

5/29/22 WORSHIP SERVICE

MORNING PRAYER

God on a mission,

You are always active and moving. You work in all things for good for those who love You.

Our faith is that You are at work in the world, reconciling all things to yourself. Just as you changed the tragedy of the cross into victory in the resurrection of Jesus, we trust that your Spirit penetrates the tragedy in our world and the pain in our lives, planting seeds of resurrection.

We pray for eyes to perceive what you are doing, for a change in heart, and for the capacity to spread the good news.

This morning we bring to You our own joy and pain. Some things on our hearts we can easily mention, and other things we hardly even know how to name before you. Yet you love us. You know us completely, and desire to make us whole.

We give thanks for the birth of a third child to Austin and Lindsey last Friday. We celebrate the birth of Silas Stanley with them and praise you in the mystery of new life.

We pray for the Junior Highers from our community along with Laura, Michelle, and input speaker Micah Hurst who are currently at Camp Tawakoni. We pray for your Spirit to be at work in these young lives as they bond with each other and find their faith ignited.

This Memorial Day weekend, we remember loved ones that we have said goodbye to in the last year. The journey of grief doesn't end after just one year, and many of us feel the void of the absence of people we loved dearly that are not here with us. Give comfort to those who feel this grief, especially this weekend.

We pray for ElRoy and Loretta in this bewildering time with ElRoy's recovery from problems due to a brain bleed. We give thanks for the improvement he has seen in his vision and pray for your strength to be with ElRoy and Loretta both in this unexpected road.

We pray for Steve and Sandy Banman who are also on a difficult road, as Steve began cancer treatment this past week. Grant them strength and hope in this journey. Work through the wisdom of doctors to bring health to Steve's body. Work through the love of the people who support them and hold them in prayer. We pray that Steve can be buoyed up in spirit and faith, especially on challenging days, and we extend our prayers to Craig and Allison and Bino as well.

We likewise lift up others in our congregation that are on our minds and hearts who are navigating ongoing and new health issues for themselves and for family members.

When we are not in control, teach us to loosen our need for control and security, and be able to step out onto the stormy waters with however small a measure of faith.

We pray for our three delegates who are currently at the MC-USA Special Assembly in Kansas City. We pray that it can be a meaningful event for them to participate in, and we pray that your Spirit would give wisdom to all of the delegates as they discern a number of different matters for the denomination.

We pray for all the families in grief after another mass shooting at an elementary school in Uvalde, Texas. This comes just weeks after the racially-motivated shooting in Buffalo. While we know there is much violence in our country apart from the headlines, these headlines make us grieve and make us feel unsafe. We pray for wisdom in how to influence our culture in the direction of peace, so that this senseless killing might stop.

O God, transform us in ways that we can't fathom. Let us be the good soil where the seeds of your kingdom sprout. Give us the breath of your Spirit, and your imagination that was present from the beginning of creation and continues now and forevermore. Amen

PRAYER OF DEDICATION

Generous God,

You are the giver of life and salvation. You touch us and make us whole. You have blessed us with many good gifts.

Now is our chance to offer them to the world, inspired by your love. We seek to offer our time, our material resources, and our very selves.

Let our gifts be a part of your mission in the world, through Christ who gave himself up for us all, Amen.

“DISCIPLE EVERYBODY”

The last two weeks, we've had guest speakers.

Joe Sawatsky from the Mennonite Mission Network preached from the book of Acts and told a story of a political refugee from one African country who became a pastor in another. Brian Bisbee also preached from the book of Acts, and described the work of New Hope Shelter and what it means to reach out to the poor and homeless.

Today, I want to step back and take a look at what we really mean when we use the word “mission,” whether it applies to our congregation or our individual lives.

Back last fall, Travis Duerksen spoke about the podcast he has worked with called, “mission-ary,” addressing some of the reasons people pause at the word “mission.” For some people, the word “mission” has some baggage, as does the short passage Lynel read, commonly known as the “Great Commission.”

Some might associate it with door-to-door evangelism. As a youth, I felt I should be telling others about my faith, but I was also terribly shy. It was an accomplishment enough to simply say “hi” to someone in the lunch line and have a conversation longer than two lines.

