

**Introduction:** In the past, when the church talked about missions, it tended to talk about global work. The church got divided into “missionaries,” those who were willing to go to the world to share the Gospel, and the “senders,” those who stayed behind and supported missionaries through prayer, giving, and supplies. This definition of missions assumed the sending community already mostly knew the Gospel, and so the work being done at home was no longer about “mission” but about growing disciples and building a better Christian society. In recent decades, churches and mission specialists have been realizing that this was a faulty way of looking at Jesus’ great commission. In relegating missions only to something that certain called people did on the other side of the globe, we neglected to share that same love and care with our own communities. Did you know that in Logan County, a place that boasts an incredible amount of churches compared to the actual number of people who live here, that only roughly 20% of people are actually attending church on a Sunday morning? I imagine that the number of people who would say that they believe in God is much higher, but for various reasons there is a radical disconnect between stated beliefs and practice. Additionally, did you know that there are people living in our county without running water, or electricity, and on dirt floors? It’s not just in Appalachia, or Mexico, or Africa, it’s right here in our own backyard. I want to suggest this morning that while global missions is absolutely important, essential, and a calling from God, that mission begins where we are, right now. Based on that premise then, we are going to explore four complementary truths: First, we are called to be “in” the world. Second, we are called to be present and active participants in our communities. Third, we are called to seek the peace of our communities. And finally, we are called to share the gospel, not only with those who are like us, but also with those who are different.

**a. We are called to be “in” the world.**

**“We are all strangers in a strange land, longing for home, but not quite knowing what or where home is. We glimpse it sometimes in our dreams, or as we turn a corner, and suddenly there is a strange, sweet familiarity that vanishes almost as soon as it comes.” -Madeleine L’Engle**

We are called, as Christians, to be “in the world but not of the world.” Paul writes in Romans 12:2 <sup>“2</sup> Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God’s will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will.”

There has, in the Mennonite Church, in an effort to be holy and righteous, been a tendency to separate from the world. Rather than be “in the world but not of the world,” we focus so much

on the “not of” part so that we stop being “in.” Somehow, we need to work at striking a better balance.

Jesus lived the example of remaining righteous while also getting down in the dirt and grit of the earth. Paul outlines very clearly in **Philippians 2:5-8** that Jesus, in order to save us, gave up the privileges of being only God and took on human flesh and blood to be with us, and as both God and man was able to save us through His sacrifice on the cross.

But he didn’t stop at just becoming human. He also decided he would spend time with the mess of humanity, not with the religious elite, the righteous, or the quote unquote “holy,” but with those who really wore the scars of sin-transformed humanity on their sleeves. **Matthew 11:19** tells us: <sup>19</sup>The Son of Man came eating and drinking, and they say, ‘Look at this glutton and drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and of sinners!’ But wisdom is vindicated by her actions.”

He did this to show that God’s love, mercy, and salvation are for all people, not just the religious, but He also did this to serve as an example for how we are to live.

We are called to be in this world, not of this world, but in order to be missionaries in our own community we need to learn to commit to being “in” like Jesus was “in.”

**Transition:** If God has placed us here for a reason, and if mission begins where we are, then what does it mean to be a missionary in this place?

### **b. We are called to be present and active participants in our communities.**

In chapter 29 of Jeremiah, the prophet writes instructions to the leaders of the exiled Israelites in Jerusalem. He tells them that they will be held captive by the Babylonians for 70 years, so while they are there, they should continue living within the community they’ve been placed.

#### **Jeremiah 29:4-7**

<sup>4</sup>“Thus says the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel, to all the exiles whom I have sent into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon, <sup>5</sup>‘Build houses and live *in them*; and plant gardens and eat their produce. <sup>6</sup>‘Take wives and become the fathers of sons and daughters, and take wives for your sons and give your daughters to husbands, that they may bear sons and daughters; and multiply there and do not decrease. <sup>7</sup>‘*Seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the LORD on its behalf; for in its welfare you will have welfare.*’

Jeremiah’s advice was probably not received well by some who heard it. They had been forcibly removed from their homes by these foreign rulers who did not worship the same god, follow the same laws, or honor the same traditions that they did. They were God’s children,

and would've understandably expected immediate rescue. And now they are being told that their captivity would last a while so they should go on living life as usual as if nothing changed, and even that they should pray for and work towards goodness for their enemies! Why?

