

Message: Shifting Our Focus¹**Were you able to bless someone during the week?**

Last Sunday, we talked about the mission Jesus gave to the disciples. It's called the Great Commission. We read the words of Matthew 28:18-20 together a few minutes ago. It's very familiar. We all know Jesus' mission. The mission statement of our denomination is based on it.

So I ask: did you live out Jesus' mission this week? Did you go, make disciples, baptize or teach? The mission's a good one, but it's a bit difficult to approach, isn't it? That's because we tend to think of the mission in terms of the Church and it's mission, rather than how we live our lives each day. We've all been raised with a particular view of the Church and it's role in our society. But that role is changing and evolving as our culture is changing and evolving.

Christian faith has an important role in our culture today. Reggie McNeal, Adam Hamilton and many pastors and authors make a strong case for that statement. I believe it as well, as do many of you. We have to shift our thinking to make our faith accessible to the generations who are shaping our world. “Three significant cultural phenomena are driving the need for collaboration and creativity in the faith community:

- ***The emergence of the altruism economy*** – in almost every part of our society, people want to see an end to poverty, disease, illiteracy and other social illnesses. They want to make a difference with their time, money and lives. That means people are going to ask questions about what's being accomplished. At the same time, they aren't going to be very supportive of groups who do charitable service just to gain influence and relevance.
- ***The search for personal growth*** – people today want to achieve their full, human potential. They want to develop, learn and become all they can be. They want their lives to matter. It's no accident that Rick Warren's book The Purpose-Driven Life was a national best seller. Information is empowering. The internet gives us new ways of learning and accessing vast sources of information. We all want to

¹ Source material for sermon : Reggie McNeal, *Missional Renaissance*, Jossey-Bass, 2009

have a say in the way we learn. And we want to invest in ways to give other people the opportunity to learn and grow equally.

- ***The hunger for spiritual vitality*** – despite the promises of technology and progress, a majority of the human race still struggles to live. The problems of disease, hunger, war and injustice persist. No matter how high we build our walls, the possibility of nuclear annihilation, terrorist attack or a pandemic outbreak make all of us vulnerable. This is one of the reasons modern day versions of comic book heroes and heroines are so popular in the movies and on TV. Institutions and systems are no longer trusted because they’re inadequate to deal with the complexities of our planet’s dilemmas.

The result: people are turning to beliefs that transcend the physical world to help them make sense of the world and it’s challenges. In other words, God is back, big time! And God is breaking out of the box that we’ve tried to put him in over the past hundreds of years. People are searching for God in all sorts of places. Many of them are looking outside the churches, in our streets, gatherings and groups.

According to the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, the fastest growing portion of the religious population is those who are unaffiliated with any denomination or faith group, the “Nones.” People are moving into this category three times faster than any other. One key fact: only one-quarter of the “Nones” profess to be atheist or agnostic. Half of the group believes faith is important or very important in their lives. The move away from affiliation is not a move away from God, but it is a signal that we need to shift our thinking and approach if we’re going to have an impact on the spiritual lives of our neighbors and families.

We need to shift our perspective to follow Jesus’ path. There are three ways we need to change our perspective. First, we need to change from a Church-focus to a Kingdom-focus.”² It means that the building, grounds, budget and systems aren’t the priority. People are the priority. Wherever we gather together in Jesus’ name, God’s Spirit is present. That’s church! Jesus drew parallels between spiritual growth and the

² *Ibid, material modified*

budding of fruit trees saying, “...when you see these things taking place, you know that the kingdom of God is near” (Luke 21:31). Our acts of sacrificial love on the behalf of other people inspire them to learn and grow spiritually. We need to change from an internal, Church focus to an external, “how can we serve our community” focus.

Second, we need to shift from a program focus to developing people. One of the myths of the Church is that if you come and participate in all of the right activities with all of the right people, you’ll be better off. But we know that’s not true. Active church members typically don’t have a different set of values or fewer problems than people outside the church. You may have asked the question, “Where’s the more abundant life promised if we participated more?” The only guarantee is often that the church will keep you busy.

As a missional church, we need to take far more seriously the challenge to help people shape their path for personal development. We need to reconsider what it means to be a disciple, shifting our emphasis from studying Jesus and spiritual things in an environment isolated from the world, to following Jesus into the world and joining him in the healing and redemption of the world.

Jesus’ heart and ministry are captured in Matthew 9:35-38,
“Jesus went about all the cities and villages, teaching in their synagogues, and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom, and curing every disease and every sickness. When he saw the crowds, he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. Then he said to his disciples, ‘The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; therefore ask the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest.’” Jesus traveled up and down the country living out his mission and he took the disciples with him, teaching them on the way.

