



Sermon: Remembering What We Are About

Scripture: Matthew 28:16-20; Acts 1:8

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April 27, 2008

Recently, I heard a story about three older siblings who had grown into their late seventies and early eighties. They had never married, and they still lived together in the family homestead. All they had was one another—these two older brothers and their baby sister (it is kind of strange calling her their ‘baby sister;’ after all she was seventy eight years old). One day, the pastor came for a visit; and after some conversation with these two brothers, the baby sister invited the pastor to come back into the kitchen to share in bringing the refreshments.

While they were talking and working together, she began to tell her pastor that she was worried about her older brothers. He asked, “Why?” And she began to tell him that the older brother would sometimes stand up in the living room and walk up the steps; and when he was half way up the steps, he would forget what he was doing. He could not remember if he was going upstairs or downstairs, nor could he remember what he was about. She would come back into the room, and he would be sitting on the steps confused.

Then his younger brother would sometimes get up and go outside the front door; and when he was half way out the door, he would forget what he was going for and come back in—go back out, come back in (I know this has never happened to any of us). All of a sudden, he would be standing there confused in the doorway. Now the pastor had a great heart and offered a very tender prayer for this sister and her two brothers. After the pastor was done, he shared with her how fortunate that those brothers were to have their baby sister to take care for them at this time in their lives. She responded, “Yes, I am glad I still have all my faculties—knock on wood...” And then she said suddenly in response to the knock, “Is that the front door or the back door?”

Now, the moral of the story is that sometimes we forget what we are about, and we get confused. It is my experience that the same thing can be said of a Christ-follower—and the same thing can be said of the church. Sometimes we forget what we are about, and we get confused. We forget that our mission is to develop fully-devoted followers of Christ, and sometimes we slide into a sense of entitlement. We forget that we exist to help other people who live very far away from God to draw close to Him, and we sometimes act as if they are not welcome or do not matter at all. We forget that God loves everyone—whether they look like us or not, whether they live near us or not, whether they to share the same class with us or not. Sometimes we act as if the church is an exclusive ‘members-only’ club. We forget that the Gospel is for the whole world, and sometimes we act as if it is just for

our neighborhood. We forget that the church is a hospital for broken people, and sometimes we act as if it is a day spa for perfectionists.

We forget that it is not about us—it is about Jesus and the people that Jesus loves. Sometimes we put Jesus in a box that makes us feel better than we really are rather than changing the trajectory of our lives so that we might reach out and help other people feel better than they really are in the name of Jesus. We forget. And when we do, we stop being the instrument of God's redemption for the world and start blocking God's mission. So I want to invite you to remember what we are all about, and we are going to give each other the opportunity to take one step forward in remembering God's dream for us, for our church and for the world.

The mission and vision of God's dream is rooted deep in the Scriptures. The Bible is really God's love story with all of humanity. It tells us in the beginning that we are created to be in relationship with God. It tells us shortly after that that we wandered far away, and the rest of the whole book is the story of God trying to find us and bring us back. God chose a guy named Abraham and his wife, Sarah, and told them that they were going to be blessed to be a blessing to the nations. This is not just an individualistic faith—this is something for the redemption of the cosmos of all of creation—of everyone that ever was, is and ever will be.

In the Old Testament, when God spoke through the prophets, He reminded the people of God that they were to be a light to the nations. Jesus' last words were to "...go into all the nations and make Christ-followers of all peoples." In the first chapter in Acts, Jesus gives a compelling mission strategy; He says, "You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and Judea and Samaria and to the outer most parts of the earth." Jerusalem is Reynoldsburg, Pickerington; Judea and Samaria are central Ohio to the edges of the United States; and the ends of the earth are getting closer and closer every day. The planet on which we live is growing increasingly smaller, and we recognize that we are the citizens of a global community.

The New Testament records how the Good News of God for all spread like wildfire. We read how Paul took the Gospel into Europe. Tradition tells us that within a few decades of when Thomas identified Jesus as risen and living, Thomas was a missionary in Southern India. There has been a Christian community in southern India since the first century. In the ninth chapter of Acts, we read about Phillip—one of the Christ-followers encountering an Ethiopian eunuch; and within months, the Christian church had been born in the African country of Ethiopia. That is the way it has been for over two thousand years.

The story of God's love in Jesus has been shared by person by person, from people group to people group, from continent to continent, from generation to generation—until it has come to 2008, and here we are standing shoulder to shoulder with all of the Christ-followers who have been and now it is our turn. It is our turn to share this great news with everybody else. It has come to us, and our mission is to develop fully-devoted followers of Jesus; and our vision is that—

someday—everything that we do will glorify God and grow disciples and will help us change the world. I guess my question is: are we up to it? Will we remember what we are about? Will we take the step that God calls us to take?

