

“Baptism and the Purpose of the Church”

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Mark 1:4-11

At the request of E&R Church's leadership, these next three Sundays I will be looking at the Purpose of the Church and it's ministry.

Mind you it's not just the purpose of THIS particular church that we will be discussing, but the purpose of the church in all it's forms. All churches have but one purpose and this purpose applies to every church. Churches might be different in their expression of the purpose. Churches might differ in how they worship, how they're structured, the music they play the languages they speak, whether they baptize only adults or baptize adults and children. What their clergy wear or even if they have clergy.

In the 1950s a book was written by two scholars who were members of what would become the United Church of Christ. Richard Niebuhr was a teacher at Yale and a member of the Evangelical side of what was then the Evangelical and Reformed Church. Daniel Day Williams was a Professor at Union Theological Seminary in New York City and was a member of the Congregational Church which joined the Evangelical and Reformed denomination in 1957 to create the United Church of Christ.

They were asked to write a book on the Purpose of the Church and its Ministry. The Seminaries or teaching institutions across the nation requested such a book from these learned gentlemen. These theological schools of divinity wanted definitive answers to the questions what kind of church and what kind of ministry ought they be preparing these young students who come to them?

Niebuhr and Williams started by taking a look at the statements of purpose that already existed among Seminaries. They were many and they were various.

The theological schools tend to define their objectives in such phrases as these:

- "spreading and deepening the influence of Christianity;
- promoting the "interest of religion and morals";
- "training Christian leaders who are wholeheartedly committed to Jesus Christ and able to share his gospel in all its relevance through the Church and all agencies of God's kingdom";
- "to provide leaders capable of bringing to others the saving knowledge of God in Christ Jesus";
- "training leaders competent in this age to interpret truth and to direct activities of the Church in its related institutions at home and abroad";

- "the preparation of men [in those days, it was almost all men going to seminary] for the ministry of the Word and the sacraments."

On and on like that.

Williams and Niebuhr decided that things were simpler than that. And by simplifying the central purpose of the Church, they might find the One Church amidst the many different expressions of the Church. They ask the question, "is there one over arching goal that would apply to all churches regardless of their history or their style" whether they use words like "mass" or "services" or name their denominational officers "bishops" or "conference ministers" or whether they call their clergy, "reverend" or "Pastor" or "mister" or "mrs" or "miss" or "mz."

Is there one over arching purpose to which all Churches could ascribe.

These were bold men and they said, "There must be. Or the church could never be one in the Lord."

Is there one principle on which all churches would agree?

They came up with this. It is in the simple language of Jesus himself. The purpose of the church and its ministry is the "increase in the world [they said 'among men' but they meant the world] **The increase in the world of the love of God and neighbor.**

In Jesus' day there were, as I've noted many times, 613 laws in the first five books of our Bible. Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy. The Rabbis have noted that 248 of them are positive "You shall honor your father and mother..." You shall remember the sabbath day and keep it holy. And 365 are negative, "You shall not kill," "You shall not steal" or one of my favorites, "You shall not wear two kinds of cloth at the same time."

Jesus cut his way through all the technicalities and confusions. He was asked by the Pharisees which of these 613 laws should they follow in order to inherit eternal life. "Or perhaps, Jesus, you could summarize all the laws and commandment for us." And Jesus said, "perhaps you could tell me?" And the Pharisee, said, 'You must love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your soul, all your strength, and all your mind.' And, 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' "

Right! Jesus says. Do this and you will live.

The Pharisees get a follow-up question, don't they? "Uh, Jesus, just wonderin', ah, who, exactly IS my neighbor? I mean how far does my neighborhood extend."

And Jesus told a parable, an illustration. And the illustration is what we have come to call the "Parable of the Good Samaritan."

You know very well the story. It's depicted in the window on the other side of that wall. A Jewish man is beaten and left for dead on the side of the road. A priest came

along and “passed by on the other side.” So likewise a Levite or temple assistant “Passed by on the other side.”

But then came by a Samaritan. In the some translations the adjective “despised” is added to this person’s ethnic and religious heritage. A “despised” Samaritan. For Jews and Samaritans did not get along. In fact, they were enemies. This Samaritan saw him, had compassion on him, bound up his wounds and took him to an Inn and paid for two days stay and said that when he returns in a few days, he will pay whatever other costs the Innkeeper incurs in the care of this stranger.

Which of these three, Jesus asks, was a neighbor to this man? The Pharisee agrees that it was the Samaritan. Not just the guy next door, or the people you like. But even those of different ethnic origins, and *especially* those of ethnic origins with which “our kind of people” have had disagreements.

The Pharisee says, perhaps a bit reluctantly, “It was the Samaritan who was a neighbor to the man left for dead on the side of the road.”

And Jesus says, “Go and do likewise.”

Therein lies the sole purpose of the Church and its ministry. The church may do many, many things and different churches may do many, many things differently, but it first and foremost of all, must increase

in the world

the love of God and neighbor.

And some churches have taken that movement of love seriously and incorporated it into their own statements of purpose.

One church featured in the book, *The Simple Church* by Eric Geiger and Thom S. Rainer the statement of purpose for the church is quite simply this, at this church, they say, we are about “loving God, loving people and serving the world.”

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Eric Geiger and Thom Rainer and their team visited the pastor of that church and asked him about that statement of purpose and it turns out that it was developed out of a crisis. In earlier time, this church discovered that people joined the church, but the attrition rate was just as high as the joining rate. The back door was as big as the front door. The church was not growing. People were not sticking around. This was a busy Church. It had many programs, groups to join. In the face of the loss of members, they thought that maybe they should have more groups and more events.

Still, people were not sticking around and worse, people were not growing spiritually.

The church decided that they must claim an old dream for the church.

Make disciples rather than just church members.

The church stole that idea from Jesus Christ. Eric Geiger says, "A plagiarized biblical vision is always a good thing."

This vision or statement of purpose is from the risen Lord who said in Matthew 28:19 and 20

Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, to the close of the age.

Disciples are not super human or super pious folks. They are folks just like the rest of us. They only do one other thing. They meet together and pray together about how to increase in the world the love of God and the love of neighbor as themselves.

They learn more deeply how to love God through careful study and prayer. Sometimes they hit and sometimes they miss. Sometimes they stumble and sometimes they walk upright. But mostly they just struggle with what it means to love God in Christ and their neighbor as they love themselves.

Then they seek out opportunities to love the least, the lost and the lonely.

To put it simply, a disciple is one who is disciplined in

Loving God.

Loving others.

Serving the World.

Next week, I'll take on the issue of how the church can develop disciples. What does a discipleship program look like? What, for that matter does a disciple look like?