer product, every financial service, every political party, but also every religious group is trying to burn their logo into your brain and feed you opinions designed to make you think they are your own, what is a true gospel? and what is counterfeit?

Or as the prophet Isaiah [55:2] said long ago, "Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread, and your labor for that which does not satisfy?" Well, because there are advertising gurus out there who make a living off of manipulating us into wanting what they're selling.

And ironically people today who avoid the Christian faith and the Christian church — because they don't trust religion any more — still fall prey to all kinds of other gimmicks: Seniors who fall for home maintenance scams; investors who believed Bernie Madoff; teenagers who think they will find true love in chat rooms or the internet; e-mail forwarders who are convinced you will get cancer and die from dioxins if you microwave food covered with plastic wrap; or car buyers that think being at the wheel of a gas guzzler will make them feel attractive and successful. Are people really that gullible? The short answer, my friends, is well, ... Yes. As an aside, the FDA assures us that there are no dioxins in plastic wrap, so you can relax on that one.

But seriously, what is truth, what is reliable, what is Gospel? The writer of the fourth of these books in the New Testament we call "Gospels" seems to have known that what is telling is something that will be perceived by many as "not true" or "too good to be true." He tells us, in today's installment, that a skeptical disciple named Thomas had to be convinced by the real deal — he had to see Jesus, touch Jesus, feel the wounds and scars before he was going to be hooked by these unbelievable tales that Jesus, the Crucified One, was indeed alive, was risen. And the writer of the Gospel gives us this wonderful event in which Thomas sees, touches, feels and lets down his guard. He comes to believe, and cries out, "My Lord and my God!"

But what interests me here is the reply we have from Jesus: "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe."

And then at the very end of the passage, the evangelist echoes this with his own statement of his purpose: “These are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.”

I want to contrast this with the gospel of consumerism, or political correctness, or cultural relativity.

I must admit, I too can be sidetracked by the promise of success or glamor in the modern world. But in fact, I used to work for an attorney that represented Porsche Cars of North America in product liability lawsuits, so I know the back story. And if my head ever turns for a swanky car, it’s a Jaguar not a Porsche. Yes, I can be emotionally hooked and drawn to something that is not bread and will not satisfy. But I have learned the lesson in life that I can summarize this way: “Never fall in love with a car or other material possession.” Why? Because that’s sinful? No, because a car or a possession cannot love you back. We are suckered if we think that *anything* that is for sale, for lease, for rent or even free for the taking will really satisfy us because they are all things. No matter what they cost, they are cheap substitutes for what we truly and genuinely crave, and that is life itself.

So the Scripture offers us a truth, a trustworthy witness of the truth “so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.”

In our Wednesday Bible studies, we are now being drawn into the thinking and the witness of the evangelist. So let me try a different example:

The word “linchpin” comes to mind. Does anybody know what a linchpin is? The word linchpin has become a metaphor, but its original meaning is really helpful to know. A linchpin is a locking pin put through the end of an axle to keep the wheel from slipping off. If you ever had a little red wagon as a child that your Dad had to fix, chances are you saw him put a linchpin back through a little hole in the axle to keep the wheel on. A linchpin is a little thing but it is essential to make a wagon work like a wagon. The whole load, the wagon, the wheel, the axle, all would fall apart if it were not for the linchpin.

And the linchpin of the Fourth Gospel is personal testimony. It is not marketing. It is not slick advertising that is based on clever manipulation of the customers’ deep insecurities to which a product can appear to be satisfying, appear to feed your hunger or give you power and respect or make you attractive. Personal testimony is the complete opposite of advertising. When you need someone to come out and fix your refrigerator, you *don’t* go to the yellow pages and call the company with the full-page ad. You call your neighbor or your Aunt Sally and you say, “who did you call when your refrigerator needed repair a few months ago? Um hmm. Was he any good? Was he expensive? Did he show up on time?” In other words you rely on testimony you can trust, not on carefully crafted schemes, scams, slogans, soundbytes or special effects. This is the only way we’ve ever had to sort out the counterfeit gospels from the true Gospel — the phony, oversold under-delivered things that our culture puts out there constantly.

So the linchpin of the Fourth Gospel is this running refrain from the people who met Jesus, and who saw him and heard him and knew him to be the real deal. These are the people who began as skeptics, even cynics, and gradually came to have their skepticism or cynicism erased, and replaced with trust. These are the people who realized not merely that he was sent from God, or that he was anointed by God for his special mission, but that the words of truth he taught were the words of life. And the people to whom they told their eyewitness stories *came to believe* not merely because the stories were compelling but because they too experienced life in Christ’s name, and found their lives to be changed, transformed, revolutionized by his influence in their hearts and

values and priorities.

For these witnesses, Jesus is the linchpin of all spirituality and faith. Jesus is the one who anchors and secures everything else that human beings put together to believe in or hold as values or trust for ultimate meaning. Like the little red wagon, we load our lives with heavy burdens, our axles can break or our wheels fall off. It is not the glamor of life, made possible with maxxed out credit cards, or cosmetics or cardboard cut-outs that can put us together again. So often in life we do not realize how finally limited or even worthless the stuff of our world is — no matter how much we paid for it — until we hit a crisis, or a breakdown, or a catastrophe. Until we are at the end of our rope we may not even notice that the rope we've been hanging on to isn't attached to anything secure at all.

So in the Fourth Gospel we have the language of ultimate values and true gospel. Jesus says in this book, "I am the vine, you are the branches... I am the Good Shepherd. I am the Way, and the Truth. I am the Resurrection and the Life."

There is nothing about faith that will make us more glamorous, more successful with the opposite, or same, sex, nothing that will make us materially rich, or the envy of everybody else we know. But in Jesus we have the linchpin of our inner being, our spirits, our souls.

Recently a visitor asked to come in to my office and tell me a bit of her story. At another church she had been someone's guest, and they tried to graciously invite her to become involved and to hear the message they were putting out there. She said she tried to be polite, but found a lot of what was going on to be quite puzzling and off-putting. And she said to me, "Pastor, I didn't feel like I could cry in their arms." And that's one of the most apt descriptions of the truth of the Gospel of Jesus, I think.

But don't take my word for it. My testimony may not be as persuasive as your Aunt Sally. My testimony may not be as compelling as that of the apostles who talked to Doubting Thomas. It is okay, after all, to doubt, to question, to probe and to be slow, even, to come to faith. But when you come, maybe you have come because the one thing you need isn't what the world is selling. You don't need glamor, you don't need power and success, you don't need the envy of all your friends. You need someone's arms to cry in. And you need the testimony of others who can truthfully say to you, "I know. I understand. I have cried in the arms of Jesus, too, and when my tears dried and I opened my eyes, it was other honest, caring people who were holding me, and helping me.

That is Gospel, my friends. That is grace. That is truth. That is life, the gift God is offering you this day. Amen.