

## **Helping People Find and Follow Jesus**

**September 14, 2014**

Matthew 28:18-20

### **Introduction – Why a Mission Statement?**

Our mission statement is the title of today's sermon. I thought that at this strategic time, it would be helpful to reflect together on what the statement means. When I began ministry in the late seventies, very few churches had mission or purpose statements. (By the way, in the landscape of church ministries, mission and purpose statements mean essentially the same thing. Today, it is more fashionable to use the term "mission.") I first encountered a purpose statement in a church I served in the late eighties. The statement revolved around four "C's" as I recall: Celebrate, Cultivate, Care, and Communicate. We found the four C's to be helpful in giving meaning to everything the church did. That's why we called it a purpose statement.

The church I served in the late nineties also developed a new purpose statement with the leadership. I don't remember the statement, but I do recall that it took us over eighteen months to write it. Writing a statement by committee is almost the definition of corporate insanity. Herding cats seems to be an apt comparison. Why bother with a purpose or mission statement anyway? It is simply this: a mission statement becomes the defining criteria for everything that is done. It is true for any organization. There are any number of things that could be done in the organization's field of expertise and service. But if every possibility is attempted, effectiveness will be limited because there is a limited supply of resources available to do the work. The same is true for a church. There is no shortage of ideas of what we could or should do. But we don't have unlimited resources in people, energy, money, and facilities. God calls us to be wise stewards of what we do have to use for the greatest ministry impact. More importantly, there are many things that we could attempt to do but we must be careful to discern whether or not God is calling us to do it. A mission statement, then, is very helpful in setting the focus of what we should be doing in our ministry.

Now some of you who are savvy and may have read our church Constitution might be asking, "but don't we have a purpose statement?" Yes, we do. And it fulfills the criteria of giving focus and setting boundaries of what we should be doing. "Glorifying God through winning the lost,

nurturing the saved, and serving the flock.” It is also thorough, and most importantly, faithful to the New Testament. The problem with our old purpose statement is that it is written in our language. It is not the kind of statement that we would be wise to publish to the outside world. The world doesn’t understand the concept of being “lost” or “saved” and the connection between a church and a flock would be confusing to them. If we are to be an externally-focused church, then our mission statement needs to be winsome and easily understood by those outside our congregation as well as us. Even though our old statement was thoroughly biblical, we felt it needed a change.

For over a year now, I’ve felt that we needed a new mission statement. But I was reluctant to embark on the formidable challenge of changing it until we got a sense of God’s mission through us. As we have journeyed through the study of Nehemiah and especially as we began to think about a building refresh, the clarity of where God was leading us was emerging while the urgency to develop such a statement was building. The more we had conversations with Station 19, the more imperative, it seemed, that we needed to have new mission statement by this fall. Not wanting to engage the full deacon board in a mission statement process, I asked their permission to convene a small task-force of four big-picture type people. They agreed, and Gary Compton, Myron Isakson, Susan Linderman, Brenda Stapp and I started working on a new statement. We started by looking at fifty of the best church mission statements that we downloaded off of an insightful webpage. From there we established several criteria that it needed to have:

- It needs to be biblical. Since it is a mission/purpose statement, it needs to reflect the mission that Christ gave us to evangelize and make disciples.
- It should be short and memorable. Such a statement could naturally fit on our website, a business card, a coffee mug, on the sanctuary wall, etc...
- It needs to resonate (or at least be understood) with church folk and those outside the church.
- It needs to be warm and friendly.
- It needs to challenge and inspire passion in our people.
- It will be the filter through which we process everything we do.

For several months I had been using a mission statement to guide me in ministry decisions and actions. It wasn’t original with me. Look online and you’ll see that several churches use it. But “helping people find and follow Jesus” was very helpful to me in my pastoral role of counseling. I’m very empathetic and can make people feel good as I listen to their problems. But as a pastor,

I need to be much more than just a listening ear. As I reflected on the mission of helping people find and follow Jesus, I found that my counseling sessions had much more focus on Christ – and in that important sense were accomplishing God’s calling for me. I didn’t want to control the process of writing the new statement, but when I suggested the statement that had brought so much focus to my ministry, it resonated with the task force who recommended it to the deacon board.

And that’s how we got to where we are today. The first criteria of our statement was that it had to be biblical and had to align with the first “mission statement” of the church found at the end of Matthew’s Gospel.

### **Text – Matthew 28:18-20**

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, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.”

