



Living the Mission of God

Vienna Presbyterian Church
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Matthew 28:18-20

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During these weeks between Easter and Pentecost, we have been exploring the topic of renewal and how it happens from the inside out. Renewal is all about relationships with God, family, our church, the communities we live in, and, ultimately, the world. Our passage for today is known as the Great Commission, and certainly helps us better understand our relationship to the world. Listen for God's word to you: "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."



Last week, I had an interesting experience. I took my son to his baseball game, but only four players showed up on time. A few other players did eventually straggle in, but we still had to forfeit the game and play a scrimmage. This has actually happened several times this season. I overheard one father say the problem was that some of the boys were involved in multiple sports.

The coach made a plea to the parents to make sure the boys were there on time going forward because it's not fair to the other players and coaches on our team or those on the other teams we play. And the main reason was simply because it's not possible to build a team to play baseball if the players aren't present and engaged. I heard one mother say under her breath that she couldn't get there any sooner unless she cloned herself.

As I sat there taking all of this in, I realized something very important was at play and that it had nothing to do with

baseball. This is a mini-picture of life for all of us in Northern Virginia. We live busy, hurried, and frenetic lives as we are pulled in many different directions with more to do than we have time to do, trying to balance the needs of family, work, and other responsibilities.

As a parent, I was challenged to think about the picture and to ask myself some important questions: What do I really want for myself and my children? Why do I do what I do? Do I want my children to be involved in church, sports, music, scouts, or other activities in order to be involved in something positive, to keep them out of trouble, to make friends, to be exposed to a lot of opportunities?

Yes, that's part of it. But what I really want is for my sons to grow into faithful, mature, responsible followers of Jesus who are experiencing the reality of the full, abundant life Jesus has brought us. I realized that as a mother and even as a minister, I can become easily distracted from the big picture of what life is all about.

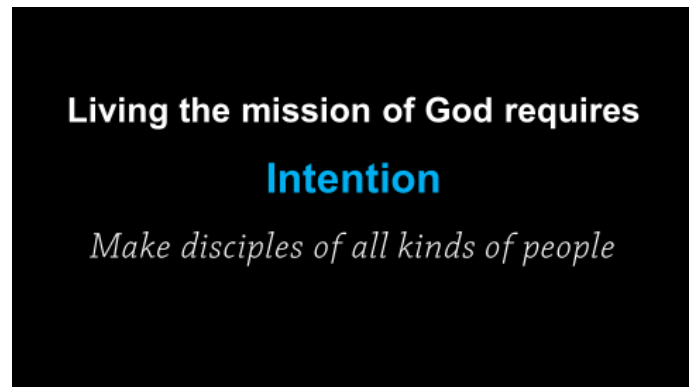
Our text for today is among the last words Jesus said to his disciples after his resurrection but before his ascension. In the Great Commission, Jesus seeks to clarify what our lives are

"I have been given say over all things in heaven and in the earth. As you go, therefore, make disciples of all kinds of people, submerge them in Trinitarian Presence, and show them how to do everything I have commanded. And now look: I am with you every minute until the job's done." (Matthew 28:18-20)

meant to be about as we live the mission of God in the world. Listen to Dallas Willard's translation of this passage which further clarifies Jesus' meaning: "I have been given say over all things in heaven and in the earth. As you go, therefore, make disciples of all kinds of people, submerge them in Trinitarian Presence, and show them how to do

everything I have commanded. And now look: I am with you every minute until the job's done" (Matthew 28:18-20).

Living the mission requires intention as we make disciples of all kinds of people. Jesus is about to ascend to his Father, and he assures his closest followers that all authority has been given to him. Truly, Jesus is Lord. He has spent three years with these men making disciples of them—living in community, teaching them the Word of God, equipping them for ministry, and, now, he is ready to pass the kingdom baton as he entrusts the mission of the church to them. They are to do what he did and make more disciples of all kinds of people.



A disciple is a follower, learner, apprentice, a practitioner. Disciples do not just profess certain views as their own but apply their growing understanding of life in the kingdom of God to every aspect of their earthly lives. This is our God-appointed business, and we must be careful not to allow anything to distract us. As an “apprentice” of Jesus, I am learning to live my life like Jesus would live it if he were I.

Discipleship was a familiar term in Jesus’ day, but it is not well understood today in our context. So here at VPC, we use the term spiritual formation, which is the process of being conformed to the image of Christ for the sake of others. Another way of saying it is that I am becoming like Christ in my character so that I can do what he would do in my conduct.

