

The Patient Missional Church

This morning I want you all to help me with an experiment. During the sermon, we are going to try to grow a plant together. I've got the soil, I've got seeds, I've got water, there's sun coming in through the windows. Let's see what we can do! Now, I've only got about 20 minutes before the sermon is over, so we're going to have to work extra hard to get this thing growing, but I think if we all chip in a little bit, we can do it! (Put soil from bucket into other container, plant seed, add water.)

Life is busy, right? And it seems to be getting busier all of the time. Even though we each have 168 hours in the week, and taking away 56 hours for sleep and 40 hours for work, we are left with 72, it still seems like there are never enough hours in the day. Because of this, we really can't afford to waste time, which means we expect the hours we do have to be productive and have results. Unfortunately, I think our expectations for high productivity and quick results in order not to waste our precious time have had the negative effect that we no longer have the patience for things that take time. How many would rather watch a movie than read a book? Would rather do something quick and active than put together a puzzle? Add 5 or 10 miles per hour to whatever speed we're driving to get to the place we're going just a little bit faster?

As we continue our transition from a church that does mission as one activity among many to a church who embraces mission as our identity and the lens through which we look at

everything, we have to get comfortable with the reality that this will be a long process. Somebody once told me that real change in the church is like turning the course of a cruise ship, it takes a while. However, if we believe that missional identity is who God has called us to be, and we are willing to accept that the payoff might not come quickly, then we need to embrace the virtue of patience.

To do mission is to take part in an activity, to be missional is to embrace a lifestyle of being sent by God to the people we meet where we live, work, and play. Being missional means that we stop seeing ourselves as simply church attenders, or even church members, and instead realize that God has called each and every one of us who is here today to be missionaries right now in our own backyards. God did not create a mission for the church, he created the church for mission.

This morning, let's consider for a moment the mission God has made the church for, the method for fulfilling that mission, our role in that mission, and what it then might mean for us to be a patient missional church.

1) The Mission: GO, MAKE, TEACH

Let's consider the Mission that God has created for the church: what is it, and how should we do it? According to Jesus' words found in Matthew 28:18-20, which we often refer to as the Great Commission, we are to do three things: go, make disciples, and teach Jesus' words. That's it, it's that simple.

Matthew 28:18-20

¹⁸ Then Jesus came to them and said, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. ¹⁹ Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, ²⁰ and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.”

First, we go. Go doesn't necessarily imply that we have to go somewhere different than where we already are. Jesus even called for his disciples to witness in the very town and area that they happened to live in. In Luke's account of the Great Commission found in Acts 1:8, Jesus tells his disciples “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.” What he is saying to them, geographically, is that would share about Jesus with others in Jerusalem, the city they were currently in, Judea, which is the region they were currently in, Samaria, which was the next region over, and to the very ends of the earth. To translate these instructions over to us today, Jesus might tell us that we are to be his witnesses in West Liberty, in Logan and Champaign counties, in Ohio, in Michigan, in the United States, and to the ends of the Earth. We are called to go into all of those places. For those of us here today, we have been called to go into our own communities, our own neighborhoods, the places that we live, work and play.

Second, we make disciples of Jesus. This means that through our words and our actions, we lead others along the path of following Jesus teaching and showing them what it means to model our lives after his. This means so much more than to just getting someone to make a decision to say “yes” to Jesus, although that is part of it. Discipleship is the long-term, active process of following after Jesus, so to make disciples is to be committed to the people in our neighborhoods long term.

Third, we teach others Jesus’ command. Really, this is bundled in with the second piece of our mission, in that teaching others what Jesus was all about, we are also making them into disciples.

Okay, I’m not seeing any change in the plant yet. We might need to water the seed a little more. I tried the first time, would somebody be willing to come up and add a little more water? Thanks!

So really, it’s that simple: Go, Make, Teach. How then is the church going to live out this mission? What is the method God gives us?

