

**Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,
Kingstowne, Virginia, on Sunday, July 29, 2007**

A MISSION FROM GOD, PART 2

John 20:19-21

Two weeks ago our family was in the midst of a cruise to Alaska, as part of my mother's 80th birthday celebration. Twenty members of our extended family made the trip, and God graciously blessed us with a terrific time together. On the final full day of the cruise, we got an up-close and personal look at the Hubbard Glacier, which is the largest tidewater glacier on the North American continent. As we approached the glacier on the icy waters of Yakutat Bay, our ship's captain came on the ship's public address system to let everyone know where we were and what we could see. Then, in his distinctive Norwegian accent and with his wry sense of humor, he said: "Now would not be a good time for you to be thinking about the *Titanic*!"

Thankfully we did not have a *Titanic*-like experience! But this morning I want you to think for a moment or two about that incomparable, "unsinkable" ship that went down in the frigid waters of the North Atlantic in the early morning hours of April 15, 1912, plunging some two and a half miles to its grave on the ocean floor and resulting in the deaths of 1,500 people.

I read recently that only 20 lifeboats and rafts were safely launched from the *Titanic* – which was not nearly enough, of course. And most of those were only partly filled. Even worse, as the bulk of the ship's passengers struggled in the icy waters, 19 half-filled boats rowed in the night, ignoring the desperate cries of the perishing, afraid that a crush of unknown swimmers would swamp their boats and threaten their own safety. Only one boat, Lifeboat #14, took the risk of chasing the cries in the darkness in an attempt to rescue even a few from certain death.

Thank God for Lifeboat #14 and those who were in it. Lifeboat #14 is what you and I are called to be. It is what the church is called to be in the midst of a world of spiritually drowning people. In the often spiritually cold and icy waters of Kingstowne and northern Virginia and greater Washington, D.C., we are called to reach out in the name of Jesus and to offer the lifeline of the gospel – the incomparably good news of His saving love – in all we say and do. As I said a few weeks ago, like the Blues Brothers, we're on a mission from God. A mission we must not neglect or ignore.

Three weeks ago, before my family's Alaskan cruise, I laid out for you the first three marks or characteristics of a missional church – that is, a church that knows and understands it is on a mission from God. In case you missed it, or to refresh your memory, here they are:

Mark #1: A missional church is a church that is grounded in the inspired, infallible, unerring and authoritative Word of God and historic Christian orthodoxy, and is committed to the primacy of the Great Commission.

The Great Commission, the mandate given by Jesus to His followers in the world, is *our* commission. It is an integral part of who we are at Faith as a congregation of the Evangelical Presbyterian Church and as individual followers of Christ. It is part of our spiritual DNA. To be true to Christ, and true to our calling in Christ, we must own the Great Commission, this mandate to go into the world and make disciples of all nations, as our own.

Mark #2: A missional church is a church that believes this country – the United States – has become post-Christian and is now a mission field.

Like it or not, the church is no longer at the center of American cultural and social life. The Christian or Judeo-Christian consensus that once existed in American culture is gone. As a result, it is not enough for the church simply to send missionaries to other peoples and cultures and nations. The church is called to be a missionary people right here. Right where we are. Because right here – right here in Kingstowne and northern Virginia and the Capital region – is a mission field where the gospel is urgently and desperately needed.

Mark #3: A missional church is a church that believes it has been planted by God in its community to effectively reach those around us with the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Remember Graham Smith's vision: That this church would be used by God to make Kingstowne "the King of Kings' Towne." God has placed us here in Kingstowne for a purpose: To glorify God by reaching our neighbors with the message of Christ's saving love, helping them to grow to spiritual maturity as followers of Christ, and ministering to people's needs in His name.

That is why we are here. The church is not here for our own convenience or comfort. We are here to do God's work and to rescue those who are perishing without Christ, to invite and welcome them into the lifeboat of faith in Christ.

Moving on from there, I invite you to consider four more marks of a missional church today.

Mark #4: A missional church is a church that is committed to reproducing a community of authentic disciples of Jesus Christ.