Two reasons. First, Jeremiah tells them that by working at God's peace for the city and for their enemies, that they would ultimately benefit. And secondly, I think that they were getting a glimpse into God's heart and desire for other, non-Israelite people to be able to be reconciled back to Him.

This idea of blessing the community around us through our proximity to them is explored further in Jesus' parables of salt and light found in **Matthew 5:13-16**:

<sup>13</sup> "You are the salt of the earth. But if the salt loses its saltiness, how can it be made salty again? It is no longer good for anything, except to be thrown out and trampled underfoot.

<sup>14</sup> "You are the light of the world. A town built on a hill cannot be hidden. <sup>15</sup> Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house. <sup>16</sup> In the same way, let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven.

Jesus tells us that Christians are to live in the world like Salt and Light, two incredibly important and indispensable elements in the daily lives of the Israelite people. But the reality is, salt and light don't work unless they are in close proximity to those things or people they are supposed to influence. If you had a plate of French fries, and a shaker of salt sitting next to it, no matter how close you move the shaker to the plate those fries aren't getting salted. For salt to work it needs shaken out and intermingled with the fries.

In the same way, if we hope to truly affect our communities for Christ, we need to be present and active; there is no power in shutting ourselves up in our houses or our churches and hoping that just maybe people might come to us. We are called to go out into the places we live and be up close and personal with the good news of Jesus.

**Transition:** Not only are we called to be present and active in those places that we live, but we are also called to actively seek the peace of our communities.

### **c. We are called to seek the peace of our communities**

#### **Jeremiah 29:7**

<sup>7</sup> Also, seek the peace and prosperity of the city to which I have carried you into exile. Pray to the LORD for it, because if it prospers, you too will prosper."

There is something really important that we need to consider and deal with in this verse. Jeremiah is telling the Israelites to seek the welfare of the city, not their own city, but the city of the enemies that have taken them captive. They weren't told to separate, to rebel, or to

complain bitterly about the circumstances surrounding them, but rather to seek what was best for those people there, and in doing so, they would also then receive blessings. This is significant because it seems to go against God's many previous commands for His people to remain separate from the nations around them, not to co-mingle or interact, for fear that they would start adopting pagan worship practices. It would also go against their natural human instincts to fight against the external oppressive forces. But God, through Jeremiah, was revealing to His people what he had always wanted from them. God's goal and desire was for His people Israel to be a light to the all the world. When they were first being established, they needed to be separate in order to really strengthen their faith against ungodly influences. However, they went too far, and rather than share their strengthened faith with others, they determined that nobody else deserved to know God. Through Jeremiah, God was challenging His people to rethink the ways that they would interact with others, and through the captivity, God was forcing them to be in proximity with people He desired to save.

To seek the peace of our communities, then, is to discover those areas desperately in need of Jesus, both the gospel of salvation and the physical calling to heal the sick clothe the naked, feed the hunger, and visit the prisoner. But it's not enough just to notice those areas; the faithful are then called to go into those places and radically transform them with the light of Christ.

**Transition:** This will mean that we will be called to be missionaries to those we are comfortable with, but also recognizing that there will be many in our communities who, like the Israelites, don't seem to fit our preconceived notions of who deserves the gospel and our time.

**d. We are called to share the gospel, not only with those who are like us, but also with those who are different.**

#### **Acts 1:8**

"But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you, and you will be My witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."

