

“Mission Possible”
Matthew 28: 16-20

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An old apocryphal story portrays Jesus assembled in a strategy session with his disciples shortly before his ascension. “Your mission, gentlemen,” said the Master, “should you decide to accept it, is to go into all the world and preach the gospel, baptizing them in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, teaching them to obey all that I have commanded you.” Peter, fresh from his experience of denial, speaks up and says, “But Jesus, what if we fail?” A caring, confident, Christ responds, “I have no other plan.”

For over two thousand years, the Great Commission of Christ has been the marching orders of the Christian Church. We articulate it at Brentwood United Methodist through a mission statement. **“Brentwood United Methodist Church, a Christian fellowship biblically focused on inviting, worshiping, discipling, serving, and healing.”** Let me try to unpack this mission statement for our understanding together.

Brentwood United Methodist Church is a Christian fellowship, biblically focused on *Inviting*. The imperative of the Great Commission is “Go.” My missions professor in seminary used to say it this way: “Some must go, some must let go, some must help go, but everybody must get going.”

Jesus said, “the Son of man came to seek and save the lost.” To invite is to ask, attract, beckon, bid, request, receive, warrant, welcome. There are no finer words in the English language than those which say, “You are invited,” or “the honor of your presence is requested.”

When churches begin, it is natural to invite people. After all, it is a matter of survival. You have to find enough people in the community to build the buildings, form a family of faith, and hire the needed staff. It is urgent business in the beginning church to invite people. But, something happens when churches become fruitful, and many people come. You are confronted now with caring for the membership, as well as inviting those who are outside. The church now finds itself at a critical point of its life. Churches are tempted to turn inward and to take care of themselves. When they start doing that, they die.

The question is never, "Are we big enough?" The question is, "Is there a single lost person that we can still reach for the cause of Christ?" Jesus was quite explicit about it. In Luke chapter 15, He told the story about the ninety-nine sheep that were safe in the fold. Only one was missing. The good shepherd leaves the ninety-nine in the wilderness and goes searching for the lost one until he finds it.

We count people because people count. My friend, Bill Hinson, tells the story about his Director of Music, who was on a musical tour in England with a group of high school students. As with any of us who have ever led a mission trip with teenagers, you have one goal in mind, "Lord, help me get there and get back with as many as I left with." It is always helpful if you come home with the same ones, too. Parents really appreciate that.

The tour went extremely well. The group gathered at the airport, ready to board the plane for the flight home. The director thinks, "I'd better count one more time. Thirty, forty, fifty, sixty, sixty-one, sixty-two, sixty-three. There were sixty-four kids on this trip. I must have missed counted. Thirty, forty, fifty, sixty, sixty-one, sixty-two, sixty-three." Immediately, he runs down the concourses of the airport, pushing open restroom doors and running into gift shops. Finally, he finds her; a sophomore standing in a shop buying one more souvenir before she comes home,

oblivious to the fact the plane is leaving.

Then, Bill Hinson raises this question: "What would have happened if that music director had come home and said, "By the way, we got back with ninety-nine percent of them here. We got sixty-three out of sixty-four back. That is a pretty good percentage, right?"

No person would ever let us get away with that! As long as there are boys who wander in the far country, sheep who nibble their way lost, coins that get misplaced through the neglect of responsible people, and as long as fifty percent of this county remains unchurched, we must be relentless in our invitational ministries.

Brentwood United Methodist Church. Christian fellowship, biblically focused on *Worship*. Worship is the heartbeat of a church. Sometimes I get so excited at worship, I can hardly contain myself. On the weekends, as we share together, the least thing worship ought to be is boring. A pastor finds Alex, a young boy, in the Narthex gazing at a slate of names of people from that congregation who have died in the war. Finally, the kind pastor goes up to him and puts his arm around him. Alex looks up to the pastor and asks, "What are all those names?" The pastor says, "Those are the names of all the people who died in the Service." The little boy, stunned for a while, looks up to the pastor again and says, "Which one, the 8:30 or the 11:00 o'clock?"

The least thing that worship ever ought to be is boring. The last thing that worship ought to ever be is entertaining. We have not come to a show. Congregations are not audiences. Leaders are not performers. The purpose of worship is not to please the people, but to please God. We must never forget it. You are the actors and the actresses in worship. The question is, when it is all over, has God been honored and pleased by what we have done, what we have said, how we have prayed, and spoken to one another? That is the ulti-

mate question, the only question that really matters.

One of the great joys of being in this business for a long time is that you meet a lot of wonderful people along the way. One of them was a little, short guy, about five feet tall, by the name of Charlie Hitt. Charlie did not have a car; he hitch-hiked to church every Sunday morning. He wore Coca-Cola bottle thick glasses, had a hearing aid in each ear, came to the early service, and sang about two measures behind everybody else. Somebody came to Charlie one day and said, "Charlie, why do you bother to come to church at all? You can't hear, can't see, and you have to hitch-hike to get here." Charlie said, "Well, it's like this. Come Sunday, I want my neighbors to know whose side I'm on."

Worship! I rejoice today that there are more Americans in church every month than vote in the Presidential election every four years. There may be a reason why there are more Americans who attend worship services in a month than attend any sports event during the entire year.

In Seminary, in the late 1960's, they were telling us that the Church would be out of business by the turn of the century. They were wrong. Thank God, they were wrong. There is a hunger in America to worship God.

Brentwood United Methodist Church. A Christian fellowship, biblically focused on *Discipling*. "Go and make disciples."

