

Sermon for Zion Presbyterian Church, April 29, 2018

Hymns: Praise Band; 755 – Go ye, go ye into the world; 778 – “Lord, you give the great commission. Responsive Reading: Living Faith 9.1.1-9.1.3

Scripture: Isaiah 43:8-11; Matthew 28:16-20; 2 Corinthians 5:17-20

Sermon Title: “You Are My Witnesses”

Responsive Reading: Living Faith 9.1.1-9.1.3 – “Our Mission”

As God sent Christ to us, so Christ sends us into the world.

We are here to proclaim Christ in word and deed.

Mission is evangelism, the offer of salvation to all people in the power of the Holy Spirit,

to be received through faith in Christ.

It asks people to repent of their sins, to trust Christ, to be baptized, and to enter a life honouring Jesus as Lord.

Mission is service, a call to help people in need

and to permeate all of life with the compassion of God.

Isaiah 43:8-11

Lead out those who have eyes but are blind, who have ears but are deaf.

All the nations gather together and the peoples assemble.

Which of their gods foretold this and proclaimed to us the former things?

Let them bring in their witnesses to prove they were right,

so that others may hear and say, “It is true.”

“You are my witnesses,” declares the Lord, “and my servant whom I have chosen, so that you may know and believe me and understand that I am he.

Before me no god was formed, nor will there be one after me.

I, even I, am the Lord, and apart from me there is no saviour.

Matthew 28:16-20

Then the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain where Jesus had told them to go. When they saw him, they worshiped him; but some doubted. Then Jesus came to them and said, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go 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 I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.”

2 Corinthians 5:17-20

If anyone is in Christ, that person is a new creation: The old has gone, the new is here! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us

the ministry of reconciliation: that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting people's sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation. We are therefore Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us. We implore you on Christ's behalf: Be reconciled to God.

I had a high school teacher, Mr. Fisher. He was probably in his forties when I knew him, which seemed old then, but seems young to me now. Mr. Fisher was notable for several things, not least of which was a glass eye. It wasn't obvious; only when, on occasion, it didn't quite match up with what the other eye was doing at the time. The second and frankly far more distracting feature of Mr. Fisher's physiognomy was his sideburn length which varied - often dramatically - from one side to the other. I was never sure whether this was related to the eye situation, or simply a bold fashion statement on his part. It was the Seventies, after all.

But the Mr. Fisher story I want to tell you this morning has to do with a Sociology class, where some tomfoolery or other finally annoyed him to the degree that he started in on an extensive lecture regarding acceptable social behaviour in the classroom, the brunt of his increasingly agitated tirade being the chap who sat next to me, my friend Tom. I was enjoying the experience of Tom getting the gears from Mr. Fisher, even quietly chuckling to myself, particularly when the volume steadily increased. Finally, quite angry now, Mr. Fisher walked right up to me, of all people, and yelled, "Douglas, stop laughing when I'm yelling at you!" You see, I had misjudged which eye had been the business eye, so to speak; it turned out the glass one was locked on Purvis, while the effective one had been trained on me throughout. I was packed off to the office, where I had to explain my problem, to the barely restrained hilarity of the staff.

I bring this up today, not as a warning should you ever run into Mr. Fisher, who is doubtless enjoying a well-earned retirement and a whopping great pension, but I raise it as an example of how we often tend to treat the words, instructions, and injunctions directed to us by none other than the Lord God Almighty. "Who, me?" we often respond, assuming that God was talking to the other guy. We claim the good stuff as our own, of course, but when it comes to some actual statements requiring an expenditure of effort or behaviour modification on our part, we develop a glass ear.

While I'm sure that sometimes we know full well God is talking to us but we pretend not to hear, other times we honestly think God has someone else in mind. We've got a pretty narrow vision of our own job description when it comes to our

role in the faith, a description which includes showing up on Sunday, putting money in the plate, and not shoving old ladies out into moving traffic. But while these are all worthy tasks, they're not the whole story. Our lives as Christians, our lives as the children of God, as the brothers and sisters of Jesus Christ – our lives as disciples - includes but is not at all limited to Sunday worship. A central part of our mandate, of our task, a big part of why we're here, is to share the Gospel with others - invite others here - to let others in on it all, to spread the word, to reach out and share what God has shared with us.

As the Lord said through Isaiah to the people of God: “*You are my witnesses,*” *declares the Lord*’.

