

# The Tipping Point

John 12:20-33

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By

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To the extent possible, effort has been made to preserve the quality of the spoken word in this written adaptation.

An Irishman walks into a bar in Dublin, orders three pints of Guinness and sits in the back of the room, drinking a sip out of each one in turn. When he finishes them, he comes back to the bar and orders three more. The bartender asks him, “You know, a pint goes flat after I draw it; it would taste better if you bought one at a time.” The Irishman replies, “Well, you see, I have two brothers. One is in America and the other in Australia, and I’m here in Dublin. When we all left home, we promised that we’d drink this way to remember the days when we drank together.” The bartender admits that this is a nice custom, and leaves it there. The Irishman becomes a regular in the bar, and always drinks the same way. He orders three pints and drinks them in turn.

One day, he comes in and orders two pints. All the other regulars notice and fall silent. When he comes back to the bar for the second round, the bartender says, “I don’t want to intrude on your grief, but I wanted to offer my condolences on your great loss.” The Irishman looks confused for a moment, and then a light dawns in his eye and he laughs. “Oh no, he says, “My brothers are just fine. I’ve just quit drinking.”

I have two Irish brothers. My younger brother is the best storyteller in our family, but then he has the best stories to tell. As an Irish policeman, a Major with the Minnesota State Patrol, he has more exciting and entertaining experiences than the rest of us. On one occasion, he helped the light dawn for a young man in trouble.

It was late in the shift and a car with a young man in the driver’s seat sped past. The plates showed evidence of a restricted license, which usually means driving only to and from work. Major O’Grady wondered where this young man was going in a such a hurry at that time of day and pulled him over. A check with the database revealed the boy was

driving beyond his restriction after receiving a DUI (Driving Under the Influence). Once he was in the back seat of the squad car, the boy asked to make a phone call to his father, who (it turns out) was a policeman in a small town in the area. Then the negotiating began. Dad was trying to get his son out of yet another violation. One can only wonder how many times the scenario had played out before!

Major O'Grady listened respectfully, and made it clear that there was no deal making with the father, and then decided it was time this young man receive a 30 second civics lesson from the back seat of his squad car. He turned to the young man and said, "Several billion of us live on the planet together and so we have decided that we need to live by certain rules. I can't take your things and you can't hurt my sister. We put up stop signs at intersections so we don't run into each other. If you decide not to play by the rules that we've established and agreed to, we have a problem. So society hires people like me to make sure people like you learn to live by the rules. You're a danger to yourself and more importantly to the rest of us."

"Now the very last thing I want is to ever see you again in the back seat of my squad car, so I'm going to turn the screws until the light goes on. This ticket means you're going to go before the judge. And the last thing the judge wants to see is you ever again before the bench for another rule violation, so she's going to turn the screws until the light comes on. Now my question to you and the thing you need to decide is when is the light going to come on? The choices you make have consequences! The decision you make today in the back seat of this car will determine what your future is going to look like."

Sometimes small changes lead to huge results! A seemingly simple decision in the back seat of a squad car, an act of the will, can set in motion a new beginning (a real change) that takes on geometric proportions and has a way of altering everything that follows. Just think of a decision to join the church, or stop drinking, or a marriage proposal.

This week in Florida a new pedestrian bridge collapsed smashing cars and leaving six people dead. A missed call by the lead engineer who alerted that there were cracks two days before might have averted the tragedy if it had been received. The voicemail was left but the employee was out of the office and didn't receive it until the day after the

collapse. Sometimes we know the cracks in our lives but we refuse to take them seriously. Paying attention to the evidence that is right before us sometimes takes courage.

