

Mission Work Requires Balance

- I. **Nurture**
- II. **Outreach**

Our summer sermon series is focusing on the Church, our Mission and the Ministry. The purpose of this sermon series is to remind us that the Church is not about our building, but people. The Church is all believers who trust in Christ Jesus as their Savior from sin. We can find the Church where people are gathered around the gospel; the good news of Jesus. The gospel is found in the Word of God (the Bible) and the Sacraments (Baptism and the Lord's Supper). We also learned from Scripture how important it is to feed ourselves with only the truth of God's Word. Two Sundays ago we learned that the purpose of the Church is not about a congregation's programs. God has assigned the Church to go and preach the good news; to show the world Jesus. Last Sunday, we learned that Satan sows weeds among the wheat. It is not our job to try and pull the unbelievers out of the Church. Jesus will sort them out on the Last Day. Our task remains to go and preach the gospel.

But now it begs the question, "To whom are we to preach the gospel? Who is our audience?" I think you already know the answer to that question. Two weeks ago we heard Jesus say to us, "**Go and preach the good news to all creation.**" In our gospel this morning Jesus said, "**Go and make disciples of all nations.**" Our audience is all nations. Today we are going to talk about how God has called us to take the gospel to our little corner of the world known as Radcliff.

When we think of mission work, we usually don't think that way... mission work in Radcliff. We naturally think of the missionaries who are listed in the bulletin every week and for whom we pray in the Prayer of the Church. Mission work takes place overseas. It means learning a new culture - from their dress to language to eating strange and exotic foods. That is mission work... but not all mission work. Jesus said, "**Go and make disciples of all nations.**" We are certainly part of all nations, aren't we? And then Jesus tells us how to do mission work amongst ourselves. In the original language of the Greek he literally says, "Make disciples... by baptizing... and by teaching." A big part of mission work includes nurturing the people God the Holy Spirit has already gathered around the Means of Grace; the gospel in Word and Sacrament.

And so, from Jesus' command we know that as a congregation we will have a comprehensive education structure that seeks to nurture the needs of the diversity of people within the congregation. That education structure begins with our children. Maybe some of you are unfamiliar with how this works so I'll explain. After baptizing children, we carry out our Cradle Roll. Our secretary sends Christian materials to parents of small children that they can use to read to their children to introduce them to Jesus. These materials are all age appropriate. When the child grows to age 4-5, they enter into Sunday School. Sunday School is the most comprehensive educational program our congregation has for children. Throughout the course of many years, children are taught different Bible stories from the Old and New Testament. Sunday School is a critical part of our children's education because it lays a solid foundation for catechism class. When the children grow to ages 12-14, the pastor teaches them the doctrines or teachings of the Bible in catechism class. It is about this

age that children are just beginning to be able to grasp abstract concepts. It is extraordinarily helpful for both the student and the pastor that he can tie abstract doctrines back to concrete Bible stories that they have learned in Sunday School. However, if the child hasn't had the foundational Bible story instruction in Sunday School, they will likely struggle in catechism class. Our children's educational program is designed to work together in the best interests of the student. Once a child has completed catechism instruction, they are confirmed, and are able to take Holy Communion.

One statistic that I share with my catechism class is that 50% of confirmands are never seen in church after their confirmation. Why does that happen? In our congregation we currently have 106 such confirmed members, and yet our average attendance on Sunday morning is 85. And of those 85 in worship, an average of 45 folks participate in one of our weekly Bible studies for adults. Where are the rest of those people? We currently have 35 children in our congregation who are Sunday school age, yet our Sunday average attendance is 18. Where are those children? How many of those who are missing would you say do their own personal daily Bible study at home?

Does it sometimes happen that these thoughts pop into our heads? "We're too busy... we need time for family, sports, fill-in-the-blank... I learned all of that stuff already... my child doesn't want to go... I won't understand anyway." Well, what does God say about nurture? He says, "**Fathers, bring your children up in the training and instruction of the Lord.**" (Ephesians 6) God says, "Since the adults are nurturing the children, the number priority in a Christian congregation is adult spiritual growth." That means getting our adults into their Bibles, whether it be listening to the Scriptures on their MP3 players on the way to work, or reading their Bibles at home, leading their children and grandchildren in devotions, participating in corporate Bible studies at church with other adults, teaching teenagers and Sunday school children - all of these result in spiritual growth.

What are the residual effects of having spiritually strong adults? They become better parents, better spouses, better employers and employees. They are eager to serve their Lord in their communities and congregations. They are able to correctly divide law and gospel. They raise spiritually strong children. Spiritually strong children are able to cope with hardships, sickness, disaster and death; they are able to persevere through the tough adolescent and teenage years; they will eventually seek Christian spouses; they will become great parents, and in turn teach their children, your grandchildren, about Jesus, all because they watched you - you be a student who sat daily at Jesus' feet.

