On a Mission
Third Sunday of Lent, February 21, 2016
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It’s Bible study time! I invite you to pick up a Bible and open it to Luke, the third of our four gospel that tell us of the life of Jesus. Luke begins on page 56, in the back of our Bible. In this season of Lent we are encouraging everyone to read through the gospel according to Luke from beginning to end—all 24 chapters, all the way to page 91. That’s 35 pages. You can do it!

The first few chapters of Luke tell about the birth of Jesus and the beginning of his life and ministry. In chapter five, on page 62, Jesus calls some ordinary people, some fishermen, to follow him. He tells them that they will now be fishing for people. After calling them, Jesus continues proclaiming the Kingdom of God, through his teaching and through his healing.

In Jesus 6, Jesus offers what is often called “The Sermon on the Plain”—a collection of ethical teachings in verses 20 to 49, to teach his disciples about this Kingdom of God. I’m planning a four week sermon series on these teachings in April.

In verse 17, just before the teachings, we see that large numbers of people were attracted to Jesus: His initial 12 disciples, a larger crowd of other disciples, and a great multitude of people. The message is getting out and people are interested.

The teaching and the healing continue for a few more chapters. In the beginning of chapter 9, we read about Jesus sending the 12 disciples out to continue what Jesus had begun. He had called them and trained them and then he sends them. This account of the sending of the 12 disciples is also in Matthew and Mark.

But Luke has an additional sending account, and that is our reading for today.

In Luke 10, Jesus sends out 70 others, in addition to the 12. Why 70? Many scholars think this is to reflect the 70 nations listed in Genesis chapter 10, suggesting that the Kingdom is for the whole world. And the number 70 also echoes the 70 elders appointed to help Moses in Numbers chapter 11.

These seventy other disciples are sent out, to continue the proclamation of the kingdom that Jesus began. He tells them to travel lightly and to be courageous and clear-headed. And Jesus lets them know that there may be challenges. But he sent them in pairs, so they were never alone.

Listen for God’s word:
After this the Lord appointed seventy others and sent them on ahead of him in pairs to every town and place where he himself intended to go. 2 He said to them, “The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; therefore ask the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest. 3 Go on your way. See, I am sending you out like lambs into the midst of wolves. 4 Carry no purse, no bag, no sandals; and greet no one on the road. 5 Whatever house you enter, first say, ‘Peace to this house!’ 6 And if anyone is there who shares in peace, your peace will rest on that person; but if not, it will return to you. 7 Remain in the same house, eating and drinking whatever they provide, for the laborer deserves to be paid. Do not move about from house to house. 8 Whenever you enter a town and its people welcome you, eat what is set before you; 9 cure the sick who are there, and say to them, ‘The kingdom of God has come near to you.’ 10 But whenever you enter a town and they do not welcome you, go out into its streets and say, 11 ‘Even the dust of your town that clings to our feet, we wipe off in protest against you. Yet know this: the kingdom of God has come near.’

Let us pray.

Jesus says, “The harvest is plentiful, but the workers are few!”

I’m not a farmer, aside from having a few strawberries in our yard, but I do know that when the crops are ready for harvest, the farmers have to get the work done.

Several years ago in Pittsburgh, we went to a local farm where they let people come harvest various fruits and vegetables. It was peach season, and I love a juicy, ripe peach about as much as anything. But on that particular harvest day, we were too late, and just about all the peaches we found had fallen to the ground and were beginning to rot. When the harvest is ready, it’s time to move.

Jesus says, “The harvest is plentiful, but the workers are few!” There is kingdom work to be done, and now is time.

Jesus realized he couldn’t do it all himself, so using his good community organizing skills, he called the 12 disciples and then 70 more, to multiply the ministry. Jesus was a good strategic planner, and he had to be in order to fulfill his mission, which was and still is to proclaim God’s Kingdom and share God’s love.

And our mission, as the church, as Christians is the same. Proclaim the kingdom and share God’s love.

When we hear the word “mission” in church, we often think about mission trips. Covenant has a long history of mission trips, and over the years I’ve led
dozens of mission trips, around the US and in other countries, with teens, adults, and mixed groups.

Today I’m going to tell you the big secret about mission trips.

We sign up for trips like this, because we want to help. Jesus tells us to love our neighbors, and this seems like a good way to do it. So we go build homes in another country, or work at the food pantry in another city, we learn about a new culture, we discover new appreciation for things we may take for granted, and have a little fun along the way.

But as far as I’m concerned, the primary purpose of a mission trip is to change the way we live after the trip.

Many years ago when I was serving a church in Virginia, we went a home building mission trip to an Appalachian community in rural Kentucky. We had a group of about a dozen people, about half teens and half adults, as I remember it.

Most of the group were mission trip veterans, but there was one woman on her first trip. Let’s call her Anne. She had two teenage sons, who were at home with her husband.

She was excited. She had her brand new hammer and tool belt. She worked hard on our home repair projects and her upbeat spirit was a blessing to everyone.

Then late in the week, one night in devotions, after a long hard day of work, in our stuffy un-air-conditioned room, with our sore muscles and piles of dirty clothes around us, we started talking about the work and what it means to be a Christian.

