

Introduction:

When I was in college, every year we had “mission week.” During that week, there were special speakers who shared about the importance of overseas missions, how the fields were ripe for the harvest but the workers were few, and how important our generation was going to be for the future of the church. They usually talked about the 10-40 window, which is a section of the world located between the 10 and 40 degrees latitude from the equator that is the most unchristian place on the planet. And at the end of the week they would have all of the future missionaries do something to show that they were dedicated to foreign missions, like put a paper star on the wall or come to the floor. And then the rest of us would pray over them.

Every year they would focus on the distinction between the missionaries and the rest of us. And I was always bothered by the way that they divided the room into “goers” and “senders.” “Goers” were obviously those with the courage to take the gospel into a foreign, possibly hostile culture; “senders” were those who would remain in the U.S. and support the goers through prayer and financial offerings.

One of the primary Scriptures they used to support this classification was **Romans 10:14-15**

*¹⁴ How, then, can they call on the one they have not believed in? And how can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone preaching to them? ¹⁵ And how can anyone preach **unless they are sent**? As it is written: “How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!”*

To the mission department at my college, to be sent meant that there were senders, who obviously were those NOT going on mission. And “senders” were always treated like second class Christians; we were the water boys while the “goers” were the first-string squad.

For many years, this was the working assumption of missions; only certain people were called to it, and it was always in a foreign field. Today, I’m going to challenge that assumption in two ways. First, we are all missionaries, sent by God to share the good news with the world. Second, the mission field is not only foreign, nor does it always look like translating the Bible for indigenous tribes in Papua New Guinea or sneaking the Bible into China or even providing medicines for the sick in Haiti; in fact, God has called us to be missionaries right where he has planted us in our neighborhoods; we are therefore called to be up close and personal missionaries with the people who live all around us.

1) Missional Calling-We are all missionaries:

Missionaries, as classically defined, are those people who place all of their faith in God and travel to a foreign nation to share the Gospel at risk of life and limb. For many of us, then, when we hear “missions” or “missionary” we feel automatically exempt from this vocation because we feel no special calling to leave the United States. This is an unfortunate and unbiblical view of the mission field because what it has done is caused the American church to look elsewhere when considering who might need the Gospel instead of gazing in her own backyard. We’ve assumed that we live in a Christian nation and so the only ones who need Jesus must be overseas. The reality, however, is not only is America not a Christian nation, but she is swiftly sliding in the same direction as post-Christian Europe. And beyond that, Jesus never meant for Christians to subdivide between the real “players” and “cheerleaders” when it comes to missional work.

Our sermon series is “God into all the world” which comes from Jesus’ final commission to His disciples, found in Matthew and Mark. In **Mark 16:15**, Jesus says, “Go into all the world and preach the gospel to all creation.” This is His missional call to the church, all of the church, that we are to go into all of the world; Christians have been commissioned to share the Gospel whether or not we vocationally identify as a “missionary.”

In **John 20:21**, Jesus shares that the mission God has given to Him is the same mission He is giving to us.

²¹ Again Jesus said, “Peace be with you! As the Father has sent me, I am sending you.”

Just as Jesus was sent by the Father into the world, we now are sent by Jesus into the world to bring the saving news that this life is not all there is, that there is a God who loves us and wants to be with us if we would only choose to be with Him. We are sent missionaries. You should have received a “Hello my name is” sticker on the way into the sanctuary. At the end of each pew there are sharpie markers. I want you all to pass the sharpies around and write “Missionary” on the sticker and attach it to yourself, as a reminder that this “sentness” isn’t a single calling for a select “holy” few, but it is something that God expects from all of us.

2) Missional Calling-Up Close and Personal

This second point really hinges on the ways in which God has chosen to show his love to us through Jesus. Think about this; if God exists and we believe he is the master, creator and sustainer of the universe, what then does He owe His creation? Nothing, he owes us nothing. But He chooses to love us deeply, and so He communicates with us. Now God could choose to make Himself known to us in more impersonal ways; He could send an angel, or a prophet, which He has done before, or he

could text or snapchat with us, which would get the message across without really getting His hands dirty. But instead, He has chosen at different points in history to be physically present with us. In the beginning when God created everything, Genesis records that He walked in the garden with Adam and Even. And when God rescued the Israelites from the Egyptians, he appeared to Moses on Mt. Sinai and personally gave the Ten Commandments, and all of the people gathered could see Him present. And when the Israelites wandered the desert, He was with them in a pillar of smoke and fire. And then, in the ultimate act of love, God decided to come down and be with His people as His Son Jesus in the form of a flesh and blood person, face to face with the people He came to save. Eugene Peterson writes this beautifully poetic description of how God became present to us in Jesus in his paraphrase of the Bible, **The Message, John 1:14 (The Message)**. ¹⁴ *The Word became flesh and blood, and moved into the neighborhood.*"

I want you to really hold onto that image of Jesus coming to earth and moving into our neighborhood. No longer is he that enormous all-powerful deity living separate from His people, but He came and rented that duplex down the street. What does this verse say about the character of God? And if we are called to be like Jesus and are sent like Jesus was sent, what does this say about the nature of our missional work?

The word that sometimes gets used to describe Jesus' physical presence is as God "incarnate." "Incarnate" is a Latin word that literally means "in the flesh." Jesus is the living breathing God with skin, bones and hair.

