

## ***“Mission Impossible”***

*John 17:13-23*

First Presbyterian Church, Corpus Christi, TX

Rev. Charles S. Blackshear • February 22, 2015

Years ago there was a television series called *Mission Impossible*. The show would always begin with the hero, Mr. Phelps, playing a recorded message that explained the dire situation that could only be solved by the Impossible Mission Force or IMF for short. The voice on the message would always explain how dangerous the mission would be and then say, “if you or any member of your team is captured or killed, the Secretary will disavow any knowledge of your actions,” and then add, “this message will self-destruct in five seconds.”

Somehow, the IMF, with all of their skill, disguises, and most importantly their technological gadgets, would pull off the impossible and save the day. Well guess what. Like Mr. Phelps and the Impossible Mission Force, you and I have been given a mission. Our mission, however, comes from God. The mission: undo the effects of sin and reconcile this broken world to God. For you and me, that’s truly an impossible mission. There’s nothing you and I can do to fix our own broken relationship with God, much less fix other people’s. But the good news is that with God, everything is possible. God is able to fix what we have broken. And he chooses to use us in the process.

For the past few weeks we have been laying out a vision for the kind of church we should be. This is not *my* vision for the church. It’s God’s vision for what we should be doing as followers of Jesus and it comes right out of the Scriptures. It begins with the verse we have been memorizing. Let’s say it together: “They devoted themselves to the apostles teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.”

There are five core values, five things that characterize devoted followers of Jesus. First and foremost, disciples worship. When we have a proper understanding of who we are and who God is, we can’t help but worship. When we think about what he has done for us in Christ,

reconciling us to himself, forgiving us, how could we do anything but fall to our knees.

There was a businessman from up north who was traveling in the south and he stopped for breakfast in a diner in Georgia. He noticed on the menu something called “grits.” He didn’t know what that was so he asked the waitress, “what’s a grit?” She answered, “Honey, they don’t come by themselves.” We need to connect to other disciples in deep, meaningful relationships. Christians don’t come by themselves.

Last week Brian talked about the third core value for followers of Christ, which is spiritual growth. Living things need to grow. When our children are little we measure them and record their height, either in a book or right there on the wall. Sometimes it’s frustrating because they only seem to grow right after you buy them new pants or shoes. But if your child wasn’t growing you would be concerned. As a Christian you should be growing in your faith, growing in your love for God and for other people, and growing in your knowledge of the Bible. If you can’t look at your life and point to spiritual growth then it’s time to ask why not and do something about it.

One way to know if you are growing in your faith is your desire to serve. That’s what we want to talk about today. The first thing we need to know about serving is that we don’t serve because we feel obligated to do so. We don’t volunteer because we feel guilty. I am not going to try to make you feel guilty so that you sign up to do more things around the church. If I agree to serve because I feel guilty about it, then I will begin to resent the other people who don’t feel as guilty and so aren’t serving. Or maybe I begin to feel self-righteous about my service compared to others. Serving Christ is a matter of the heart and it flows from our relationship with Jesus and with other Christians. If I am worshiping God, connecting with other believers and growing in my faith, I

will want to minister to other people.

I think one of the things that really holds us back from the kind of service God wants us to do is that our understanding of church and of our own roles is limited. Many of us have grown up with the expectation that we attend worship, we give when the offering plate is passed, and we occasionally sign up to help out around the church when we have time. But the heavy duty work of ministry is left to professionals like pastors or missionaries. That's not at all what we find in the Bible.

Ephesians 4 says, "Christ gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God." Notice that the work of those called into full-time ministry is not to carry out the mission. It's to "equip the saints (that's you) for the work of ministry." If you claim to be a follower of Jesus, you have a job to do. You are a part of God's mission to the world.

There's a guy named Alan Hirsch who writes a lot about the missional church. He writes, "A proper understanding of missional begins with recovering a missionary understanding of God. By his very nature God is a 'sent one' who takes the initiative to redeem his creation." God's nature is to send. In order to redeem his creation he sent his son Jesus. In the gospel of John alone there are nearly forty references to Jesus being sent. We find many of them in the passage we're studying today. Apart from that sending, you and I have no hope.