Our mission strategy is pretty simple—it has three different phrases. The first thing we want to do is to meet real needs; the second thing we want to do is to offer people a real Jesus; and the third thing we want to do is to partner with other Christ-followers to change the world. If we will get this down—if we will meet real needs and offer a real Jesus and partner with one another and other Christ-followers around the world—we can change the world. It has been happening for centuries. Are we willing to say yes to that kind of dream? Are we willing to remember what we are about? Are we willing to take the next step in being mission-hearted?

I want to share four suggestions for those of us who want to grow and become mission-hearted. The first one is this: we need to GROW. We need to allow God to grow our hearts to reflect His heart, and one of the ways we do that is to learn how to support missions—not just in our community, but around the world. God loves a mission-hearted Christ-follower because God uses mission-hearted Christ-followers like you and me to reach around the world. I know that the world seems to be a very big place so I would like to compress it for us today. I want you to imagine that the world is a village of only one hundred people; and based upon modern day statistics, I want to paint a picture for you today of what that village looks like.

Forty-nine of them are female; eighty-two of them are non-white; eighty of us live in substandard housing; fifty of us are malnourished; one of us will die of starvation in the next six months; sixty-seven do not have access to clean drinking water; twenty-four of us do not have electricity—and for the seventy-six who do, the overwhelming majority of us only use the electricity to turn on one single light bulb at night to light our eight-by-eight-foot hovel of a room.

Sixty-seven of us are not Christ-followers; fifteen are illiterate; only one of us is a college graduate; seven have access to the internet; five of us control thirty-two percent of the village's wealth—and all of those are North Americans; thirty-three of us receive and try to live on only three percent of the village's wealth in a given year—less than a dollar a day.

Only seven of us own a car; thirty-three of us are under eighteen; six of us are over sixty-five—and God loves every one of us. Every one. As followers of Jesus who live in the wealthiest part of the village, are we willing to grow our hearts so that we will begin to reflect God's heart so God can use all that we are and all that we have for the furthering of His Kingdom? Are we willing to help God's dream for the world come to fruition? Are we willing to take a step? Are we willing to grow our heart for the world?

I am a little bit thick, and it took a long time for God to grow my heart for the world;

but let me tell you the big event that helped that to happen. I had volunteered on work camps and had gone on week-long mission trips. I had done building projects—I had done all that kind of stuff. I had heard about it all my life; but in the fall of 2003, God took me out of North America and put me in East Africa for sixteen days. I still remember the day when we landed in Entebbe in Uganda and drove the twenty kilometers—which took us forty miles from the airport—into the capital city, a city of about one million people with no traffic lights.

As we made that forty-minute journey, every sense that I had was assaulted. I saw things that I had never seen before. I heard human anguish like I had never heard it before. I smelled stuff that I have never smelled before. It was kind of like this mixture of manure and open-air meat and fish markets and diesel exhausts and welding shops and red dust and charcoal smoke. It was like the whole country went camping and never came back, and the taste was unbelievable.

What God did in that forty minutes was He stripped every sensibility that I had inoculated myself with as a North American. It helped me see the world—the 80% of the rest of the world—like it really is; and it broke my heart. I have never seen poverty like that—they have nothing. Then, I went to the church in Africa—and I have never seen spiritual wealth like that. I have never seen a hunger for God that looked like that. I have never seen extravagant worship like that and unbelievable faith like that. You see, when it came to physical things, they were incredibly poor; but when it came to spiritual things, they were incredibly rich.

Then I flew home. As I was flying into New York City, I looked out where literally everything that glitters is gold; and it struck me that we have everything. I have never gone for want of anything in my life; and then I went to the church, and for the first time in my life, I saw the poverty of our worship and how small we think God is. It struck that I needed to re-orient my life to take some of my everything to pour into their nothing so that they could take some of their everything and pour it into my nothing, and my heart could be changed. I will tell you, no matter how much I have given, I have always received a hundred fold back in return of the blessing that God pours, but it takes a willingness to allow God to grow our hearts. Are you willing to grow your heart?

The second suggestion I have for us is we need to KNOW the people with whom we are in partnership. We need to know the people around the world. In the first chapter of Paul's letter to the Philippians, he writes and thanks God for these people—these Christ-followers in the church at Philippi—who had been his partners in the Gospel from the first day until now. He said, "It is easy for me to feel this way about you because I hold you in my heart." During this last week, we have had several people who have been serving as partners with us in mission—both in the Reynoldsburg area and around the world—come to meet with us. We have had fifty-five hundred contact hours of members of our congregation with people who represent us around the world. It is an opportunity for us to get to know them—to host them in our homes, to learn their stories, to know their loves and

their concerns, their joys and their sorrows.

I have known missionaries all my life and have had many dinners with missionaries. I have visited several in the mission field—and do you know when you ask anybody who does this for a living what they need what is the first thing they will tell you? They will ask, “Will you please pray for us?” The second thing they will say is, “Please don’t forget us.” I had a couple in my second congregation where the husband had retired as an engineer from General Electric and the wife retired as a nurse, and they decided that this was only halftime in their lives. In their retired state, God called them—and they listened—to go to a village in Ghana, West Africa. Jim and Rita Doner built a hospital where Jim engineered the job and Rita trained all the nurses and midwives.