It would have been a big stretch to manage to witness to the other person while I was at it, and yet I felt guilty about failing to do that.

Meanwhile, some people associate mission with maps of the world showing the “unreached” people groups that need Western missionaries to teach them the gospel. Knowing the history of Western colonialism over the past few centuries might give you pause, even though this commission Jesus gave his disciples was many centuries before colonialism.

The word “mission” comes from the Latin verb for “sending.” Anytime there is a mission, there is one who sends and those who are sent.

In John’s gospel, when the resurrected Jesus said to his disciples: “Peace be with you! As the Father has sent me, I am sending you.” Then he gave them the gift of the Holy Spirit. It is Jesus himself who was the One sent by God, and to follow Jesus is to share in that vocation.

This means that “mission” isn’t one activity of many, like we have Sunday services, Sunday school, fellowship meal, VBS, and then there’s that “mission stuff.”

All that we do and all that are as a church should reflect the fact that we don’t exist to serve ourselves but to reflect the mission of God. It’s a mental shift before anything else.

That concept might feel difficult and out of reach. I tried to think of experiences where I was specifically “sent” by another person. The years when I did work for my dad, I was often “sent” to deliver or pick up mowers. Sounds pretty straightforward and trivial.

But even a simple task required forethought. What roads to avoid because they’d make the trailer bounce. How to get to the property. Where was the mower kept? Could it be expected to start, or would it need to be pulled onto the trailer with the winch? How to pull into the property and back up as one not very skilled in backing up with a trailer?

When you are sent on even a simple task, you think intentionally about what you are doing.

Let’s take a look at a passage of scripture called the “Great commission.”

In Matthew’s telling of the Jesus story, these are Jesus’ final words to his inner circle of disciples, following his resurrection. Whatever your experience with this passage, I think we will find some surprises, some things we have never noticed before.

Let me go through some of these surprises one by one:

The first is that this passage starts with worship and doubt. The eleven disciples received the word that they were to meet the risen Jesus at the top of a mountain in Galilee. When they see Jesus, they worship him. But “some,” it says, “doubted.”

Actually, the original language should probably be interpreted to mean that all eleven doubted. They worshipped him, but yet they doubted.

If that's surprising, the other place where "doubt" shows up in Matthew's gospel is the story of Jesus walking on the water, and Peter following him out onto the water. He becomes frightened and begins to sink, but Jesus catches him.

"You of little faith, why did you doubt?"

But that is not harsh criticism of Peter. Peter is the only one who actually tried stepping out onto the water in the first place. If you don't risk anything, you don't have reason to doubt. But doubt is a part of faith and worship, when we take risks and step out into the uncertain and the unknown.

The lesson is that you do not have to be perfect or super confident. The sacred trust is given to ordinary people who waver, doubt, and have questions.

Surprise *two* is how the "commission" is bookended.

"All authority in heaven and earth is given to me," Jesus says. And he finishes by assuring them: "I am with you always, until the end of the age."

Mission is always about the Sender, not about the Sent. It is an endeavor of humility, not brash confidence. God is at work whether we join or not. This is not about any special accolades for ourselves. We can get over ourselves and instead see ourselves as part of something larger.

Surprise *three* is how early Christians interpreted this passage.

In his book, *The Patient Ferment of the Early Church*, Alan Kreider writes about how patience was a prominent virtue in the church of the first centuries. He marvels that the church grew as much as it did without formal strategized mission efforts or worship services that seekers could attend.

Instead, the church seemed to focus on forming the character of the Christians into new people, and the good news appears to have to spread organically.

When writers in the early centuries reference the final words of Matthew, they assumed that apostles like Paul had already taken care of the "going" part of the equation.

They didn't even take it as a universal "great commission" for their time at all. Rather, they were concerned with how to properly carry out baptisms and the trinitarian formula "in the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit." (page 10)

Surprise *four*:

The key word is not "go." It's "disciple."

Most of us read a translation something like "Go and make disciples of all nations."

We assume it's about going overseas or to some far-off location, maybe because of the word "nations."

Let's examine that a little closer.

First, in the original language “go” is a participle. It’s like it’s saying, “as you go on your way, make disciples...”