As I pointed out a few weeks ago, there is only one command – only one imperative – in the Great Commission as we find it in Matthew 28. That command is to "make disciples" (Matthew 28:19). Jesus is interested not simply in converts or professions of faith or names on a church membership roll. He is interested in disciples who are fully devoted to Him, disciples who are growing daily in the grace and knowledge of Christ,

disciples who are committed to living a life of faith and obedience under the Lordship of Christ.

A disciple – a committed follower of the Lord Jesus Christ – is what each of us is called to be. Discipleship is a lifelong process that begins with conversion. It begins when we turn from our sins in repentance and embrace Christ as our Savior, trusting in His saving work for us on the cross. It is a process of growing toward spiritual maturity so that we more and more reflect the heart and character and values of the Lord Jesus. A disciple of Christ is what you are called to be. It is what I am called to be. Making disciples is what we are called to do as a church. As a Christ-centered fellowship of believers we are called both to be and to reproduce a community of authentic disciples of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Your calling and mine is to live every moment as a follower of Jesus, under His sovereign and gracious rule – because He is Lord, and unto His glory. Our calling together is to encourage and support one another on the road of discipleship, and to multiply the number of genuine disciples by introducing others to the Lord Jesus, inviting them to respond to His saving work in repentance and faith, and walking with them, instructing them, nurturing them, supporting them and inspiring them as they walk the road of Christian discipleship.

God wants His church to grow – not merely in numbers or names on a membership roll, but in terms of redeemed, transformed lives, relationships and homes.

There are many components to a life of discipleship. Personal prayer, the daily reading of God's Word, involvement with other believers in a small group for spiritual support, encouragement and accountability, regular participation in both private and public worship, and involvement in a ministry which utilizes your gifts and meets real needs in a way that honors God – all of these are aspects of Christian discipleship. In the August issue of our *Faith in Focus* newsletter, Pastor Bob has an excellent article laying out four practical reasons why adults should be involved in our Sunday School. I encourage you to read the article, but here are the four reasons very briefly:

1. Sunday School creates a context where we can pursue sanctification or spiritual growth.
2. Sunday School creates a context where we can experience fellowship with other believers.
3. Sunday School creates a context where we can give and receive care.
4. Sunday School creates a context where we can begin to express our spiritual gifts.

Sunday School is not just for kids. It is not something we grow out of. It is for adults as well. And it is a vital tool of discipleship, as we seek both to grow in our personal discipleship and to develop and reproduce a fellowship of authentic disciples of Christ.

Mark #5: A missional church is a church that is continually in the process of equipping its members to be missionaries sent by God to live and proclaim the Kingdom of the Lord Jesus in our own world and to the ends of the earth.

I praise God for the short-term missionaries and mission teams which have gone out from Faith this summer. By God's grace, we have had the privilege of extending our influence to Kentucky, Haiti, Mexico, France and Kenya. That is a pretty amazing thing!

I praise God, too, for the missionaries who have heard and answered God's call to serve as His ambassadors and servants in other cultures and nations, sometimes at great personal risk. They are my heroes. It is possible that God is calling some of us here today to go in His name as missionaries, whether short-term or long, in other parts of the world. I encourage you to consider this possibility and to pray about it. But here is the thing: It is not just a few who are called and sent by God. The whole church is a sent community. Jesus said to His followers in John 20:21: "As the Father has sent me (into the world), so I am sending you (into the world)." The church is a sent community in which each believer – each member of the body of Christ – is sent as a missionary to impact our community with a message and a way of life that challenges and counteracts the ways and values of an increasingly secular society. We are sent into the world to be as salt and light as Jesus said in the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5. In Matthew 5:13-16 He said:

You are the salt of the earth. But if the salt loses its saltiness, how can it be made salty again? It is no longer good for anything, except to be thrown out and trampled by men.

You are the light of the world. A city on a hill cannot be hidden. Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven.

Eugene Peterson in *The Message* expresses the teaching of Jesus in these verses this way:

Let me tell you why you are here. You're here to be salt seasoning that brings out the God-flavors of this earth. If you lose your saltiness, how will people taste godliness? You've lost your usefulness and will end up in the garbage.

