



Series: BECOMING A PREVAILING CHURCH

Sermon: PREPARE – “Be All You Can Be”

Scripture: Ephesians 2:1-10; 4:11-13

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I can still remember the events as if they happened just yesterday – it was October 1982, and I had just arrived at Fort Jackson, South Carolina to officially join the U.S. Army. A group of us stood together with our right hand raised as we swore an oath to protect and defend the United States of America. Shortly thereafter, we were marched single file to our next rite of initiation – the famous military haircut. We called that haircut “the quarter pounder” because, when they were finished with us, it was all meat and no hair. Next, we were sent to a large building where our measurements were taken and uniforms were given to us. By the time we walked out, we looked totally different.

Just a few days later, we were loaded up in a bus and driven down to the U.S. Army Infantry School at Fort Benning, Georgia. I remember the bus coming to a stop and seeing a whole group of drill sergeants standing in a field between some barracks. The door opened and one drill sergeant came on board the bus. He said – in a calm clear voice – “Gentlemen, my name is Staff Sergeant Keller and I’d like to welcome you to Fort Benning, Georgia. In the next 60 seconds, I’d like you to get off this bus, remove the duffle bags from under this bus, and I want you to stack them in one large pile out there on that field.” And I thought to myself, “What a nice man. This isn’t what I expected at all because I had just watched the movie, ‘An Officer and a Gentleman.’ ” But that thought only lasted a few seconds because that nice, calm-speaking staff sergeant suddenly started screaming like a demon possessed man, saying over and over again, “Get off this bus! Get off this bus!” If I had been a little more connected to my faith, I would have rebuked him in Jesus’ name!

For the next thirteen weeks, that group of drill sergeants prepared us to “be all that we could be.” They prepared us in what you might call “the essentials” so we could understand the core values of Army life together – such as duty, honor, respect and camaraderie. In addition, they taught us how defend ourselves with training in the weapons of warfare and hand-to-hand combat. They encouraged us to reach down deep inside when we felt like quitting, and they showed us that we could make it.

As the weeks progressed, they took us “up a notch” and subjected us to aptitude testing which helped them understand where we as individuals should receive specialized training. Some of our squad who were good with math were pulled out for training as “mortar men” – that was not me. Others with really good hand-and-eye coordination became TOW gunners, which were used to kill tanks – that was not me either. Bigger built, strong guys were made M-60 machine gunners – that was not me either. No, my first job in the infantry was M-203 gunner, which meant I had a grenade launcher attached to my M-16. So, at first, I was just a “grunt.”

Finally, we were trained together as a fully-equipped infantry squad and were moved to the final phase of training – which involved learning land navigation and how to conduct operations like ambushes, raids, and reconnaissance. In short, by the end of thirteen weeks, they transformed a rag tag group of out-of-shape men into physically fit soldiers who could run for miles without stopping. And that same group of men – who did not know each other and did not care about each other thirteen weeks prior – were now a “band of brothers” who would go anywhere with each other, even

the fiercest of battles. For the next four years, we would continue training together almost every day so we could “be all that we could be.”

Now think about a question with me this morning – why in the world does the U.S. Military do all this? Why all this instruction and training? Why all this development of character and emphasis on putting people in jobs best suited to their abilities? Why is all this preparation necessary? If you do not know the answer, let me help you out. All of this preparation is critical because – as I told you months ago – nothing is more important than completing the mission. Put another way – the stakes are way too high, so failure can not be an option. And that got me thinking. I thought to myself, “Whose mission is more important?” For four years I was trained to protect and defend the United States against all foreign aggressors. Put bluntly – I was trained to kill, if necessary. My purpose was to take life.

But the mission of the Church is to give life—to lead people from death to life! I do not know about you, but I see that mission as infinitely more important than the mission I had in the military. Therefore, should not the preparation for carrying out this mission be equally important?