There are other equivalent passages, such as when Jesus tells the messengers of John the Baptist, “Go and tell John what you hear and see...” Of course they’re going to “go.” The second verb “tell” is the key word.

Or when the Pharisees criticize Jesus for eating with the wrong people, he responds, “Go and learn what this means, ‘I desire mercy, not sacrifice.’” Again, “go” is more of a rhetorical flourish. Jesus is more interested in them *learning*.

Some are called to go to a new location. But we can equally follow this commission by being faithful in all the places where we already are present: “as you go...”

Here’s yet another observation: “Make disciples” is one word in Greek: “disciple,” as in “the elders *discipled* the young people.”

“Discipling” can mean a person who wasn’t a Christian becomes one. “Discipling” can also mean “train,” as in Matthew 13:52 where Jesus starts out a parable, “Every scribe who has been trained (“discipled”) for the kingdom of heaven...”

The emphasis is not on getting as many converts as possible, but on learning to follow Jesus. This is why Jesus’ final words say, “teaching them to keep all that I have commanded you.” That would include teaching like the Sermon on the Mount, love for enemies, as well as care for “the least of these.” (Matt 5, 25)

What about the word “nations”? Yes, it may mean going physically to other countries. In fact, today, there are many missionaries that come from countries in the Global South and do mission work either in other countries of the Global South or in the North. We have mission in all directions.

“Nations” is also the very same word translated as “Gentiles.” I think Jesus’ point may be less about geography and more about people. Because Jesus is Lord of all nations and peoples, the good news is not reserved for just one group. Christians are called to cross and bridge boundaries.

The boundaries of different racial groups, different cultures, different languages, different education or experience... Urban and rural, poor and wealthy, Republican and Democrat. My guess is that without going to someplace entirely new, we already run up against some of these boundaries.

Some may be called to engage people you’ve never related to before, but for others the question is how to be Christlike in all the relationship we have in all the circles we are already in?

[In sum, I have this diagramed on the screen to show how I read the commission]

“Therefore, go Disciple [People of] all the nations, Baptizing them In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, Teaching them To keep all that I have commanded you.”

So what do we conclude from all this?

First, let's be a part of God's mission where we already are. Each of us is already an influence on other people whether we are aware of it or not. This is true of us as individuals and as a congregation.

Practice awareness of who are the folks in your spheres of influence. What is the influence and impact you would like to have? What kind of person would you like to become in order for your life to be evidence of Christlikeness? How might we simply seek to bless others that we encounter?

The parallel for our congregation is asking: What are our congregation's spheres of influence? What are our relational networks? What are the lives we touch directly or indirectly? How can seek to be a blessing for others?

I see a lot of this in our midweek and VBS ministries, service projects, as well as the connection many of us have through Bethesda and local schools.

Secondly, there is no way around the task of personal spiritual transformation. If we are to back up with our lives what we might say in words, we have to consciously be intentional about spiritual transformation.

Much of American Christianity completely skirts around this and instead is focused on marketing a product. Spiritual transformation means we grapple with the issues of our over-consumption, addiction to comfort, and our addiction to security and being in control.

We slowly learn to accept the journey of life as it comes, and lean on each other and our faith rather than our own self-sufficiency. Transformation is a journey, but testifies to the fact that Jesus is the one is making us whole.

This transformation means we learn to live in a way that is odd, different, and countercultural. This may give others questions and hopefully also respect when we do this for the right reasons.

Third, we focus on building relationships and friendships of collaboration, both with each other in our congregation and in our circles. When we build relationships of trust, and when we are intentional about our own journeys of transformation, we begin to be positioned to be able to use words to articulate what gives us hope. In what do we put our faith? Where do we find support for life's challenges?

While we are dreaming of the land of beautiful flowers, we join God's mission here in this broken world.

God's work has always been one of love. So we must make love our primary motivation, which is hard when we are thinking about filling more pews or meeting a budget. It is hard to do, but

mission as I am talking about it is letting go of thought for how our church benefits, and simply seeking to be a blessing to the people in our circles.

May God be at work within us and do a work of love through us.

BENEDICTION

Go about your week,

Watch for how God is at work,

Do everything as a follower of Jesus,

Remember that Jesus is with you always.