Here's another way to put it: You're here to be light, bringing out the God-colors in the world. God is not a secret to be kept. We're going public with this, as public as a city on a hill. If I make you light-bearers, you don't think I'm going to hide you under a bucket, do you? I'm putting you on a light stand. Now that I've put you there on a hilltop, on a stand – shine! Keep open house. Be generous with your lives. By opening up to others, you'll prompt people to open up with God, this generous Father in heaven.

Salt serves no purpose if it stays in the saltshaker. And what good is a light that is hidden? We've got to get the salt of our faith and love out of the saltshaker and into the world. And we've got to let the light of our faith and hope and love shine in the darkness and doubt and confusion of this world.

What does all this mean in the context of this mark of a missional church? It means that rather than simply trying to get unchurched people to come to church – or just expecting they will come if we open the doors – a missional church replaces the “come to us” mindset with a commitment to “go to them.”

Each of us is called to be a missionary. It has been said many times by many different people: “You're either a missionary or a mission field.” If you belong to Christ by faith, you are a missionary. As a people on a mission from God, our mission field is where we live, where we work, where God has placed us as a church (right here in Kingstowne) and wherever God may choose to put us or send us.

If you're a student – high school, middle school, elementary school, college or graduate school – your mission field is your school. Your classmates, your bandmates, your teammates, your friends – they are all your mission field.

If you're in the military (we thank you for your service to our country), the military is your mission field. I don't mean that you should violate military protocol by engaging in proselytism and using coercive means to bear witness to Christ. No. I mean that you should live out your faith and let your light shine for Jesus in the midst of your military duty. As Peter says in 1 Peter 3:15, you should always be prepared to give an answer to those who ask you the reason for the hope you have in Christ. And, says Peter, you should do it with gentleness and respect and with a clear conscience.

If you work for the government, the United States government is your mission field, whether you work for the State Department or the Justice Department, the Defense Department, the Commerce Department or some other department. God has sent you and placed you where you are to be His missionary there and to let the light of Christ shine in your life.

If you are a doctor or a nurse, or if you're employed in some other way in the health professions, your mission field is your medical practice or the hospital or lab where you work. You are on a mission from God to communicate His grace and love as you minister to the health needs of the sick.

If you're in the business world, the marketplace is your mission field. God can use you to have an influence for eternity in the lives of those with whom you work or do business.

If you're a teacher, whether your school is public or private, Christian or secular, where you teach is your mission field.

If you're retired, or if you're a homemaker, your network of relationships is your mission field. It is the place where God wants to use you as an ambassador of Christ.

The task for each of us is first of all to understand what our mission field is, then to embrace the mission God has given to us, and to ask God to show us how to be His missionaries in the place He has put us. God wants us to be intentional and strategic in carrying out our mission, in the same way that cross-cultural missionaries – men and women who leave their homes and native land to serve as missionaries in other lands and cultures – have an intentional and strategic plan for their ministries of evangelism and church planting, medical missions or relief and development. We need to help each other to figure out what God has called us to do where we are, and how to do it most effectively for His glory.

Our task as a church is to be focused and engaged in the work of equipping and mobilizing and inspiring one another to live as missionaries called and sent by God to both model and proclaim the good news of the Kingdom of God where we are and even to the ends of the earth.

Mark #6: A missional church is a church that is constantly re-examining itself as to whether it is merely doing maintenance of existing ministries and members, or whether or not it is effectively doing the mission of reaching its own community with the reign of God through the gospel of the Lord Jesus.

Too many churches unfortunately operate with a maintenance mindset instead of a mission-focused mindset. It is neither hard nor uncommon for churches to function with an overriding concern to preserve the church and keep church members happy. Chad Hall says there are two primary distractions that often block churches from focusing on being missional. The first is a concern for self-preservation. If a church is concerned first and foremost about itself, it will turn inward to protect and preserve itself from the risk and discomfort of change. The second distraction, strangely enough, is an emphasis on church growth. It is not that church growth is bad. God passionately wants His church to grow, as more and more people hear the gospel, respond in faith and begin to worship and serve Him. But a church that is focused primarily on numbers or numerical growth can easily lose sight of the fact that there is more to the church's mission than simply attracting a crowd.