Suddenly, it was like a light bulb went on for Anne. With great enthusiasm, she said, “Hey, we should be doing this kind of thing back home! We should be figuring out concrete ways to love our neighbors every day. We don’t have to drive hundreds of miles to do this...!”

As she said, this I was doing a little happy dance in my head, saying “Yes! She gets it. Success.”
We do mission trips in order to help people in need, but perhaps more importantly to learn how to live as mission people—every day.

We could think the same way about our church mission work and mission funding, both of which are very important, but they also help us be transformed and become new people.

Here at Covenant, we do a lot of good and faithful mission work with our hands:

- serving dinners to college students at Pres House,
- delivering meals through Meals on Wheels,
- collecting blankets and food and school supplies,
- hosting homeless people here at church through The Road Home

And with our mission funding, with tens of thousands of dollars we support great programs like Porchlight, Domestic Abuse Intervention Services, Habitat for Humanity, education in Guatemala and South Sudan, and more.

Those activities and dollars are really important, as they provide resources for our partners who work with people in need. Remember Jesus told the disciples to fish for people, and he prioritized caring for the poor, the outcasts, the sick.

But as we do this mission work, if we go on mission trips and if give generously to support mission funding and we’re not living with a sense of purpose or conviction or mission in our daily lives, we’re missing something.

Put another way, if you’re involved at church but not living with grace, humility and love in your daily life, then maybe you need to read the Lenten idea I mentioned last week. An Ohio pastor wrote to his congregation, “instead of giving up chocolate this Lenten season, why not make a commitment to give up being a jerk?”
For us to truly be a congregation that supports mission, we need to:

- support mission projects with our hands
- fund mission work with our dollars
- **and** live as mission people with our lives

My hope is that we’re following the pattern of the gospels, where people are called together and then sent out to do great things. Calling and sending. Equipping and Empowering. Some churches call this gathering and scattering. Here at Covenant, we call it LEARNING and LIVING.

Look at the bulletin insert or our webpage or our letterhead. You’ll see those three words: LEARNING LOVING LIVING.

We come together to **learn** that we are called and claimed and loved by God. We learn the **good news**, that by God’s grace we can patch up the broken pieces of our own lives. We learn that we are each created in the image of God and have within us all sorts of potential to do make a difference in the world.

At the center of life is God’s **love** for us. We receive that love and we learn to share it by our living.

So we take what we learn here out into the world to **live** as new people. Mission people.

I’m glad we have people going on mission trips and working at food pantries and building new homes for people in need. But I’m even more glad to know that because of what we learn here, lives are changed and people live in new ways, with a sense of mission.

Maybe you are being called to go on a church mission trip or be involved in a church outreach program. Those are great experiences, but due to various life circumstances, that are not for everyone.

However the mission of living in a new way is for everyone.

So what is your mission? What can you do to help the kingdom harvest?

No one can tell you what your mission is; you need to figure it out. Let me offer some suggestions.
Your mission might involve your work or wherever you spent a lot of time—being an advocate for justice and righteousness, for doing the right thing.

Or your mission might be at school—speaking up for the kid being bullied, or supporting the kid that sits alone at lunch. Or working hard and taking advantage of the incredible opportunities you have.

Or maybe your mission is to care for a friend, or neighbor, or someone on the church prayer list—to get together for coffee, to listen, or to write a note and to pray. Maybe you could just spend time with the people in your life. I remember reading about two grandparents who had a few grandchildren living out of state. When they visited the grandkids, they never brought presents, but they were 100% available to play games, read books, go for walks and such.

Or maybe your mission is with your spouse, or your parents, or your kids, or your siblings—to find the humility to be kind and gracious, or the courage to speak the truth in love and say what needs to be said.

When you leave church today, are you going to go as a disciple with a purpose? What mission do you think God is giving you this very week?

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At the end of worship, I usually try to give a word of encouragement, and then I often close with a Trinitarian blessing.

“The grace of our Lord Jesus, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit are with us, now and always, amen.”

But sometimes I wonder if I should say something different.

Years ago, I learned about Rev. Richard Halverson, who spent many years as the chaplain of US Senate. A Presbyterian minister, he often spoke these words at the end of worship services.

You go nowhere by accident.
Wherever you go, God is sending you.
Wherever you are, God has put you there.
God has a purpose in your being there.
Christ lives in you and has something he wants to do
through you where you are.
Believe this and go in the grace and love and power of Jesus Christ.

Or I could remind you of the beautiful artwork in the narthex, with the words of the Great Commission that Jesus shared: Go and make disciples, and teach, and baptize, and share God’s love.

Or maybe we could play the appropriate music, and I could say something like “Your mission, should you choose to accept it . . . is to serve God’s kingdom, to fish for people, to work for the harvest

There are a lot of options for the end of the service.

I know of one pastor who raises his arms and as he speaks he kind of pushes the people out the door, to help them know that God has sent them into the world.

I’m not going to push anyone out the door. But I will encourage you to take whatever you learn here and go live in a new way, as a Christian, on a mission.