As Jesus said to the disciples: “*Go 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 I have commanded you.*”

As Paul said to the Christians in Corinth: “*We are therefore Christ’s ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us.*”

It’s central to our job description. As we read responsively just a few minutes ago, from the Presbyterian Church in Canada’s “Living Faith: A Statement of Christian Belief”:

Our Mission

*As God sent Christ to us, so Christ sends us into the world.
We are here to proclaim Christ in word and deed.*

*Mission is evangelism,
the offer of salvation to all people in the power of the Holy Spirit,
to be received through faith in Christ.
It asks people to repent of their sins, to trust Christ, to be baptized,
and to enter a life honouring Jesus as Lord.*

*Mission is service,
a call to help people in need and
to permeate all of life with the compassion of God.*

Once again, back to the first clause: *As God sent Christ to us, so Christ sends us into the world. We are here to proclaim Christ in word and deed.* Christ sends us, it says: **us**, not the other guy. “*We are here to*

proclaim Christ in word and deed.” **We**, it says. We. Christ sends us. We are here to proclaim.

But surely, you think, God’s not looking at me, but, Mr. Fisher-like, is looking at the guy beside me! After all, who am I to invite someone to church? Well, what sort of objections might we have? Let’s have a look at some common rationalizations people come up with as to why they don’t invite others to church:

1. ***I’m not good enough to invite someone else to church.*** Well, you’re right, you’re not good enough. That’s why you’re here. And that’s why the church is here, too. The church is about God, and about how God reaches out to all of us in love. And all of us need that. As “Living Faith” puts it: *“We should not address others in a spirit of arrogance, implying that we are better than they. But rather, in the spirit of humility, as beggars telling others where food is to be found, we point to life in Christ.”* You see, we’re in church not because we’re perfect or perfectly good. We’re in church because we are sinful, broken people, desperately in need of God’s love, forgiveness, and the new life God so very much wants give us. And that is what we share in common with all people everywhere: all of us are in need of God’s love.
2. ***God’s got professionals to do this job. He doesn’t need me.*** Well, while it is true that God has people set aside for a specific purpose or ministry, this one is for all of us, not just those getting paid. After all, the vast majority of people are in a particular church because they received an invitation from a friend, neighbour or family member - not because the minister happens to be good-looking, entertaining, eloquent, intelligent, talented... let’s see, did I forget anything? Oh yes, humble. No, let me assure you, God needs you to extend the invitation. There are people who know you and will listen to you, who would never listen to me. Why should they? They don’t know me! You, they know.
3. ***If people want to come to church, they’ll come on their own.*** People do occasionally come on their own, and in years past when going to church was a societal expectation, we could rely upon people simply showing up to fill a church. “If we build it, they will come,” worked up until about 40 years ago, when people in western society suddenly realised that maybe church wasn’t mandatory after all. People still need you and me to extend the invitation. Otherwise, it is hockey or soccer or baseball practice for the kids or grandkids, and a late breakfast as the default Sunday morning option.

4. ***If I invite someone to church, they'll think I'm a religious fanatic.*** Well, that's why Jesus gave a very particular kind of advice to a fellow whose life had been wonderfully transformed by Jesus. We heard it last week, but it bears repeating. Jesus said to the man, "*Go home to your family and friends. Tell them about all that the Lord did for you. Tell them how the Lord was good to you.*" When you extend an invitation to someone you know - a friend, neighbour or relative - they, knowing you, are unlikely to regard you as a religious fanatic. They know you too well. They would expect so much more from a religious fanatic! What they will begin to understand about you is why you consider Sunday mornings a special time, a time set apart, a time to put our hearts and minds and spirits on a different plane, to direct our thoughts to something, to someone, greater than ourselves. They might begin to understand what this is all about.
5. ***I don't want to impose my beliefs upon someone else. People are entitled to believe what they believe.*** Yes, and what you're providing for someone in inviting them to church is the opportunity to believe something. Most people in our modern society don't believe in much anymore, or are confused about what they do believe. Church will provide them with an opportunity to focus that belief on the source of all truth and life, and as a result, find new life themselves.
6. ***I couldn't be bothered.*** Well, I'm glad someone bothered enough to invite me, all those years ago. And I'm glad someone bothered enough to invite you.

I could go on and on, and often do, but suffice it to say, when God is asking us – commanding us – imploring us - to "*go therefore and make disciples of all nations,*" and to "*be my witnesses... to the ends of the earth,*" and to be "*Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us,*" he's talking to us, not to some other guy. It is to us the job is given. It is we upon whom God has fixed his eye. Let's not disappoint him. Let's invite a family member, a neighbour, a friend, so that they too might discover the wonderful gift of love God has for all the world.

There are wonderful services of worship in store for us all this May. Commit to inviting someone to a service, this coming month. Offer to go for lunch afterwards. Pick up the tab. Don't be cheap! And allow God the opportunity to share with someone new, the wonderful gift of life, of love, of forgiveness, of joy in Jesus Christ. "*You are my witnesses,*" says the Lord. Amen.