2) The Method: ROOTEDNESS

The method God gives to the mission is, in some ways, as simple as the mission itself. How are we to GO, MAKE, and TEACH: by rooting ourselves deeply in our neighborhoods. In Jeremiah 29, the prophet is writing to the people of God, Israel, who have been taken into captivity by the Babylonians. Their

expectations would have been that God was going to kill their enemies and lead them back to their homeland. However, that was not God's plan for them. Instead, he wanted them to root down into their new neighborhoods in Babylon, to build houses, plant gardens, marry, and have children. All of these suggestions indicate that God wanted them to really settle there. Not only were they to settle, but they were to pray for and seek the peace of the Babylonians because, as he tells them, if Babylon has peace, then they will have peace.

Jeremiah 29:4-7

4 This is what the Lord Almighty, the God of Israel, says to all those I carried into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon: 5 "Build houses and settle down; plant gardens and eat what they produce. 6 Marry and have sons and daughters; find wives for your sons and give your daughters in marriage, so that they too may have sons and daughters. Increase in number there; do not decrease. 7 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."

Jeremiah's words would have been incredibly radical to the Israelites; they did not want to root down, they wanted to leave. But God knew that for them to have any positive impact on the people around them, they would need to be committed to the place for the long term.

Let's also consider the life of Jesus. What do we know about Jesus between the time he was born and when he began his ministry at 30? Luke tells us a brief story in Luke 2 about Jesus

and his parents going to the temple for Passover, but other than that we know nothing of Jesus' growing up. In Matthew 13, after Jesus had begun his ministry, the gospel writer tells us that Jesus returned to his hometown to teach, and the crowds were asking each other "Isn't this the carpenter's son?" This tells me that before he began preaching, teaching, and performing miracles, Jesus lived a pretty ordinary life. He probably spent his time learning to be a carpenter, getting to know his neighbors, and studying the law. I think that this unknown chapter in his life is significant, in that it shows us the care Jesus put into getting to know the people and place he had been sent to minister in and to.

Nope, nothing yet. I'm wonder if it's getting enough sunlight, I'm going to move it a little closer to the window. Let's see what happens.

Transition: So the mission is GO, MAKE, and TEACH, and the method is ROOTEDNESS. What then is our role in all of this?

3) Our Role: Gardeners

In Chapter 3 of his letter to the Corinthians, Paul writes the church to correct an issue that had come up; people within the church had divided into two groups, some saying that they followed Paul, others saying that they followed Apollos, Paul's associate who had helped establish the Corinthian church. Paul reminds them that they do not follow any man, but that they follow God because he is the ultimate authority and rule. And to help them understand why they should claim to follow God

and not those who teach about God, Paul uses the interesting analogy of a garden. This is what he says in **1**

Corinthians 3:5-9

⁵ What then is Apollos? What is Paul? Servants through whom you believed, as the Lord assigned to each. ⁶ I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth. ⁷ So neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything, but only God who gives the growth. ⁸ He who plants and he who waters are one, and each will receive his wages according to his labor. ⁹ For we are God's fellow workers. You are God's field, God's building.

In a garden, we can plant a seed, fertilize and water the soil, and weed consistently, but ultimately we don't make the plants grow. We create the right conditions, but it's by God's hand that the garden grows. In that same way, we can teach others about Jesus, we can model for them a Christian life, and we can pray for them, we can create all of the right conditions for a person to become a disciple, but it is ultimately their decision and God's calling. God calls us to be the gardeners and to faithfully tend to those people he has placed around us, but He is the master of the garden, and it is by his work in people's hearts that they come to him.

Transition: So the mission is to GO, MAKE, and TEACH, the method is rootedness, and we are the gardeners and caretakers of this mission and method. But, in our current culture which expects high productivity and quick results, ROOTEDNESS and GARDEN TENDING are slow, long processes that require patience, and ultimately, we are not in control of the outcome.

SO, what does it mean for us to be a PATIENT MISSIONAL CHURCH?

Let me check on the seed again. Nothing. I'm starting to get a little nervous, there isn't a whole lot of time in the service left; I don't know if this experiment is going to work. And also, I'm beginning to suspect this might be y'all's fault. I've been doing most of the work here, I'm wondering if you even care about this plant?

