

GROWING ON PURPOSE AS THE CHURCH OF CHRIST

1 Corinthians 9:19-23; 2 Corinthians 4:1

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SCRIPTURE

Our first reading is taken from 1 Corinthians 9:19-23. I am going to read a paraphrase of this passage in order to help us better grasp the characteristics of ministry Paul is trying to teach us. He writes:

Even though I am free of the demands and expectations of everyone, I have voluntarily become a servant to any and all in order to reach a wide range of people: religious, nonreligious, meticulous moralists, loose-living immoralists, the defeated, the demoralized—whoever. I didn't take on their way of life. I kept my bearings in Christ—but I entered their world and tried to experience things from their point of view. I've become just about every sort of servant there is in my attempts to lead those I meet into a God-saved life. I did all this because of the Message. I didn't just want to talk about it; I wanted to be in on it! (1 Corinthians 9:19-23 THE MESSAGE).

In our second reading, taken from 2 Corinthians 4:1, Paul tells us:

“Therefore, since it is by God's mercy that we are engaged in this ministry, we do not lose heart” (2 Corinthians 4:1 NRSV).

INTRODUCTION

The term “engaged” here has nothing to do with marriage. John Fetterman, a pastor from Madison, Wisconsin, tells of an elderly woman who died. Having never married or even been engaged, she requested no male pallbearers. In her handwritten instructions for her memorial service, she wrote, “They wouldn't take me out while I was alive; I don't want them to take me out when I'm dead.”

Anyway, the term that is translated in this passage as “we are engaged” has to do with taking ownership of something, either literally or metaphorically, in order to bring about a positive outcome. God is calling us to take ownership of his work in the world in order to bring about a positive outcome.

1. KNOW THE PURPOSE

Of course, it would help if we knew what it is we are supposed to be about. Fortunately, God has not left us in the dark. As we examined last week, the followers of Christ are to obey the Great Commandment and carry out the Great Commission.

From the Great Commandment and the Great Commission we derive five purposes: love God with all your heart, love your neighbor as yourself, make disciples, baptize and teach them. The practical expression of the love of God is through Worship; the love of neighbor through Service; the making of disciples through Outreach (evangelism); baptism through participating in the Fellowship of the Church; and teaching through Discipleship.

God wants us to grow in each of these areas not only as individuals but also as a community of faith. And God will bless us with spiritual growth as we take ownership of these purposes. A Great Commitment to the Great Commandment and the Great Commission yields a Great Church.

2. FOLLOW A PRINCIPLE

The Apostle Paul reveals to us an important principle that we need to keep in mind as we fulfill God's purposes. This is the principle of winsome love. When we work for God we need to engage the heart and practice winsome love.

The aristocracy of ancient Greece believed that if you talked to ordinary people as if they were important, that would make you no better than a slave. Paul risks offending the aristocrats who were part of the Corinthian Church when he says:

“I have made myself a slave to all” (19).

But he is not recommending that we become doormats for others. Rather, he uses this language in order to reject the aristocratic view. The truth is, all people matter to God and so they need to matter to us.

Paul says the reason he becomes like a slave is:

So that I might win more of them” (1 Cor 9:19 NRSV).

Paul wants to win people to Christ. The word for win (*kerdaino*, ker-dah'-ee-no) is interesting. When it applies to finances it means to obtain by investment. When it applies to people it means to develop a relationship, that is, make a friend. Paul uses it 5 times in 4 verses. (Even if he had only used it twice that would still be a win-win situation! But here it is a win-win-win-win-win situation!)

A winsome love is one that builds relationships and helps people find a deep personal connection with Christ. It does not manipulate people nor does it distort the message but it seeks an authentic and heartfelt connection.

The motivation for this is Jesus himself. Through Jesus we become friends of God and he gives us the wonderful privilege of helping others become his friends also (2 Cor 5:18). This

requires a winsome love. We need to engage our hearts and win people to Christ..

3. MAKE A PLAN

The next characteristic that Paul emphasizes is the need to plan the work. Paul's plan to help people connect with God is simple: become like them to reach them. He does not adopt their values or lifestyles but tries to find common ground. He enters their world and tries to see things from their perspective.

Paul was willing to reach out to anyone but he believed he was especially called to reach people who knew little or nothing about Judaism, commonly called Gentiles. He describes it this way:

“For God, who was at work in the ministry of Peter as an apostle to the Jews, was also at work in my ministry as an apostle to the Gentiles” (Gal 2:8 NIV).

So how does a rabbi raised in a strict religious environment tell people that Jesus is the Messiah when these same people have no idea what a Messiah is? He had a two-stage strategy. First, he would go to the local synagogue and explain how Jesus of Nazareth had fulfilled the prophecies of the Messiah. Sometimes members of the synagogue would come to believe in Jesus as the Messiah and that was great. But that, in and of itself, did not help Paul reach the Gentiles.