So how does this happen? How are we spiritually-formed ourselves, and how do we make disciples or apprentices of

others and help them to be spiritually-formed? Jesus outlines this in the Great Commission.

Living the mission of God is

Incarnational

As you go...

Living the mission is incarnational: The translation “*As you go,*” refers first and foremost to the day-to-day activities we all engage in.

Every part of our lives can be a part of our spiritual formation and an opportunity to live the mission of God wherever we are, and no matter what else we are doing.

Lest we think God is referring only to the super-committed or those people who go overseas to “do mission,” we need to understand this is a command as relevant to the career missionary living in Brazil as it is to the college student spending her summer break waiting tables, or the Christian mom serving alongside other PTA parents at her child’s school, or the businessman who interacts with the same Starbucks baristas on his daily commute to work, or the retired senior who volunteers to tutor at-risk students at a local elementary school.

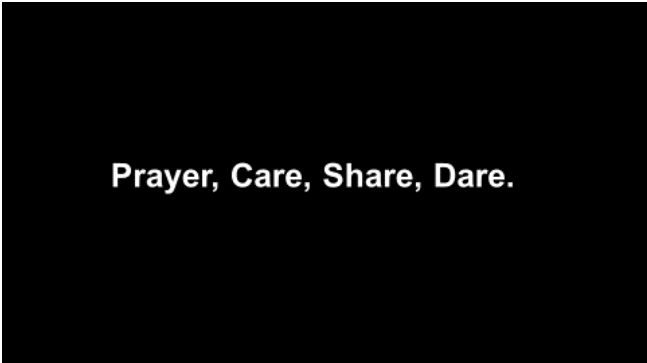
The benediction by Dick Halverson that our own Stan Ott always uses helps us understand what is happening: “Wherever you go, God is sending you. Wherever you are, God has put you there; He has a purpose in your being there. Christ, who indwells you, has something he want to do through you. Believe this and go in his grace and love and power.”

In other words, while not all Christians are physically able (or called) to go to “all nations” in order to share the gospel, we are all called to live the mission in all the places where

we live our lives. Here in Northern Virginia, the world has come to our door, and we can truly *reach all kinds of people* as we live intentionally and incarnationally. Our words and actions can make Christ visible in positive ways, life-transforming ways.

I have shared before about my experience working as a temp in a large corporation between graduating from seminary and being called to a pastoral position. At first, I had hoped I would only be there for a few months, but it turned out to be over a year. I remember when I finally accepted the fact I was going to be there awhile and that this was God's mission field for me. I began to employ a simple way any one of us can undertake what I have shared with you before: prayer, care, share, dare.

I began to *pray* for the people around me—general prayers of well-being and blessing, but also that God would open their hearts to the gospel. And, then, I sought to *care* for them—first by simply getting to know them and spending time with them. Instead of taking breaks alone, walking or reading, which I was prone to do as an introvert, I began to be more intentional in taking coffee and lunch breaks with others in a sincere desire to really get to know the people who sat around me, to build relationships. I also prayed God would open doors of opportunities so I could *share* my story—how God has worked in my life—and also *share* the good news of Jesus' love as God opened doors. At times, I needed to *dare* to speak up when people said or did something unethical or unkind. God needs people who *dare* to stand up against injustice when we see it in big or small ways, remembering “The only thing necessary for the



Prayer, Care, Share, Dare.

triumph of evil is that good men (or women) do nothing.” It was amazing to see what God did in that time—in me and in those around me.

I share my experience only to illustrate that each of us can live the mission of God incarnationally as we pay attention to our real, everyday ordinary lives. God invites us to be aware of our natural spheres of influence—the places we go, the people we see, and the things we do—and to engage in prayer and to care, share, and dare to live the mission of God with him.

Living the mission of God requires

Immersion

Submerge them in Trinitarian Presence

Living the mission of God also requires immersion. I like Willard’s translation to “*submerge them in Trinitarian Presence.*” Many associates baptize with water being poured on someone’s head, but the word *baptize* actually means to immerse or submerge. And it’s not actually referring to the water at all. Remember that a sacrament is a visible, physical sign that points to an invisible, spiritual reality.