4) The Patient Missional Church

Being the people of God on mission is not a sprint, it's a marathon. And like a marathon, there will be moments where things feel great, and we're excited, and our adrenaline is pulsing, and things seem to be happening, and we are sure we can do this forever. And there will also be moments when we can't seem to catch our breath, or keep up, or we just hit that wall and everything feels so hard, or nothing seems to be happening. These moments can be difficult and discouraging. So what do we do when we're feeling discouraged about the missional results of the church? Paul offers the church hope and comfort to the church in **Galatians 6:9**. *"Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up."*

Teddy Roosevelt once said "Nothing in the world is worth having or worth doing unless it means effort, pain, difficulty...I have never in my life envied a human being who led an easy life. I have envied a human being who led an easy life. I have

envied a great many people who led difficult lives and led them well.”

Laboring for the kingdom of God, following his missional calling, will not always produce fruit right away, and sometimes it might feel like the end is not worth the struggle; but God promises to bless our work with an abundant harvest if we remain faithful. And ultimately, the results will be better, stronger, and more rewarding when we put real work and effort in rather than seeking the quick and easy. But when the sun's high in the sky, and the temperature is hot, and the weeds are thick, it doesn't always feel like we're making much of a difference. So let's consider an example of the faithful missional church and how its patient witness led to explosive growth of the kingdom of God. Let's look at the early church. We know in church history, in the year 312, the Emperor Constantine made Christianity the legal religion of the empire and all persons were “made” into Christians, which resulted in the biggest mass conversion in the history of Christianity. But we also know that before that there was a substantial Christian presence in the empire. So how did they do it? Surprisingly, there is no evidence that the churches had an organized missions program, or a good catchy slogan. Alan Kreider writes that “The growth was odd...it simply happened.” (Kreider 9) He notes that early Christian writers did not produce a single work on evangelism and instead focused on the life and worship of the church, and even more surprising, they did not use their worship services as a way to attract new believers. In fact, after the emperors began persecuting and killing believers,

they began to meet in secret and did not tell outsiders what happened in their worship services. So, how did the early church grow, if they weren't encouraging their members to evangelize or having attractational worship services to draw unbelievers in? They lived lives so extraordinarily different from people around them, while at the same time living in the culture, so that others would ask why they were the way they were and choose to go in that same way. Kreider writes: "The (early) Christians believed that God is patient and that Jesus visibly embodied patience. And they concluded that they, trusting in God, should be patient-not controlling events, not anxious or in a hurry, and never using force to achieve their ends."

So, what might it look like for us today to exhibit that same kind of "strange patience", as Justin Martyr calls it, of the early church?

One of the ways to think about it, is to consider what it means to be a Patient Missional Church, a church that sees its primary purpose as mission to where God has rooted them, vs. an Impatient attractational church, a church most concerned with getting bodies in the building.

Patient Missional Church

Committed to a place and a people

Forms long-term relationships

Invitation to a relationship with Jesus

Perseveres in spite of setbacks and obstacles

Plants roots deeply in the neighborhood

Goes to where the people are

Steadfastness (neighboring) is encouraged

Focused on Authentic Discipleship

Driven by God's Mission

Impatient Attractional

Changes focuses and priorities often

People are projects to "get saved" and move on

Invitation to a church building

Gets frustrated at "lack of results"

Stays fortified in the building

Tries to draw people in

Busyness (events and programs) encouraged

Focused on Church as Product

Driven by Consumer-Need

You know, I don't think that this plant is going to come up today. In fact, I think it's fair to say it was a ridiculous experiment, to think we could grow anything in the span of 20 minutes or so. No matter how much water we gave the plant, how much light it got, whether we fertilized it, even if we all came and gently rubbed the side of the pot, it wasn't going to grow. Because for plant growth to happen, it needed that one secret ingredient that we could never force: time. And we then would need that one fruit of the spirit that we've been talking about all morning: patience. In the same way that this experiment was bound to fail because we set it up for failure by giving it impossible time constraints, Kingdom growth in the missional church of God will fail if we come at it with impatient expectations. If we are to be the church God calls us to be, we have to patiently go, make, and teach, rooting ourselves in our neighborhoods and taking our roles as gardeners seriously, remembering that Kingdom growth is ultimately in God's hands.