

Pastor Kevin Garman
Theme: Missional Church
Scripture: Mark 12:28-34
October 31st, 2021

Five Practices of Fruitful Congregation: The Missional Church

The Red words below are not mine. I took it from UMC discipleship ministries from their preaching resources. I altered them slightly during the deliverance of my sermon, but it should be noted those are not my words.

Last week we discussed the theme of Extravagant Generosity and talked about extravagant generosity from a few of the people I grew up knowing from my home church in Surgoinsville, TN. We looked at the scripture of the poor widow giving everything she had and then some. This week we look at the Greatest Commandment in Mark's Gospel to illustrate the purpose of our mission and the future of the missional church. The Missional Church and the church's mission in a general sense is our theme for the day. How do we become the missional church Jesus calls us to be? The missional church isn't new, but it is reidentifying what our mission is to the world. Simply put, our missional purpose is to continue building discipleship and fostering supportive relationships in our community to respond to the needs of the people in our local context.

Our story for reflection is the story of how our soup & scripture ministry formed at Surgoinsville, TN. I know I have discussed this ministry before, but it provides us with a concrete example of what the missional church can look like.

The demographics of First Surgoinsville UMC were similar to the demographics here. The majority of the congregation retired with several more closely approaching that time, a few young families, a few sporadic age groups, a handful of children/youth, and a lay led church that sees pastors come and go pretty often. There was a need in the community as the oldest members of the church and community began to near the end of their journeys. It was particularly the shut-ins and those in nursing homes that were in need of the most attention. The response to this problem in their community was soup & scripture.

Instead of asking shut-ins and people in nursing homes to come to them, which would have been a difficult endeavor to undertake, the church went to the people they were serving. This is a core concept of the missional church. They did things all humans do by breaking bread and sharing together a nice meal. They shared their scriptures for the week and said a few prayers as they were gathered with the people who had once

served them at one time or another in church. The best part of these visits were the conversations that took place. Through this relationship building, people's lives were transformed as they had support from friends and community, but they also transformed the lives of those who would participate in soup & scripture as well.

This taught me a few important lessons about ministry and has prepared me for the future of the church. The church's strongest missions have always been when we left the comfort of our walls and gone out to meet the people where they are at. We often say that in our denomination or, just as Christians in general, but I do not think we do as good of a job of this as we think we do. The mission of the church must always be responding to the needs of their community. The mission of the church is service based and we cannot simply serve just one another. Please do not think this is a condemnation of this church, but it is an area of growth the denomination and Body of Christ in general struggles to encourage growth.

["Which commandment is first of all?" (Mark 12:28.) And being a scribe, he knew in intimate detail just how "all" all could be! There has been a debate over the centuries concerning whether this was just round four in this melee and the scribe was trying to trip Jesus up just as the previous combatants had tried to do. But Mark doesn't think so, and neither do I. There is something different about this approach. Mark describes it by saying the scribe was impressed by Jesus. "He argues like a scribe," he must have thought to himself.

No, it appears to be an honest question, a sincere search for answers. And that is how Jesus responds. "Hear O Israel," Jesus reverts to the shema, a traditional liturgy that every Jewish child learned almost as soon as he or she could talk. "The Lord our God, the Lord is One" (12:29). These are the words that are written on a scrap of paper and placed in the mezuzah, that little box attached to the doorframe of every Jewish home. As people would go in and come out, they would touch that box and recite the words, remembering who they were and whose they were. Of course, he would use those words. What else? Then follow them up with the proscription to love God and love neighbor. Jesus presented them both as though they were inseparable, two sides of the same coin.

There are some variations of wording between Mark's account and the Old Testament. Mark has four dimensions of this love – heart and soul, mind and strength; the Deuteronomy text has only three – heart and soul and might. But we can understand the shift by remembering that Mark wants to make sure that Gentiles understand the totality of this commitment. To the Jew, the heart was the seat of both emotion or feeling and intellect. Greeks tended to divide the human emotion from the rational mind, so Mark makes sure we hear both heart and mind.