That is what I hear the Apostle Paul saying in Ephesians. Beginning in chapter two, Paul says, “We were all dead in transgressions and sins. We were lost but God in his mercy and grace saved us from our lives bent on self-destruction.” But then he says something that we need to hear loud and clear – verse ten, “For we are God’s workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.” Did you hear that? You think God does not see our mission as critical? You think God does not see preparation for completing that mission as important? According to this verse, before we ever walked as part of God’s faith community, God was preparing our mission and the role we would play in carrying it out. Why? Because the stakes are just too high!

People are living hollow, empty lives – chasing after anything that will fill that unquenchable void in their lives. They try to fill it with their career, and they lose their family. They try to fill it with money, but they just cannot seem to make enough. They try to fill it with alcohol or drugs, and they find themselves in the bondage of addiction. They try to find it some illicit affair, and they end up chained to their deception and shame. They try to fill it with some government program that only continues the cycle of dependence and poverty.

Open your eyes to the world beyond Reynoldsburg – or even the U.S. In countries like Africa, the AIDS pandemic is wiping out whole generations, and millions of children are now left as orphans. This past week – while we were in Haiti – my wife, Jennifer, and I visited one of the most difficult places I have ever been in my life. We were allowed access inside of the Abandoned Baby Unit at the Government Hospital in Port-au-Prince. The conditions in this section of that hospital are beyond description. The smell of urine and feces nearly overwhelms you as soon as you walk inside. Flies are everywhere. Worst of all, the children in this unit are not allowed to receive any medical treatment whatsoever. They can only be fed food that I could not bear to look at without feeling as though I was going to get sick. Basically, they are there to die – unless something can be done to get them out of there. Thankfully, one organization – Mercy and Sharing – is committed to doing that, but their space is very limited and that left me feeling even more hopeless.

In the midst of all this hopelessness, God says, “Jon, you have the answer! You are my hands and my feet! You are my mouth! I prepared this mission for you in advance. I equipped you for this task. Now, because of all I have done for you, if you really love

me, do something about this horrific scene.” And God says the same to you. “The stakes are way too high. None of you has ever been saved by grace so you can just sit on the sidelines until my son, Jesus, comes back. On the contrary, out of a heart filled with gratitude for the grace I have richly given you, you must go out and make a difference in this world.”

But you will never be able to accomplish this mission unless you are adequately prepared. And this, my friends, is the very place the Church of Jesus Christ has consistently fallen short – because it has been my experience that many churches know how to connect people with Jesus Christ and into the community of faith, but then they do not know what to do to prepare them for service in God’s mission. And no one is to blame more than the pastors at those churches. Paul makes it painfully clear in Ephesians chapter four – that Christ gave his Church pastors to “prepare God’s people for works of service...”.

By the way, you need to underline that word ‘prepare’ – if you mark in your bible – because that word is loaded with meaning. Literally, it says God gave pastors to “restore people to their former condition or to make people complete.” Therefore, when we as pastors prepare people, we are helping individuals marked by the fall to move closer to their original condition. We do not make people sinless, but we help them transform into the character of Christ. We help them discover their unique design and the way God has equipped them. As a result, these Spirit-led people will go out to serve and transform the world as they live out their original God-designed purpose — a purpose God has been preparing for many, many years. That is the way God designed his church to work.

If it is not happening, it is the pastor’s fault. If God’s people are not being prepared, it is pastoral incompetence – it is pastoral malpractice. And friends, this is one pastor who knows that a day is coming when he will stand before his ‘Commander and Chief’ – Jesus Christ – and give an account of his time at Reynoldsburg United Methodist Church as the Pastor of Discipleship. On that day, my ‘Commander and Chief’ will ask me, “What did you do to prepare my people to transform this world?” God help me if all I can say is, “Well Jesus, I asked them to come to a lunch after church one Sunday; and then asked them to take a pledge the next; and then I hoped against all odds that maybe, just maybe, they followed through with getting plugged into a class.” Think about this for a second - just imagine if the U.S. Military employed the methods of the church in preparing soldiers for their mission.