Nurturing is not limited to preaching and teaching, although they are the most obvious ways of nurturing a congregation. Other ways you can nurture in this congregation: stop by the home of a member or prospect you haven't seen in a while and just say hi. Accompany the pastor or one of the elders and visit one of our home bound members, sit down with them and read a short devotion; pastoral counseling certainly encourages spiritual growth; call a Soldier or his/her family, encourage them with the Word of God. All of these are ways we carry out Jesus' command, "**Go and make disciples of all nations... by baptizing... and by teaching them.**"

Part of the “Go” in Jesus’ command is internal. But “all nations” includes those outside these walls, doesn’t it? Part of understanding the audience God wants us to reach is realizing there are more people God wants us to serve other than ourselves. Problem... and we talked about this a few weeks ago, we make excuses. “I’m not gifted in speaking to others about Jesus. I don’t know my Bible well enough - what if they ask a question I don’t know the answer to? What if they say no to my invitation? What if it’s awkward?” Who of us is not guilty of thinking these thoughts? Who of us has kicked themselves thinking, “I should have said something.” We all are guilty of allowing an opportunity slip and have made excuses.

My dear friends, what are you? You are the Church! The Church has been reconciled to the Father. Because Christ was punished on the cross for your sins, the Father has changed your status from sinner to saint. You are someone who is holy in God’s eyes, precious and righteous. Through faith in Christ, God the Father has forgiven you for those excuses, for your inactivity in “nurture” and “outreach.” As a member of the Church he has given you a new life, and a new purpose for living, “Go and make disciples of all nations!”

That includes those right here in Kentucky. Did you know that 48% of Kentuckians attend church regularly, at least once a week, according to the most recent Gallup Poll?ⁱ The City of Radcliff website stated that there are 34,000 people in this town.ⁱⁱ Let’s crunch the numbers. If both of those statistics are true, then there are over 17,000 people in this town alone that are unchurched; 17,000 people who need to hear the gospel. How are we going to do that?

We heard in the First Lesson (Acts 11) how Christians carried that out. The Christian congregation in Jerusalem was being persecuted, and they essentially said, “Forget this! We’re moving!” [They] *traveled as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus and Antioch, telling the message only to Jews*. Imagine that. Jews from Jerusalem relocate, and seek out people just like they are and share the Gospel with them. In our case, that’s like us white Anglo-Saxons of German descent (that’s basically who we are) sharing the Gospel with other white Anglo-Saxons of German descent. But listen to what happened when God slapped some of them on the head and made them remember that forgiveness is for everyone in the world, not just Jews. ²⁰ *Some of them, however, men from Cyprus and Cyrene, went to Antioch and began to speak to Greeks also, telling them the good news about the Lord Jesus*. Jews sharing the message with Greeks; Jews doing cross-cultural ministry. Do you think that God would be happy with us if we looking to share the Gospel with people other than German-Americans? Listen to what happened. ²¹ *The Lord’s hand was with them, and a great number of people believed and turned to the Lord* (Acts 11:10). When we carry out God’s mission God’s way, be ready for his blessing.

What does that look like within our congregation? As we structure our congregation around God’s mission, we will want to strike a balance between nurture and outreach. In developing a congregational outreach plan, we will use what are known as “come strategies” and “go strategies.” Come strategies are events that invite the community to come to our congregation. Come strategies would include our Fall Festivals that we’ve held in the past; our grand opening festival at the end of this coming October; a game night; a youth group activity, a special worship service or Bible study. What we must be careful of is not to let the new building be our sole “come strategy”. The new building will bring curious unchurched people, but the building is not our outreach program. We dare not sit on our duffs and say, “We’ve built it. They’ll come.”

Yesterday at a Faith Vision Cottage Meeting one of our members dreamt big for this church. She said, “I see every pew in that new church filled on the first Sunday we worship in that new building, and staying full for every Sunday thereafter for several months, so that we have to go to two services.” How is that possible?

Jesus used the verb, “Go!” That means that we will get out there, in our homes, in our places of work, in our communities, our children’s sporting events... at least one of the 17,000 are probably in one of those places. Our congregation will also have “go strategies.” Having a well maintained church website; hiring a summer vicar; inviting college students to come for a week (Travel/Canvass/Witness teams) to help us make phone calls, conduct surveys and hang flyers; making follow-up visits with guests to worship, setting up a booth at one of our local festivals... these are all go strategies. As members of God’s Church it is our responsibility to develop a comprehensive plan for outreach so that we will carry out God’s assignment to go to the nations and make disciples.

One final thing... when we talk about nurture and outreach, it is hard not to self evaluate. How well is our congregation carrying out nurture and outreach? Are there areas where we excel? Have we leaned too heavily in one area and not the other? How have I as an individual member been active in nurture and outreach? When we do a little bit of self-evaluation, there will be lots of guilt. We know we have fallen short of God’s expectations. One thing we need to keep in mind as we carry out Jesus’ command to us is this: forgiveness. We will daily step to the font and drown our sinful excuses, and be reminded that Jesus has washed us through the waters of Holy Baptism. We will daily step to the cross and see that Christ did suffer for my failures. As often as it is offered we will step to the altar to receive in our hands his body and blood with the bread and wine for our forgiveness. And then, we will allow God’s love, shown through his Son Jesus, empower us to go – to go and nurture, to go and reach out. I pray that the Holy Spirit will provide opportunities for you this week to do so. Amen.

ⁱ <http://www.gallup.com/poll/125999/Mississippians-Go-Church-Most-Vermonters-Least.aspx>

ⁱⁱ <http://www.nhria.com/radcliffis.shtml>