Wilber Rees wrote a little piece that goes like this: "I would like to buy three dollars worth of God, please. Not enough to explode my soul or disturb my sleep, but just enough to equal a cup of warm milk or a snooze in the sunshine. I don't want enough of God to make me love people that I don't like. I want ecstasy, not transformation. I want the warmth of the womb, not a whole new birth. I want a pound of the eternal in a paper sack. I would like to buy three dollars worth of God, please."

I suspect there are many of us who come to God that way. We want the hurt stopped, the pain relieved. But, God has a way of dealing with all of us. He takes us just as we are, but he is never satisfied to leave us there. He wants to make us into what we were created to be. C.S. Lewis used to tell it this way: "Being a Christian is a little bit like going to the dentist. When you get a problem with a tooth, you go to see the dentist. You want him to just work on **that** tooth."

I have a little crack on the edge of a tooth. I went in and I said, "Can you fix this up?" "Sure, we'll be glad to take care of that." I have been going to the dentist for the last six months. He has worked on every tooth in my mouth. He even told me all these Kentucky fillings have to be replaced by Tennessee ones. Dentists are just that way. They see a crack here and another problem over there. They want to take care of it all while you are there.

It is exactly that way with our Lord. He will welcome us where we hurt. We all get to God because of our pain. But, let us not be fooled. While we get there out of our pain, God is in the business of reforming, transforming and shaping us into the people we are called to be. Spiritual formation is the process of being formed in the image of Christ. It is a journey into becoming persons of compassion who love, forgive, and care deeply for others, even as Jesus Christ did.

Brentwood United Methodist Church. A Christian fellowship, biblically focused on *Serving*. I have said it before, I say it again, The Church may be the only institution in the world that exists primarily for its non-members.

The mandates of the Master are clear. Matthew 16:25 states, "Those who want to save their life will lose it. Those who lose their life for my sake, will find it." Mark 10:44-45, "Whoever wants to be first among you must be servant of all. For the Son of man came not to be served, but to serve." John 13:14, "If I, your Lord and teacher, have washed your

feet, you ought to wash one another's feet." I confess to you that it is a lot easier to preach it than it is to practice it.

A few years ago, at a prominent seminary, they took a group of senior students in preaching class and assigned them the text of the Good Samaritan. Then, they had them go next door to be critiqued. On the sidewalk, along the way, was a beaten beggar that had been "planted." An interesting discovery was made. Less than fifty percent of those who had just preached a sermon about the Good Samaritan were able to practice servanthood when they found someone in need on the street. But, preachers are that way. Is it any easier for you?

You see, we have problem with the servant leadership. It is a beautiful word. We float it around in denominations. We talk about it in the Church. Servant leadership, I will guarantee you, is a radical and profound transformation of the way you and I approach life. Everything in culture has it the other way. "You deserve a break today." "Have it your way." Of course, it is "Customer Service." Everything is created with the image and idea that "you are number one" and "you can be served first" and "you ought to take care of yourself." Then, we get to church and they talk about service, sacrifice and thinking of others before we think of ourselves. That calls for radical, radical change.

We will be in servant leadership when our best leaders are willing to park off this campus, so those who do not know where to park will have a place to park. Then, I will know we are in servant leadership. (By the way, if we can make this happen, it is worth two million dollars to us.)

Brentwood United Methodist Church. A Christian fellowship, biblically focused on Healing. A sign over an Italian Hotel, which was once a hospital, put it this way, "To Heal sometimes, to Comfort often, to Care always."

A study with the American Academy of Family Physicians, discovered that ninety-nine percent of their physicians are convinced that religious belief has a healing impact on patients. Seventy-five percent of their physicians believe prayers of others help in a patient's recovery. Doctors may be more anxious to embrace spirituality than many theologians. The time is right for the Church to recover its ministry of healing.

Tony Campolo tells the story about speaking at a church in Oregon. He says, "As a part of the service I prayed for a man who had cancer. Three days later his wife called me to tell me her husband had died. I felt awful. I said immediately to her, "I'm so sorry." She said, "That's not why I called. I called you to say, thank you. You see, my husband walked into church that Sunday morning. He was dying of cancer at 58 years of age. He was mad at God, mad at us, and mad at the world. Somehow, through the miracle of worship, prayers, and community, a peace settled upon him that we cannot begin to understand nor describe. I just called to tell you that the last three days of his life were the most wonderful days of our marriage together. He was not cured, but he was healed and I thank you for your ministry."

The last words of Jesus in His Commission are these, "And remember, I am with you always, even to the end of the age." Always. What is always? Life is not always. We buried a sixteen year old boy from this sanctuary yesterday. His parents and family joined this church today. There are so many things that are *iffy* in life. I need to tell you that **God is always**.

With apologies to Irving Berlin:
God is loving you, always.
With a love that's true, always.
When the things you've planned,
Need a helping hand
God will understand, always.
Days may not be fair, always.

*That's when God is there, always.
Not for just an hour, not for just a day,
Not for just a year, but always.*

My friends, in a shaky, fearful world, we need to help people understand the **God who is there... always.**

The service came to an end in a country church. The song leader stepped to the platform and said, "Let us sing number 654, *Till the Whole World Knows.*" A little girl, who did not quite get it, looked up at her mother and said, "We're going to be here for a long time."

Whatever it takes, for as long as it takes, and wherever it takes us, let us go and make disciples. Amen.