Just as God the Father sends the Son and God the Father and the Son send the Spirit, God the Father, the Son and the Spirit send the church. We are the sent people of God. The church, then, according to Hirsch, is the instrument of God's mission in the world. He says, "As things stand, many people...believe mission is an instrument of the church; a means by which the church is grown. Although we frequently say 'the church has a mission,' according to missional theology a more correct

statement would be 'the mission has a church.'" Or as another author puts it, "The church is not the center of God's plan, but the church is central to God's plan." God uses the church to share the good news of hope and forgiveness found in Christ with a hurting world. And the church is you.

Jesus makes it clear that you and I are sent out to serve others in today's passage. This is part of what's known as Jesus' farewell discourse because immediately after he finishes he is arrested. It's also known as his high priestly prayer. In verse 18 Jesus prays, "As you sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world." In case you were thinking this only applies to the apostles who were there that evening, Jesus adds in verse 20, "I do not ask for these only, but also for those who will believe in me through their word." In other words, Jesus is sending out all of us who are devoted to the apostles' teaching.

Then he tells us why you and I are sent out: "so that the world may know that you sent me and loved them." That's our mission. We are to go out into the world and tell people, and show them, how much God loves them. That means we can't just hope that they will show up here. We are to pattern our ministry after Jesus who went where there were hurting people.

The mission of the church, then, is to make disciples who then join Jesus on mission. Again, let me point out that you are not called to do this alone. We're not asking you to stand out on the corner trying to convince people to come to church. Rather, the goal is for us to live Christ-centered, gospel-driven lives in community, focused on bringing others into community with Christ where their lives may be visibly transformed by the power of Christ.

Here is where the vision for the church begins to change. My proposal is that we begin to form what are called "missional communities." Perhaps you are familiar with the idea of small groups where people gather, usually for Bible study and fellowship. The idea of missional communities builds on the small-group concept but turns it inside out. The

group is not only for the benefit of the participants, it's focused on carrying out the mission of God. Here's how one church in Austin defines a missional community: "A community of Christians on mission with God in obedience to the Holy Spirit that demonstrates tangibly and declares creatively the Gospel of Jesus Christ to a specific pocket of people."

Do you see the difference? A missional community has two key characteristics. First, like Jesus' mission it's *incarnational*. That means the missional community is deeply entrenched in the community, focused on living, demonstrating, and offering biblical community to a lost world. The other characteristic is that it's *intentional*. Most of us are busy. We must be intentional about making room in our lives for new relationships. The question is always, "How can *this* church, this group of people, be God's missionary to *this* community?" Basically, the idea is that we gather in small groups who are determined to think and live like missionaries right here in the places where we work, shop, eat, and play.

Let me finish by saying that this is just a vision. And I suspect that some of you are struggling to understand what this will look like in our church. *I'm* wrestling with the same thing. We've never done it this way before. But

the reality is that the world outside these doors is very different than it was even ten years ago. We have been given a message of hope that they need to hear. But we have to earn the right to be heard. Jesus said, "I do not ask that you take them out of the world, but that you keep them from the evil one."

As we try to understand how we can demonstrate tangibly and declare creatively the good news of Jesus, let me suggest that you begin by finding places to serve. Your mission, if you choose to accept it, is to find a ministry within the church and a ministry to people outside the church and then get involved. Maybe it's helping with the Sunday service, like greeting people as they come in or helping with the hospitality after worship. Maybe it's sitting with a child at Crossbridge as she reads to you. Maybe it's helping us figure out missional communities by offering your home for a group of people to pray together and discuss opportunities to be incarnational and intentional. When we are willing to do that, not only will Jesus not disavow any knowledge of us, but as he says in John 12, "If anyone serves me, the Father will honor him. The result of our serving, according to Jesus, will be that we would have his joy fulfilled in ourselves. And his message will never self-destruct.

*Amen*