### **Prayer**

#### **“Having gone, therefore...”**

This passage, of course, is known as the Great Commission. It is brought out virtually every time a missionary comes to church or there is a missions conference. It has been put to music countless times. When we think of the Great Commission, we think about supporting all the missionaries overseas and the great sacrifice that many make and the adventurous life they have for the sake of the gospel.

Our strong association of the Great Commission with missionaries, however, has been a great misfortune for the evangelical church, based on a misreading of the passage. The mistake we’ve made is to misidentify the direct command in the commission. A more precise translation of the verses can be rendered this way:

There was given to me all authority in heaven and upon earth. Having gone on your way therefore, teach all the nations, making them your pupils, baptizing them into the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to be attending to carefully, holding firmly to, and observing all, whatever things I enjoined upon you. And behold, as for myself, with you I am all the days until the consummation of the age.  
(Wuest)

The command is not “to go.” Christ assumes that his disciples will be dispersed throughout the world. The direct command is to “make disciples.” Everything else modifies the action of making disciples. We make disciples “as we are going.” We do it by “baptizing” and “teaching.” This understanding of the Great Commission is even more compelling than we thought. It has been tempting to dismiss this verse as applying only to those who have heard the missionary call. And there definitely is a missionary call to other nations in the New Testament. It’s just not exclusively in these verses. With this understanding, we can understand the Great Commission in this way:

Wherever you are; in whatever situation you find yourself, having gone on your way, make disciples of everyone. Every nation is to be evangelized. Make them disciples by baptizing the people in the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit because each member of the Trinity is actively engaged in salvation. Teach them to be followers of Jesus - just like you are – to carefully attend to and follow the teachings of Jesus. And throughout this endeavor, Jesus will be with you through the Holy Spirit until the final day when God’s kingdom has fully come.

This understanding of the Great Commission makes a claim on your life and mine. We cannot pass it off on the missionaries and just write a check. Wherever you are, you and I are to make disciples. In your family, as they who are closest to you see you live out your authentic faith. Make disciples of your friends and neighbors as you actively take an interest in them and demonstrate the love of Jesus. And especially at work or at school where most of us spend our time and the people know us for who we truly are.

Evangelism, sharing your faith where you are – in Jesus’ words, “having gone into the world” – is the most powerful kind of evangelism because it begins with a relationship. There is a place for “cold-calling” or door-to-door evangelism. I’ve done some of that kind of witnessing myself. Its shortcoming is that because there is no relationship with the person, there is not link to ongoing discipleship – which is what the Great Commission is all about. But relational evangelism is the most natural and has the most promise because of the ability to follow-up and actually disciple the person. Wherever you share life with other people, if you are truly following Jesus, your light will shine. As people open their lives to you, as they do when you are in relationship with them, you have the opportunity to listen to their problems and pray for them. Because your life is reflecting Jesus, you will have an opportunity to share how he makes a difference in your life and how they, too, can have a relationship with Christ.

One of the disadvantages of the ministry is that it is very easy to live in a bubble without any non-Christian friends. I will continue to work to try and cultivate friendships with non-Christians. But in my days before I was in the ministry, I know that it didn’t take long for my Christian witness to open a door for me to share my faith. Whether I was washing dishes in the coffee shop, working in a warehouse, or teaching in public schools the opportunities always came. If you are following Christ and praying and looking for opportunities to share your faith, they will most certainly come.

## **Peter**

When I think about what it means to become a disciple of Jesus, I think Peter offers a wonderful, if imperfect example of how one becomes a follower of Christ. According to John’s Gospel, Peter was most likely a follower of John the Baptist. He was already predisposed towards spiritual things when he first met Christ, most likely near the Jordan River since that was where John was ministering. I believe that a person must be predisposed to spiritual things if he is to receive the gospel. We cannot make anyone into a disciple. It is God’s work – through the Holy Spirit – to prepare their hearts to receive the gospel. Often times, we share the gospel and it seemingly bears no fruit. But it is not our place to bring forth fruit. Our job is to plant the seed.

It is God's role to prepare the soil – the person's heart – and to bring forth fruit. Peter was already seeking God when he first met Jesus.

But the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke all record that Jesus called Peter from his fishing boat at the Sea of Galilee. He said, "Follow me, and I will make you a fisher of men." Most likely, Peter had gone back to fishing after he had first met Jesus in Judea. It is often true that a person has to hear the gospel many times before they truly respond to Christ. Do not be discouraged in your witness. If God is calling them, they will ultimately respond. Be lovingly persistent.