“Okay, just come to lunch with us, and then listen to a few people speak about what they do for the Army. Then, next week, you need to raise your right hand and take the pledge and you will get your uniform. And gosh, we really do hope you will report for duty each day. Oh and by the way, you need to know that you are going to be deployed to Iraq in thirteen weeks, so you might want to consider taking the basic rifle marksmanship Sunday school class. We do not make that a requirement but we really wish you would take it. We also have the ‘How to cross a minefield’ class on Wednesday nights, because you will definitely end up in one at some time while you serve. Oh, Wednesday nights are not good for you? Eleven weeks is just too long? That is okay – we will just pray you are with someone else who took the class when you end up in one. If not, I guess you are just out of luck.”

That is not going to happen, friends – not on my watch! I know who I will stand before some day. I also know what you will face as you go out in mission in this world, and if I send you out with this low expectation, laissez-faire attitude, you will either go out and accomplish nothing for the kingdom, or you are going to go out and get whacked by the enemy – and neither option is acceptable. The stakes are just too

high!

I believe it was Rick Warren who said, “God can make a mushroom in six hours, but it takes 60 years to make an oak tree.” Which type of faith do you want when hell breaks loose in your life – a mushroom or an oak tree? Therefore, you must be prepared – that is why we created the ‘Lifetime Pathway.’ In the first class of the series – Alpha – you will achieve two goals critical for your preparation; first, you will gain critical understanding. For example: Who is Jesus? Why did Jesus die? How can I be sure of my faith? Why and how should I read my Bible? Why and how should I pray? How does God guide us? Who is the Holy Spirit? What does the Holy Spirit do? How can I be filled with the Holy Spirit? How can I resist evil? Why and how should we tell others? Does God heal today? What about the Church? How can I make the most of the rest of my life?

If you do not have complete answers to these questions, you are not prepared. This is just ‘101-level’ stuff we want you to understand for membership. By the way, let me dispel a rumor – if you are already a member of this church, we are not revoking your membership if you do not take this class. However, we do want to encourage you to take it if you have not already done so. Even if you already know the answers to these questions, come on out and help explain it to those taking the class. If you are not a member of the church and want to be one, we would like you to take the class prior to membership. If you are not ready to commit to this preparation, sorry to say, you are probably not ready to be a member of this church – we feel this preparation is that important. You need this critical understanding – but that is not the only goal. The second goal of this class is to connect you with others who will journey with you. You need people with whom you can be ‘real.’ You need people who will be there when life gets tough. And they will need you when their life gets tough.

Next in the Pathway is Class 201- Network. This class will help you discover three critical components for carrying out God’s mission: first, you will learn your God given passion, which teaches you where you should serve; second, you will discover your spiritual gifts, which teaches you what you should do; and third, you will discover your Personal Style, which shows you how you will serve. We call this our ‘Ministry’ component.

Next in your preparation is Class 301- Becoming a Contagious Christian. Not everyone is called to be an evangelist, but everyone is called to be a witness for God. You have a story to tell someone else about God’s work in your life. In this class, you will learn how to share that story based upon your personality, because there are at least six different ways you can be a witness. This is our ‘Mission’ component.

Next is Class 401- Financial Freedom – where you will gain a biblical understanding of how to manage God’s resources. You will be given the tools to live on a budget and be debt-free so you can live in the joy of no longer being mastered by money and all the stress that brings in our lives. This is our ‘Maturity’ component.

After you complete the pathway, you keep preparing by joining a small group – like a Sunday School class or home study group. And that preparation and service and mission will continue until Jesus Christ returns or God takes you home. Why? Because, whether we realize it or not, we are at war. Paul says, “Our struggle is not against flesh and blood but against rulers, against authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms...” If you do not believe that friends, just take a trip to Haiti with me. Just come with me downtown in certain parts of Columbus, or even here in Reynoldsburg.

“Therefore, put on the full armor of God, so that when the day of evil comes, you may be able to stand your ground...” What does that mean? Be prepared! In doing so, Paul says you are moving closer to the original purpose for which you were created. You are being completed as you take on the character of Christ Jesus. If we are going to be a Prevailing Church, we must understand that there is nothing more important than completing the mission – and preparation is the pathway to accomplishing that mission.