Jesus blessed people by giving them good news - words of hope and encouragement when they were feeling oppressed. He taught them about spiritual life using stories nominally religious people would understand. Jesus healed broken people, those who were physically, emotionally and spiritually wounded. That’s what we are called to do

today. That’s how we can be relevant to a world that’s hurting and looking for meaning in life. That’s how we can bless others.

I know many of your hearts. What I’m describing is exactly why you’re here. We feel inspired, excited and fulfilled when we participate in this kind of service. This is exactly why we come to church: to be inspired by God’s Word and to experience God in prayer and in the stories we share of how God is present in our lives each week. But we have to learn and change. People development isn’t easy. It’s not the same as running projects, with deadlines, milestones and budgets. Many of us may have never experienced what it means to be part of an intentional discipleship process. We can do it, but we have to learn how to do it together.

That leads to the third shift: lead by example. Being a blessing to others is a good first step. We have to do more, though. We have to be willing to go out and engage others in spiritual ways where they live, work and play. We need to raise up leaders who understand the challenges of culture and are willing to be part of the discussion. These leaders will focus outside the church building and organization with a willingness to serve in non-traditional ways. Rather than seeing the facilities and structures of the church as the goal, we need to see people as the goal with the resources of the church available to help us reach and develop people in Jesus’ name.

Some of you are nodding your heads. You get it. You’re ready and willing to engage. The mission of the church is to make disciples, people “who get it and who live it” in all aspects of life. That part of the mission of the church hasn’t changed. Making disciples who make disciples is really all about helping people find their identity as followers of Jesus Christ, ready to share their hope and lives with others.

Some of us are shaking our heads, wondering what it means. You hear the message of today’s culture as a condemnation and challenge to the church. The idea of focusing on people and service outside the church, rather than fixing the problems and systems we have doesn’t make sense. I have good news: we aren’t doing away with church. We’ll still meet here each week, study God’s Word, pray and sing

praises to God. You’re invited join those of us who want to change and grow spiritually. Take a chance: I think you’ll be blessed when you do.

God promised Abraham his spiritual descendents would be a blessing to the world (Genesis 12:1-3). I invite you to be a blessing everywhere you go, inside and especially outside the church. Last week, we prayed for each other, asking for God to bless us. I know some of us had encounters with other people during the week and blessings were given in Jesus’ name.

Does anyone have a story they’d be willing to share?

Thank you for sharing. I know the idea of asking someone in public “how may I pray for you?” is daunting to many of us. Remember we’re reborn with a spirit of courage, not timidity. God will give you the words. If you aren’t comfortable speaking to others in public yet, I invite you to speak with your family, preferably in person, but you can do it over the phone. They love you and it’s a safe place. Trust the Holy Spirit to give you the prompting and the words.

So we can find the initiative to “**Go therefore,**” I invite you now to turn to the person seated next to you and ask them this question:

“How can you bless someone this week?”

Please pray for God to lead them to bless another person

Claim this blessing from God. Make it part of your discipleship. Remember, God made us to be a blessing to others and it gets easier with time. You will receive blessings in return, because God is present. When we bless others, we begin to look forward to the ways God’s Spirit will work in and through us. That’s a blessing, as it gives us hope. I can’t think of a better way to show our love of God, to love our neighbors and to help heal the world.

Let us pray:

Lord, help me to be the person you want me to be today. Give me the boldness to speak in your name, to offer your love to a world that is hurting and in need of hope. Help me to follow you and be transformed by your love so I may bless others with that same love. Bless us when we live generously, sharing your love with others. We commit ourselves to you in faith and in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Joshua 24:1,14-18 (NRSV)

Then Joshua gathered all the tribes of Israel to Shechem, and summoned the elders, the heads, the judges, and the officers of Israel; and they presented themselves before God.

“Now therefore revere the LORD, and serve him in sincerity and in faithfulness; put away the gods that your ancestors served beyond the River and in Egypt, and serve the LORD. Now if you are unwilling to serve the LORD, choose this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your ancestors served in the region beyond the River or the gods of the Amorites in whose land you are living; but as for me and my household, we will serve the LORD.” Then the people answered, “Far be it from us that we should forsake the LORD to serve other gods; for it is the LORD our God who brought us and our ancestors up from the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery, and who did those great signs in our sight. He protected us along all the way that we went, and among all the peoples through whom we passed; and the LORD drove out before us all the peoples, the Amorites who lived in the land. Therefore we also will serve the LORD, for he is our God.”

Matthew 28:18-20 (NRSV)

And Jesus came and said to them, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.”