Do you know that almost all the children in that village that are between zero and fifteen years of age have the names ‘Jim’ and ‘Rita’ somewhere in their own name? They became Jesus for this village. There was one woman, however, in that congregation that would not forget about Jim and Rita, and she wrote them a letter every day. This would be a person that many of us would call a ‘handicapped’ person. She would write to them every day; and when they would come home, they would cry as they talked about how much she cared for them. She knew them. She held them in her heart.

There are people I know in Zimbabwe and Ghana and in Kenya and Uganda and Seoul, Korea that I know—that I hold in my heart—because we are partners in the Gospel. I know them, and I care for them. Are you willing to know the people with whom we are in partnership?

The third suggestion I have us if we want to be serious about being a mission-hearted church is that we need to GO. We need to go and be in ministry alongside the people that with whom we are in partnership. We need to strip away our sensibilities, and we need to get involved. That means sometimes getting our hands dirty and meeting a real need. That means that sometimes being surprised by the movement of God as we share a simple Gospel. I am convinced that, even if I read Leviticus in Uganda, people would come to Jesus (if you do not understand that joke, you need to read Leviticus because the spirit of God moves there, and all I had to do was to be willing to go).

I know that we are all busy people, so I want you to start simple. If you have never done this before, give a half a day at The Shepherd’s Place free clothing store; or give half a day to the Home Again furniture ministry; or give a day working with Habitat for Humanity; or give a day going to Marion to the correction facility there. Get outside your comfort zone and go...and after you have put your toe in the water, why not take a week and go on a junior or senior high WorkCamp or a college-age WorkCamp? Or go on one of our week-long volunteer-in-mission (VIM) trips to New Orleans or to McCurdy School or to Alaska? And if you are really ready to take a step, why not go with me out of the country? Why not go to Haiti?

I am going to lead a mission team to Africa next January or February. I want a dozen of us to go so we can meet real needs so we can offer a real Jesus and partner with the people we are in ministry with around the world. Are you willing to go? Some of us might be called to leave a former way of life and lay that down—like Jim and Rita did—and go into a different kind of life in full-time service. Are you willing to take a step?

The last suggestion I have is this: we need to BESTOW our gifts on people. We need to give a portion of what we have as a second-mile giving effort for beyond what we already do in the church. As North Americans—with nearly one-third of the wealth of the world at our disposable—we need to be willing to help other people. Do you know that the poorest person in North America is wealthier than ninety-nine percent of the people in the rest of the world that live on less than a dollar a day? God has distributed the resources of the world like that and has invited us to be a participant in that.

Now, I know what you are thinking—I am, too—the economy is lousy right now. I paid \$3.55 a gallon last week. My wallet is hemorrhaging. Beth went to WalMart last week and came home with two bags; and she held them up and said, “This is \$100.” I know...but let me tell you something else I know. It is at those times in my life when I have been forced to step by faith that God has moved in the mightiest ways, and I dare us to trust God.

On my second trip to Uganda, we traveled east along Lake Victoria; and when we arrived at the Kenyan border, there was a border town called Busia. We took a right and went fifty kilometers out in the middle of nowhere—I mean we were driving through eight-foot high elephant grass for thirty kilometers. We would occasionally see somebody come out of a bush. We pulled into this clearing, and there was a mud brick church there with over 300 people who were waiting for us on a Sunday morning for worship. As they spilled out, the drums began to play; and we began to listen to their story and heard that some of them had been walking six hours to come to worship that day—six hours.

I stepped out of the van and looked off to the left where I heard a sound—they were killing the goat that would be lunch. As I was sitting on the podium of the church that day, I was looking out the window and their version of the United Methodist Women were in the kitchen—which was three palm trees with three steel pots underneath them—and they were preparing the goat. I watched them ring the necks of three chickens and throw them into the pot. I leaned over to some guy from South Georgia who was there with me and said, “Bubba, that is our lunch...” and he said, “I know!”

Here is the thing that really amazed me—I learned that the goat that they had killed and the three chickens that they had to put in the pot was more meat than that entire village would eat in a month...and they gave it to me! I do not think I

have ever sacrificed like that in my life until then. Are you willing to take a step and bestow?

Let me put this in phrases that most of us can understand. How many of you have been to McDonald's and eaten from the dollar menu? Pick any dollar menu off of the McDonald's menu. If we would give up one of those items a day—everybody who worships here on a weekend—one a day, then we would be able to distribute \$750,000 around the world in the name of Jesus. How many of you go out to lunch once a week? It costs me about \$10 to go to lunch. That is on a good day (it is that whole Diet Coke thing just gets me at the end). If I were to give up one lunch a week—and you were, too—in a year, our community of faith would be able to distribute \$1 million. That is a much less than a goat and three chickens and all the meat in a month. Are we willing to take a step and bestow?