Whether we are conscious of it or not, all of us are living a life that is immersed in something. Most of us are immersed in the values of the busy, frenetic, noisy, demanding, and high-expectation culture I spoke of earlier. And be sure of this: those cultural realities and values are shaping us and shaping our children all the time.

But God’s heart is that we would be immersed in the Trinitarian presence so that we can *experience* the love of God washing over us, the grace of Christ accomplishing for us what we can’t accomplish on our own, and the Holy Spirit renewing us to a new and different kind of life characterized

by the fruit of “love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, gentleness, faithfulness, and self-control” (Galatians 5:22-23).

In baptism, we are reminded that because of Jesus, we belong to God and to the body of believers. Baptism marks a transition from life outside the Christian community to discipleship or apprenticeship within it.

Just as you can't play baseball without a team, you can't live the Christian life without a community. Being an apprentice is not an individual thing!

Community is central to spiritual formation in Christ and living the mission of God. The introduction to the Renovaré Bible states that “The aim of God in history is the creation of an all-inclusive community of loving persons, with Himself included in that community as its prime sustainer and most glorious inhabitant.” Every believer is called to be a part of a local congregation. But in such a large church as ours, we also need a group or class where we can experience being known, loved, served, and celebrated.

Community is central to spiritual formation in Christ and living the mission of God. The aim of God in history is the creation of an all-inclusive community of loving persons, with Himself included in that community as its prime sustainer and most glorious inhabitant.

What does this look like? Well, in the last few weeks I have had the joy of hearing how people have experienced the reality of being immersed in the Trinitarian presence in community as:

- Recent Great Banquet guests shared what the weekend meant to them;
- Individuals have shared the blessing of a having a Stephen Minister walk alongside them or a Sunday school class love and support them in concrete, tangible ways;

- Small group participants shared their deeper experience of God’s love and grace after a nine-month journey in Growing Your Soul;
- Confirmands shared of God’s good and faithful work in their lives; and,
- Families shared how God has used camps and summer mission projects to shape and mold the lives of their children.

I could go on and on, but I hope you see that being immersed in the Trinitarian presence is *experienced* through intentional relationships in Christian community.

Living the mission of God requires

Instruction

*Show them how to do everything
I have commanded*

But still, that is not enough. Living the mission of God requires instruction: “*show them how to do everything I have commanded.*” I was thinking about this in relationship to

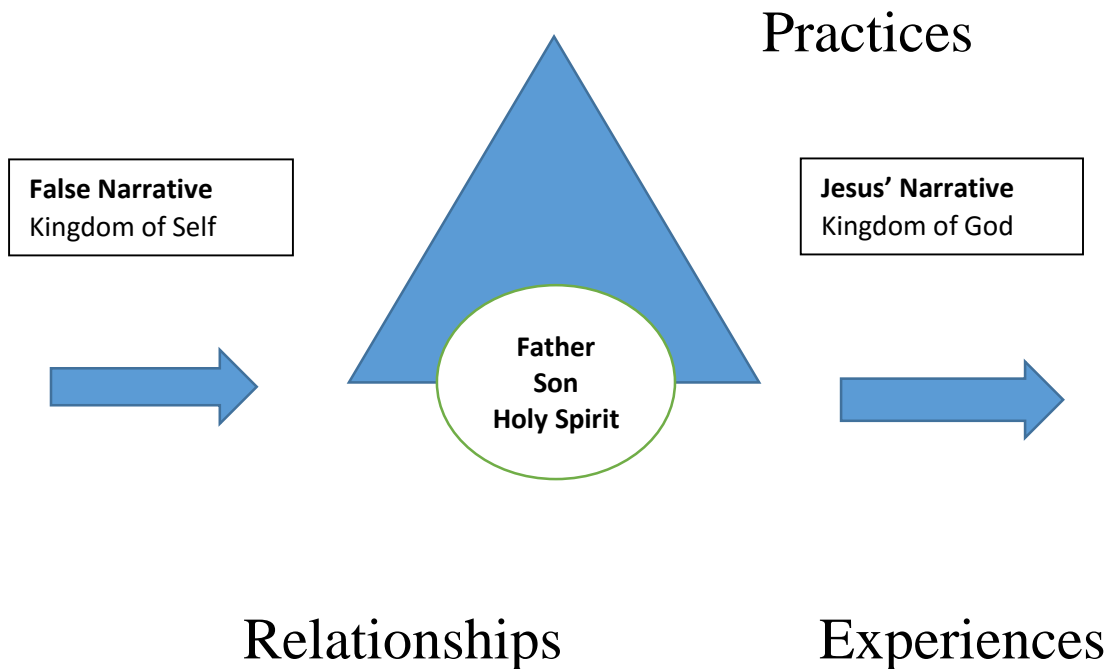
baseball. A person can have the right equipment, read about the skills needed and the rules of the game, and even understand the biomechanics of the sport, yet still not become a good baseball player. Knowing what to do is not enough.