If you were to look at an ancient map of Biblical lands, Judea and Samaria are two regions that are literally touching each other. Samaria factored fairly heavily in the life and ministry of Jesus; it lay smack dab in between Nazareth, where Jesus was raised and lived, and Jerusalem, the center of Jewish worship where Jesus would eventually go to die. John chapter 4 tells the famous story of Jesus meeting a Samaritan woman at a well on the way from Jerusalem to Galilee and offering her living water. And in Luke Chapter 10, Jesus tells the story of the Good Samaritan and uses the Samaritan character as an example of a good neighbor to the shame of the Jewish religious elite.

What's significant about the inclusion of Samaria in Jesus' list for places to witness isn't just because they are Judea's next door neighbors, although that's certainly a part of it. What is most significant is the contentious and negative relationship between the Jews and Samaritans. Samaritans came from the Israelite people but had allowed the true faith to be warped by pagan influences. Jews viewed Samaritans as a disgrace and someone to be despised, so much so that many would rather take the longer route around Samaria when traveling from Judea to Galilee than directly going through their land. The bitterness of the Samaritan-Jewish rivalry could be compared, somewhat to Ohio State-Michigan, or West Liberty-Mechanicsburg, or Bellefontaine-Indian Lake.

But Jesus, through his life, teachings, death and resurrection, wanted to make perfectly clear to His disciples that the Gospel was now available to anyone who would call on the name of Jesus, even the Samaritans.

That's why it's so important for us today to see the purpose of Jesus' inclusion of Samaria on this list. In doing so, he was saying that the Good News isn't meant just for us, or people like us, or even people we like, but it's also for those different than us, those with whom we don't agree, or can't get along with, or can't even imagine being a part of the Kingdom of God. I wonder who are your Samaritans? Who are the people in this community, in your neighborhood, in the places you inhabit, that you would feel most uncomfortable sharing the Gospel with? Being a missionary where you are means sharing the Gospel with everyone, not just those we consider worthy. Remember, God considers all people worthy of hearing and receiving the good news.

### **Conclusion:**

Similar to the Israelites, we are a people in exile. The world has been transformed by sin into a state that God never intended. And yet, God has called us to be missionaries in this place. So, if we have been put by God in this particular place at this particular time for a particular reason, what might that be?

**Let's consider for a moment:** What are some of the prominent areas in our community, right now, that need the light of Christ?

-People that don't know the gospel

-Drug Addiction: I can't read local news without seeing a story about an overdose or an arrest related to drugs in Logan County. It's bad, and it's getting worse. How has the church been working in this area? What are we doing to address the problems?

-Mental Illness: If the recent shooting at WL-S, the suicides at Triad, and the closing of Adriel have taught me anything, it's that Mental Illness is an enormous burden for people in our area and is woefully under addressed. Not that organizations like CCI aren't doing their best to work with people, but the reality is that the need is exponentially greater than the current ability to meet the need. How is the church offering light into this often times misunderstood and maligned group of people in our community?

-Isolation: What people and groups of people are isolated in our community? Who doesn't have the benefit of an extensive family or support network? And in what way could we provide support and community for people who might not have it elsewhere?

\*The last time we talked extensively about mission in the church, we felt God leading us toward renting a space in town so that we can really be in and amongst the people we hope to minister to. The Grove has now been open for fifteen months, and we have seen all sorts of people and organizations come through our doors. We've been doing good work, but as we continue into our second full year as an organization, are we continuing to live out God's mission and vision for the church in this community through our efforts? And have we, as an entire church, embraced this ministry as a physical extension of Oak Grove into West Liberty, not just this ministry of a few involved people? How have you participated in this visible element of Oak Grove in West Liberty, and how might our presence through this space be able to work with some of the areas in our community that need the light of Christ?

I want to close with the Psalm that was read for our Call to Worship as a reminder that any missional work we hope to do, which begins at home, must be rooted in prayer to the God whom we serve. **Psalm 122:6-9**

<sup>6</sup>Pray for the peace of Jerusalem: "May those who love you be secure. <sup>7</sup>May there be peace within your walls and security within your citadels." <sup>8</sup>For the sake of my family and friends, I will say, "Peace be within you." <sup>9</sup>For the sake of the house of the LORD our God, I will seek your prosperity."