

New Meanings of Mission  
Matthew 28:16-20  
July 25, 2010  
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This summer we are celebrating the many blessings God has poured out upon us here at Covenant and we are celebrating our faithful stewardship of those blessings. Today we are excited to celebrate God's mission through Covenant. In a way, Covenant was started as a mission to the west side of Madison fifty-five years ago. From then and there, throughout our short history, Covenant's congregation has been passionate about and committed to missions. Immediately after this morning's service, there will be a Mission Fair to share information about some of the twenty-eight local and international missions we support both financially and with many, many volunteer hours. Last year, 2009, we had over one hundred-fifty adults, youth and children directly involved in mission work in one way or another and our total mission giving through our operating budget and other means was \$237,253. From our Session, the commitment is also strong; nearly ¼ of our elders serve on the outreach council, two out of every three years. The Outreach Council is made up of our mission and public life committees, who are responsible for putting on the Mission Fair this morning. If you get the chance, please thank them! As a congregation, recognizing all we have comes from God, we have and continue to respond as faithful stewards in sharing God's blessings. Today we are celebrating mission; as we do, we are going to explore the familiar text we just read which throughout church history has been connected to mission. The text is known as the Great Commission. We are going to look at it in three ways: first, naming what it says. Second, looking at how some are re-claiming what it says. And third, re-framing what it says.

First, naming what it says. Basically it says, convert people to be disciples of Jesus Christ. In its context, the Great Commission is a part of the post-resurrection text in Matthew. The disciples have had an encounter with the resurrected Christ and for the first time we hear that they worshipped Jesus in a new way. The verb used for worship in the Greek here means, that they "prostrated themselves before him." Then, Jesus affirms his authority over heaven and earth, and commissions them to share his good news with everyone, calling them to follow him, to become his disciples, baptizing them in name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. It's interesting to note here that the Hebrew usage of the phrase "in the name of" means "in the protection and possession of;" protection and possession, a powerful witness to God's covenantal relationship that we affirm in the Sacrament of Holy Baptism, which we will celebrate later in this service.

In the first century and beyond, we can see historically, the intricate connection between mission and evangelism. Based on the Great Commission, the disciples' and the Apostle Paul's missionary trips were to share the good news, converting people to follow Christ. In the first century, the fledging Christian community with Jewish connections, in the midst of the expanding Roman Empire, needed to establish itself and spread its own unique message. This intricate connection between mission and evangelism continued throughout the centuries, spreading Christianity in helpful and stressful ways: most helpful was in it being established as the religion of the Roman Empire in the fourth century beginning Christendom; and probably the most stressful way, at least most notorious, the Crusades of the 11<sup>th</sup> to the 13<sup>th</sup> centuries. This intricate connection between mission and evangelism continued through the great age of missions in the 19<sup>th</sup> and through the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. As missionaries went out from

“established countries” to “foreign lands,” the effort was on sharing the good news with the intention of converting others to Christianity. This had profound impact on many lands and peoples, changing cultures and countries, as well as the Christian faith itself. Intentions were good, but sometimes tactics were used that later were questioned as manipulative, resulting in many people having a negative perception and/or experience of evangelism.

This influenced a major change in the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. We began to see a separation between mission and evangelism in mainline churches. Also, in the 1950’s, mainline Christian churches boomed in the United States, so much so that the placid understanding was that maybe evangelism, following Jesus’ Great Commission to convert people to Christianity, wasn’t necessary. An Episcopal Bishop, Claude Payne, in his 2001 book, Re-Claiming the Great Commission makes this provocative statement confronting that position: He says, “*The church has moved...from a missionary expansion to the maintenance of its membership—to the assumption that those who should be Christian already were Christian or would somehow be attracted to the church on their own.*”<sup>1</sup>

This perspective is what some claim as the obvious reason for the decline in the mainline churches in the last 50 years. For some, the obvious response is to “re-claim” the Great Commission and the connection between mission and evangelism. Many of the evangelical churches have taken on this “re-claiming” and yes, some of them are growing; but mainline churches such as ours struggle with this, not that we don’t believe in the great commission, not that we aren’t wanting to follow Christ, but in asking ourselves the question, “Does ‘church service’ have to have a conversion component in order to be mission?” In churches like ours, we have answered that question, with our attitudes and actions, with a “no.” Contrary to what’s named in the Great Commission, and in conflict to what is being re-claimed by other churches in our day, but in faithful response to being instruments of healing, help, peace and justice, many mainline churches, including ours, are re-framing the Great Commission as we grapple with re-defining mission.