This translates to the life of a disciple. Information alone will not help you obey God; we need transformation. That’s why I like Dallas Willard’s translation: “Show them how to do everything I have commanded.” We need *teaching* (what to do) and *training* (how to do it) to become like Christ—the kind of person who is response-able—able to do what needs to be done in the moment.

So how do we learn to obey everything Jesus commanded? It does not mean trying harder or doing more. It does not mean exerting more will power because the will power has

no power. It takes training to develop muscle memory to play baseball, to play an instrument, to drive a car, to be a neuro-scientist. There are things we need to know, but we also have to learn how to do them, and that takes practice.

Let me see if I can explain it through a diagram.



As I said earlier, all of us are immersed in cultural realities that shape us and impact our behavior more than we know. Our behavior is driven by the narratives we believe. And here is the main point: these false narratives of the kingdom of self are running (and ruining) our lives.

The teaching and training of apprenticeship is about transforming these false narratives so that we are living the true narrative of Jesus in the kingdom of God. Only the triune God can change us and our narratives by His love, grace, and power. But we can cooperate with God as we give ourselves over to Him to do what only He can do through spiritual disciplines or practices, relationships, and experiences that will help us become the kind of people who are able to do what needs to be done.

Studying the Bible is a critically important practice, not merely to gain information but to know God and to know the true narrative. But we also need other practices such as worship, prayer, silence, and solitude to help build the muscle memory in our body and to grow our souls so we can become the kind of people who are truly able to “love the Lord our God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength—and love our neighbors as ourselves.”

We have already talked about the significance of intentional relationships in community and paying attention to our real-life experiences, embracing every aspect as a part of our training and an opportunity to live life in God’s kingdom. Practices, relationships, and experiences train me so that in my real life when cut off in traffic I can bless rather than curse. Or when I have to wait a long time in a line at the store I can wait patiently with joy and peace rather than stewing with frustration or lashing out in anger. Or when I miss a flight or an important appointment due to traffic, I can rest in God’s sovereign care even when things don’t go my way. I am learning to live my life as Jesus would live it if he were I. And that translates to much bigger and more difficult circumstances of life.

Yesterday, I spoke to my twin sister. She and her husband have had a difficult year filled with health issues, multiple moves, and unemployment. But they have used their time to love, bless, encourage and help others, all the while bearing witness to God’s love and faithfulness. It is evident that they have become the kind of people who are living as Jesus would live even in the midst of struggle and uncertainty.

Our topic today is our relationship to the world, and you may still be wondering about how what I have said today relates to that. There is an old song that says, “What the

world needs now is love, sweet love. That's the only thing that there's just too little of." It's true. If you have been following the devotions this week, you know that the readings and prayers have focused on demonstrating God's love, grace, mercy, goodness, truth, and very life. That is what the world needs—from us. God's great idea for reaching the world with the wonderful news of Jesus Christ is to make disciples or apprentices who are arranging their lives to be with him and who are increasingly becoming more and more like him. As we do this ourselves, we will become the kind of people who are able to sacrificially and generously share God's love with others with whom we come in contact every day. And we will truly be able to make apprentices of others in the process.

I used to think I could change the world, but I no longer believe that's true, which, frankly, is a great relief, because that was a lot of pressure. But I do believe *God* is changing the world, and He wants me to participate with Him. I believe I can influence the people around me and the environment in which I live and work, and God can use what I do to make a difference in individual lives and to be a part of His greater work in the world. Our calling is to live the mission of God in the world from the inside out. At VPC, we say we are “*becoming like Christ together for the world.*”

Here's the thing: as each of us lives as a faithful apprentice of Jesus and makes disciples or apprentices of others around us, God's love will be shared, lives will be changed, the world will be reached, the Great Commission will be fulfilled. This is the big picture. This is God's plan and purpose for our lives and for our relationship to the world. And Jesus promises to be with us until the job is done. So, let's do it.