Jesus is God "incarnate" sent into the world because of God's love; He chose not to simply send a message of love, but to himself be and become love in the world to us.

He became a real, flesh and blood person to us. Someone that could be touch, could laugh, weep and be injured. In John 3:16-17, Jesus testifies to those listening that God wanted to commune with His people in a holy, intimate way by descending from His godly heights and becoming human, which demonstrates his love and his power through humility.

John 3:16-27

¹⁶ For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. ¹⁷ For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him. ¹⁸ Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because they have not believed in the name of God's one and only Son.

Jesus is God incarnate, in the flesh, sent into the world to save God's people for Himself. And we are called to be like Jesus,

we are sent just like Jesus was sent. So we too are called to be missionaries of incarnation, in the flesh. Just like Jesus took on human form and moved into the neighborhood, we too have been placed by God in our neighborhoods in order to share the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

Brisco and Ford, in their book “Missional Essentials,” refers to this missional-incarnational ministry as “proximity” and “presence.” I am going to refer to it as being “up close and personal.” Being “in the flesh” missionaries to our neighborhoods demands that we consider the closeness of the people around us. What is our mission field, according to the neighborhood we live in? We should also be asking, according to proximity or closeness, what is the “neighborhood” of Oak Grove? Though we have members and attenders from all over Logan and Champaign Counties, God has placed our church in proximity to West Liberty in order to be Jesus “in the flesh” to that community.

Personal, or presence, then asks us not only to whom are we to be missionaries, but how are we to be missionaries to those people? As Dick has shared, an older understanding of church and missions was the expectation that we would establish Christian outposts in the world and unsaved people would flock to them. Like “Field of Dreams” people and churches believed that “If you build it, they will come.” Our culture is largely

shifting away from the church being a center of the community, so this method of “missions” is no longer relevant. Beyond that, the expectation that as missionaries, people should be coming to us is unbiblical. There is nothing in Jesus’ life and ministry that suggests that he expected people to come to him. Rather, we see Jesus going to the poor, the sinner, the marginalized, in their territory, and sharing the gospel with them.

If we hope to reach our neighborhoods today with Jesus’ love, we need to cast off the old idea of church as a stationary outpost and instead embrace incarnational missions in our communities. Eric Miller, one of the pastors of Journey Church in South Hutchinson, Kansas said about this:

“If the only thing that we’re doing is to reach folks that are different from us is to have our doors open and say “welcome,” we are asking people who don’t yet know Christ to be the missionaries. We are asking them to do the hard work of crossing the boundaries to be with us.”

To be personal, then, is not to build our church fortresses and wait in them for the lost masses to show up; instead, it means that in our closeness with our neighbors, we will also get personal with them. We will get to know them. Who are they? What are they like? Who is their family? And then beyond some of the perfunctory “get to know you” questions, we can also learn to identify with them on a deeper level. What are

their joys, hopes and fears? What of those do we have in common? Instead of focusing in on the things that make us different, how can we relate to them as human beings, as God's fellow creation?

Conclusion:

So, we are all called to be missionaries, and as missionaries, God has placed us here to share the good news of Jesus with our neighbors.

How well do you know your neighbors? How do you connect with your neighbors?

- Be Outside

- Walk around

- What ever happened to sitting on the front porch?

- Neighborhood cookout

"Neighbors" extends beyond just where you physically live. Eric Miller asked the question, "where do you live, work and play?" How have you brought Jesus into your neighborhood? How have you brought Him into your workplace? What about in the areas of play? Where do you go out to eat? Do you get coffee? Where do you regularly shop? How about the gym? Or are your kids involved in sports or extra-curricular activities? These are all golden opportunities to get to know people up close and

personal, to share your lives together, to find out what they dream of, what they love, what they fear, and to share Christ's love and light with them both through the message of the gospel and how you treat them.

I went to Wal-Mart the other day to purchase supplies for our Youth Group Kick-Off coming up this afternoon. I'm sure I looked like a crazy person because I had about 15 bottles of dish detergent and a bunch of s'mores supplies. But it gave me an opportunity to strike up a conversation with the woman in front of me in line and share a little bit about what I was going to be doing with the supplies. How can we better notice when opportunities come around to engage our neighbors?

As a church, we have been placed in the West Liberty neighborhood. In what ways have we as a church learned to be "incarnate" or "in the flesh" in the community, beyond just inviting people to come to our place? We are present at the Food Pantry, and we participate in the Thanksgiving parade. We have a lemon-shake up stand at the Labor Day Festival too. One of the challenges that we face being a part of a church that is located out of town is that there is a significant barrier for people to come out to our church, and when we expect that of them we really aren't acting as sent missionaries being "up close and personal," but instead falling back on the old idea of a fortress safe from the world. I would challenge us in the

coming months to consider more ways in which our church can be Jesus incarnate in the community, to be the hands and feet of Christ outside of these walls, and to really embrace our “sentness” as missionaries in this neighborhood.

John 20:21

²¹ Again Jesus said, “Peace be with you! As the Father has sent me, I am sending you.”

We are all missionaries, sent into this neighborhood to be up close and personal with others in the name of Jesus. The question is not whether or not this is true, the question is will you live into God’s calling for your life and whether or not we will be the church God has commanded us to be.