But for the most part, it is the same. Jesus reaches back and grabs a foundational statement and offers it up as an answer to the plea. And the scribe grins and claps his hands, not in appreciation of the scholar who passed the test, but in the joy of knowing that what was in his heart is truth. When Jesus sees this joy in agreement, he tosses out the phrase that transforms this whole event from a back-alley brawl to a glimpse into eternity. “You are not far from the kingdom of God” (12:34). Wow.

What we wouldn’t give for a statement like that from Jesus. “You are not far off,” Jesus tells us that is why he came, to seek those who are far off and bring them near. We want to be near; we want to know that we are close to the kingdom, close to the hope, close to the model for living that we are called to live – more than that, close to model for living that we long to live.

Mark tells us here that to get close, we have to live full out. We don’t hold back; we don’t keep a little in reserve. With all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, with all your strength. That’s the only thing Jesus wants from us – everything.]

There are certainly some complications to understanding the current state of the mission of the church. Covid has made this difficult for churches who were already beginning to make this transition. Plenty of churches and groups have managed with virtual gatherings, but as we learned last time around this year, it just isn’t the same. The missional church takes direct contact with one another to be efficient. Covid certainly complicated this and still provides some obstacles today as some people are more wary to try something new or return to something like church.

The other complication we have is not everything thinks the missional church is the future. There are plenty of communities thriving in more traditional, programmatic church models, but for how long will this last? In short, none of us can predict the future of the church, but one certain aspect is clear to me that the church lack’s a cohesive identity. You have some who devoutly argue the church is about developing moral character and ethical principles to guide their lives. Some would say we need to exclusively focus on the missional needs of the church by providing economic assistance and financial support to those in need. Some only view their faith as their ticket to heaven. Christianity has always been diverse and always meant a lot of different things to a lot of different people and to some degree it will always be this way. Yet, I think as an organization and denomination we need to define a little more clearly what it means to be Christian in the 21st century.

How do we become the missional church Jesus calls us to be? It is going to take an expansion of how we work together as denominations across cities and towns are going to have to come together to pool resources for community events and liturgical

traditions. It will take a strong concerted effort by both lay and clergy as membership and participation decline in both. How do we become the missional church Jesus calls us to be? We are going to have to be humble and confess our sins to the world. The church has hurt a lot of different people and I don't expect corporations or our federal government to hold out their hand to help as they spit on us, but the church is not either of those entities and the difference is the church's mission has been called a mission of love as they participate in the marginalization and condemnation of multiple social groups including other religions. You can't do both.

People are willing to understand nothing is perfect, but they don't want to keep feeling like they are being lied to when the church says on Sundays they love the world like Jesus did, but Monday through Saturday the church tells people how they are or aren't good enough. The church must return to its roots to serving people, just like Jesus sent the original disciples to go out and heal people, love people, support people, and spread the mission of the good news. If you feel scared or daunted by the task at hand, fear not, for there is undoubtedly always hope to be found. Even in the darkest corners of the world and even in the darkest moments in the midst of the storm, we must never give up hope for a new beginning, a new way of being.

In conclusion, it is time to understand church in a new way. Sundays are our time together where we get to support each other, care for one another, break bread and share stories, but Monday through Saturday is still church. It is just church in a different way. It's church when a coworker breaks down and confides something to you and you respond with grace and compassion without judgment. It's church when the person in front of you can't afford the last bit of their groceries and is trying to figure out what to put back, but you step in and give what you can to help them out. It's church when you feed stray cats and take care of those in need, it's church when you toil in the earth to feed others, it's church when you mold the young minds of our future in the classroom, it's church when you heal people through medicine and surgeries, and it's church when someone tries to tell you they are not good enough and you reach out your hand and say, "Fear not. Be not afraid. I'm here for you. You're good enough just as you are. How can I help?"

Let this be the Gospel of Jesus Christ as we go out into our homes and shared spaces this week. Let us be reminded the church does not end at the end of this hour, but it begins this new week of new beginnings and new problems to endure.