At most synagogues, there were also people who remained just outside listening to the services. They were called “God-fearers.” These were Gentiles who embraced the teachings of Moses but never converted to Judaism. Some of these would respond favorably to Paul's preaching and come to faith in Jesus. Paul's second stage would then be to work with these “God-fearers” turned Christians to reach other Gentiles who knew little or nothing about Moses or the Scriptures. The God-fearers became the bridge between Paul's Jewish worldview and the completely different worldview of the Gentiles. This two stage strategy proved quite effective in Paul's ministry. The key thing to remember is: he made a plan.

Most American churches do not have any kind of plan. The prevailing philosophy is, “If it is important, it will happen all by itself.” One wonders what the reaction would be if people who hold to this philosophy discovered that their doctor had the same attitude: “If the surgery needs to be done, it will happen all by itself.”

This will not do. If God's work is important then it is worth thinking about how we can do the best possible job. We need to engage our minds and plan the work.

Here at First Presbyterian Church we have been using the Engaging Church model as a blueprint for planning our ministry. This is expressed in our Mission Action Statement: Go Out, Bring In, Build Up. To Go Out - We Serve Christ through SERVICE to others. To

Bring in - We Connect people to God through OUTREACH. To Build up- We Nourish people in the Spirit through WORSHIP, FELLOWSHIP, and DISCIPLESHIP.

This morning I want to lift up to you five strategic initiatives we believe are crucial for carrying out this plan. For the most part they are not new but I life them up to you to ensure that you *do* know what they are, to encourage you to pray about them, and for you to consider how you can help bring them about.

(1) We have formed a Connection Team, currently chaired by Marge Weil, to help implement the Engaging Church Model. The most visible aspect of this group has been various special outreach events, such as Three Men and a Tenor last March, and the Chenille Sisters coming next month. These events are designed to reach out to the community and bring people from the community through our doors. But there is a great deal more to the Connection Team than just these events. We seek to Attract outsiders, Welcome and Connect visitors, and Integrate new members.

(2) We have deliberately gone to one, Full Treasure style service on Sunday mornings. This is still a work in progress. The aim of Full Treasure Worship is to glorify God, and gather, unite and bless his people.

(3) We created a Building Improvement Task Force, currently chaired by Nan Jones. The Task Force has been working diligently on making recommendations regarding the safety, security and maintenance of our building as well as considering enhancements that will have the most positive impact on our ministry and outreach. We have been blessed with a beautiful and historic facility dedicated to the honor of God. We have a responsibility to be wise and faithful stewards of what has been entrusted to our care.

(4) We have been reviewing how to make the best use of the gifts and talents of our existing staff. It is not appropriate to discuss details in this setting but we believe the congregation will have a highly favorable response to this personnel enhancement.

(5) The fifth initiative has to do with the financial resources to support the plan. Churches typically have three kinds of financial resources. There is the ongoing financial support from members and friends that I will refer to as “operational income or budget income.” There is money set aside and/or invested over time that I will simply refer to as “reserve funds.” There are “special gifts” such as memorials and designated donations. Budget income, reserve funds, and special gifts.

It is not uncommon for a congregation to struggle with budget income and yet do quite well with the other two types of financial resources. First Presbyterian Church is no exception. The challenge is to make the wisest and most effective use of all three kinds of resources, and so we as a church have been taking steps toward that end.

In light of all of these things, we anticipate a special combined campaign in the Spring of 2012. By the grace of God, such a campaign can provide for the needed capital improvements, support for our mission and a vital boost to our ongoing ministries. This will be an opportunity to invest in the work of God. And unlike investing in the stock market, a sincere investment in the work of God will never yield a negative return.

4. DELIGHT IN PARTICIPATION

The final characteristic that Paul conveys is the biblical truth that every Christian is called by God to participate in ministry. We are to be deeply involved in what God is doing in the world. Christianity is not a spectator sport. If you are watching something happen, then you are not really part of it. You are not engaged in it. We need to engage our behavior and participate together in fulfilling God's purposes for the Church.

Paul says:

“I do it all for the sake of the Gospel, so that I may share in its blessings” (23).

The word for share (*sugkoinonos*, soong-koy-no-nos) means “co-participant.” The Gospel ministry is not meant to be a one-person job. The followers of Jesus are to participate together in this work. And those who participate in the work share in the blessing of seeing others receive the benefits of Christ also.

CONCLUSION

We need to be committed to God with our whole being. God needs to be our highest priority and when God is our highest priority all other priorities in life fall into the right perspective. Jesus said:

“Seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well” (Matt 6:33 NIV).

Or to put it another way, “God will give you all you need from day to day if you live for God and earnestly desire to engage in what God is doing in the world.”

Pray for a Great Commitment to the Great Commandment and the Great Commission.

Pray for a gracious demonstration of winsome love in all we say and do.

Pray for guidance as we plan the work.

Pray for willingness to work the plan.