Most of us know the story of Peter's highs and lows. He was one of the three in Jesus' inner circle. He walked on water with Jesus. He was at the Mount of Transfiguration when Jesus was glorified and revealed as the Son of God. It was Peter who stepped forward from his peers and boldly declared that Jesus was the Messiah – the Savior they had all been waiting for. But we also know that it was Peter who attempted to prevent Jesus from following his calling to Calvary. It was Peter who first refused to have his feet washed. And shamefully, it was bold Peter who, in an act of cowardice, denied Jesus in the ultimate test.

But it was also Peter who Jesus pulled aside after his Resurrection. "Do you love me?" Jesus asked Peter three times. Jesus lovingly affirmed his brash disciple who bore a heavy load of shame because of his denial. If Peter's story tells us nothing else about being a disciple of Jesus, it is this: the gospel is a gospel of grace! Let the pathway that we prepare in helping people find and follow Jesus always be richly paved with forgiving and longsuffering grace. We are all imperfect like Peter. We all need God's grace. Let's be sure and extend it to those who are coming to Christ and to those who are trying to follow him.

### **Be My Witnesses – Acts 1:8**

In the same context in which the Great Commission was given, Jesus also told his disciples how they would accomplish it. In the companion narrative to the same last scene of Jesus with his disciples, he tells them, "You shall receive power when the Holy Spirit is come upon you. And you shall be my witnesses in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and to the end of the earth" (Acts 1:8).

Helping people find and follow Jesus is not a task that we do on our own. One of the great joys of witnessing is to see how God works through you. It is always amazing! There is perhaps no greater joy in this life than to lead another person to faith in Jesus Christ. But it is always God's working through those who are available to him. Read the book of Acts. One of the distinguishing marks of being filled with the Holy Spirit was speaking the gospel with boldness and clarity beyond one's natural ability. We see that especially in our friend Peter. Peter was never trained as a theologian or preacher, and yet he delivered sermons that brought the whole of Scripture to focus on Jesus Christ. And when he was done, the message was so compelling that thousands repented and became disciples of Christ.

Not only did Jesus say that his disciples would receive power, but that they would be his witnesses. For three years, they had walked with Jesus. They had heard his teaching and observed his miracles. They were heartbroken and disillusioned when they saw him crucified on the cross. But their whole world was turned upside down when he rose from the dead three days later. They were witness to all of that. And in Acts, Chapter 1, there were at least 120 of them. You can debate doctrine or the lessons from history. But you cannot debate and refute the eyewitness testimony of 120 people! Read the book of Acts. Read the whole New Testament, for that matter. Everything revolves around the Resurrection. Their witness was compelling.

Yours is, too - if you are following Jesus. Because, you see, if you are following Jesus, your life is being changed by that same resurrection power that raised Christ Jesus from the dead. "If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ Jesus from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through his Spirit who dwells in you" (Romans 8:11).

### **God's Mission...My Mission...Your Mission...Our Mission**

God's mission, from the beginning in Genesis until the final verses of Revelation has always been to redeem his creation – to turn what has been turned upside down by sin and turn it right side up through Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ has come and inaugurated the Kingdom of God through his death, resurrection and ascension. But we wait until the day Christ returns for its

ultimate completion. God has invited you and me into his mission – to redeem his creation back to himself. I like the way the Apostle Paul describes our mission: “... we are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us. We implore you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God” (II Corinthians 5:20).

So what should we gain with this new mission statement of “helping people find and follow Jesus?” First, it should give you and me personal focus in our relationships with people. We need not be manipulative or obnoxious in our witness. But realize that God has put people into your life for a purpose. See them through God’s eyes. Love them in Jesus’ name. Live your life as a follower of Jesus, looking and praying for the opportunity to share Christ with them. Pray for them. Pray with them. And I encourage you to invite them to come to church or a church-sponsored event with you. Secondly, beyond personal focus, this mission statement will help us to keep our ministries and programs focused. There many things we can do, but we can’t do them all. Any and everything that we do should go to the end of helping people find and follow Jesus.

To bring all things back to himself has always been God’s mission. It is my mission. It’s your mission, too. Jesus has invited us to join with him in turning the world back to God. And together, as First Baptist Church, it is our mission as we shape all that we do towards helping people find and follow Jesus.

**Song of Response: #543 – Let Your Heart Be Broken**

**Benediction**