The meaning of mission has changed by becoming much more plural. Here are some examples; is mission a noun or a verb? Is mission different with a capital “M” rather than a small “m,” how have secular and societal missions re-defined church mission and vice a versa? Is mission only external or is it also internal in the ongoing life of a congregation? The key word in mainline churches in the last decade or so in re-framing the meaning of mission has been missional. The ongoing struggle with that word, just like mission, is it’s hard to define. Simply said, it means “meeting people where they are,” not necessarily a new way to doing mission, just a new name with new approaches because of our changing world.

Technology and travel have made our world smaller, advances in weaponry have made the risk of wars greater, and revolutions in society have altered what was acceptable and what is not. So meeting people where they are includes meeting people in other physical places like Africa or the Middle East, as well as cyber-space as in Facebook or Twitter. Meeting people where they are may include working for peace in face of nuclear consequences and human genocide. Meeting people where they are may mean facing our own racial, gender or sexual orientation prejudices. Meeting people where they are means meeting them outside the church walls in offices and schools, soccer fields and swim clubs, restaurants and grocery stores, inviting them by our actions and attitudes to join us in walking through the church doors. Meeting people where they are includes meeting people with different faith traditions and

respecting them as we want to be respected: this isn't without controversy but it is how many mainline churches have responded to sharing our faith and living in a global community.

Two other de-facto meanings of mission that mainline churches, including ours, operate under are: 1. Mission is service and 2. Mission is relational. We respond to Jesus' commands to care for the sick, feed the hungry, help the homeless, and work for peace and justice in our daily lives and through our communal mission. Our mission service is strengthened and enriched both for us, and for those we are offering service, when we take the time to develop relationships. This is how we prevent the church from becoming just a place to "funnel funds" for doing good! The meaning of mission as "relational service" is essential! But it may not be enough. How is relational service distinctly Christian? How is service through the church different than service through a service club such as Rotary or through organizations like the United Way? All are sharing in service; all are relational, what makes the church "mission" different.

The difference is, as individuals and as a community, we have had encounters with the risen Christ! As those first disciples fell down and worshipped as Matthew described, before we go out and "do mission," we gather to worship the Risen Christ, and then we are sent in his name to relational service. We are sent to share what a difference the Risen Christ has made in our own lives. And we want to share that difference with others! We serve others because we have been served by Christ. We love others because God first loved us. We embrace the Great Commission as "doing mission" "being missional" in response to our own encounters with the Risen Christ. In a complicated, diverse and multi-faith world, in an age that some have called the "post-Christian era," we live out our Christian faith authentically while serving others relationally with respect and integrity, joy and love!

In many ways it would be easier to be an evangelical church, and re-claim the Great Commission; but, just as Peter's mission to the Jewish Christians was different than Paul's mission to the Gentile Christians, the mainline churches' mission seems to have a unique message. So much of what we do in the mainline churches is tending the tensions of what it means to live the Christian faith uniquely in this day and age. Completely aware that what we are about is more than just maintaining our membership; we tend the tension of how to do mission and grow our membership, both in faith, and yes, in numbers not just to reverse the decline but to fulfill our unique God-given mission! People say it may be the end of the Christendom as the world once knew it, but God's guiding us into a new age and Christ promised to be with us to the end of every age! As people committed to Christ and to God's mission of loving the world, whether as evangelical or mainline churches, we ask God's grace to guide us in showing us who God is calling us to be, and how God is calling us to do mission now and in the future!