In *The Tipping Point*, a bestseller written a few years ago by Malcom Gladwell, says, “This possibility of sudden change is at the center of the idea of the tipping point.<sup>1</sup> These three characteristics — one, contagiousness; two, the fact that little causes can have big effects; and three, that change happens not gradually but at one dramatic moment — are the same three principles that define how measles move through a grade-school classroom or the flu attacks every winter. It also explains fashion crazes and new technological developments that quickly become common, like cell phones. “There is a ‘tipping point’ when change becomes exponential.”<sup>2</sup>

Two Greeks in the story this morning apparently came to seek out Jesus and a new direction in life. They were not religious types. They weren't Jewish but were foreigners, and therefore regarded with suspicion. Today it might be two Palestinians from the Gaza Strip or the West Bank who came to Jerusalem requesting, “Sir, we wish to see Jesus.” They approached Philip, who bears a Greek name and probably spoke Greek, who then tells Andrew, and together they go to tell Jesus about this request. And that's the last we hear about these two Greeks. All we know is they said, “We wish to see Jesus!”

For some reason that launches Jesus into a long discourse that begins with, “The hour has come . . .”<sup>3</sup> It marks the end of his public ministry in this Gospel, the “tipping point.” Earlier, in the story of the wedding in Cana, his “hour has not yet come.” When he taught in the Temple, in the treasury, no one arrested him, “because his hour had not yet come.”<sup>4</sup> Now, here in this passage the hour *has* come and it has something to do with these two Greeks coming in at that moment saying, “Sir, we wish to see Jesus.” Now that support is becoming contagious, the opposition will intensify.

“Look, the whole world has gone after him,” said the religious officials. They couldn't prevent his popularity. His political star was rising and it was changing the political

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1 Gladwell, Malcolm, *The Tipping Point*, Back Bay Books/Little Brown and Company, New York, New York, 2002. P.12

2 Ibid. pg 9

3 John 2:4

4 John 8:20

landscape and there was nothing they could do to reverse it. Those who were closest to him believed Jesus was the one foretold to come by the prophets. But even they would have to see things differently. They saw only what they had been conditioned to see. Jesus came from a completely different angle. He was not simply a nationalistic phenomenon. He was not merely the “King of the Jews,” the title Pilate would have placed over his head on the cross. Jesus would be lifted up and draw all people to himself: the Greeks, the Romans, the Jews, Americans, Chinese, Africans, Taiwanese, Hispanics, men, women, children, all people! At the center of faith is a changed perspective, on Jesus, on ourselves, and on the world around us. Even the disciples didn't begin to understand it until they saw the resurrected Christ.

Jesus gave the first disciples something to believe in and the light came on. They risked it all! They learned that you don't save your life by holding back! You lose it! You don't preserve the peace by avoiding conflict, you may just create larger conflicts down the road. You don't “go along to get along,” you have to stand up for what is right. You live with integrity, not avoiding conflict. You actually gain your life when you are willing to risk it for what you believe in. “What will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life?”, asks the Lord. It was a completely different compass that he provided, one that pointed towards true north, and people throughout history have described what it is like to have been rescued by him, finally finding their way home. The light bulb goes on. The human heart turns from self-seeking to worshiping the Lord of life.

Real change in life often begins in seemingly insignificant ways. A mere conversation, an honest prayer, listening for a word from the Lord; all have a way of setting life back on course and turning towards a future with hope. “Sir, we wish to see Jesus!” Is Jesus Christ someone who commands your attention today? Or do you find it easier to merely dismiss him as yet another historical figure without any enduring significance. Maybe it's time for you to have a real conversation with God! Change happens not gradually but at one dramatic moment.

You have probably heard of people who had a “come to Jesus” moment in their lives. Maybe it's time for you to have one? Or another one! The question is, when is the light bulb going to come on for you and me?

Let's us pray . . . O Lord, you know all things for you created all things. You know what we are struggling with this morning, you know what needs to change in our hearts and lives. You know what will lead to life for each and every one of us. We come this morning with a desire for some tipping point to occur in our lives, in our families, and in our world. Bring about the change we need and you want – for we pray in the name of Jesus Christ, our living Lord. Amen