Being a missional church requires a change in thinking from a consumer-oriented mentality to a servant mindset. A consumer-oriented mentality asks: "What's in it for me (or my family)? Does the church meet my needs?" These aren't bad questions in and of themselves, because the church in its life and ministry should be a blessing to its people. But it is not nearly enough if a church desires to fulfill God's purposes for it. A servant mindset asks: "How can I serve the Lord where He has placed me? How can I minister to others in the church and to my community? How can I incarnate and communicate the saving love of Christ in my mission field?"

A church that knows it is on a mission from God must continually re-examine itself to see if its heartbeat is maintenance of existing ministries or reaching out in love to its community with the message of the gospel.

If we're honest, we at Faith have to admit that sometimes we are more passionate about ministries focused on us or about traditions than we are about actually engaging in ministries to reach the people of our community. A time of re-examination may be of enormous value.

Mark #7: A missional church is a church that perceives that the essence of these fundamental attributes is the essence of its own existence.

In other words, missional is not just another church program. It is a way of seeing, and a way of being as a Christ-centered fellowship of believers who gather here at Faith for worship and fellowship, for instruction and encouragement, for equipping and inspiration, and who are sent into the world on a mission from God that only the people of God can fulfill.

As Mike Breen, a pastor in Arizona, puts it: "The missional church is rooted in not just the New Testament church in Acts, but in the mission of Jesus Himself. A missional church lives out the church's three-dimensional calling: to be upwardly focused on God in worship that is passionate; to be inwardly focused on community among believers that is demonstrated in relationships of love and compassion; and to be outwardly focused on a world that does not yet know God."

Upward. Inward. And outward. All three are essential for a church to be healthy and to carry out its God-given mission.

Remember the words of Jesus to His disciples as His followers huddled in fear behind locked doors on the day of His resurrection. He blessed them with His peace and then said: "As the Father has sent me, so I am sending you" (John 20:21). Just as God the Father sent God the Son into the world – on a mission from God – so God the Son sends His followers into the world in His name.

Think of what it means that Jesus came into the world. It means, as James Montgomery Boice has written, that "He did not stay in heaven, though He certainly could have. It means that He did not shout words of salvation to us from the safety of heaven's ramparts. Having determined to come down to us, He did not even then come in the (fullness) of His divine glory but rather divested Himself of that glory and appeared in humble form. In fact, He did not even appear in a human disguise, which is what the Gnostics taught, but actually became a human being, just like us. He was born; He grew; He suffered; eventually He died. That is what it means to 'come into the world.'"

Just as Jesus came and became one with us, so He sends us into the world to identify with and to serve those to whom we are sent. But this is a hard and dangerous calling. It is full of risks. And Boice is right when he says that many of us in the evangelical church

“have retreated from the world rather than invading the world. We have retreated to the suburbs or whatever our equivalent may be.. to where it is nice or safe or non-threatening.” Those words make me uncomfortable because I think it is the truth, and I am just as guilty as anyone else.

John Stott assesses the situation this way: “I personally believe that our failure to obey the implications of this command (of Jesus) is the greatest weakness of evangelical Christians in the field of evangelism today. We do not identify. We believe so strongly (and rightly) in proclamation that we tend to proclaim our message from a distance. We sometimes appear like people who shout advice to drowning men from the safety of the seashore. We do not dive in to rescue them. We are afraid of getting wet, and indeed of greater perils than this. But Jesus Christ did not broadcast evangelism from the sky. He visited us in great humility.”

To be faithful to our mission, then – to be faithful to the One who sends us into the world – we must both identify with lost and hurting people in relationships rooted in love and we must point them in words of witness and the message of the gospel to the One who is the Savior of sinners and the hope of the world.

Which describes you better today: Lifeboat #14 doing all it could to rescue people who were drowning in the North Atlantic, or shouting advice from the safety of the shore to those who are drowning? Which describes us better as a church?

When I look at myself in this regard, I don't like what I see. But I want to be in Lifeboat #14. I'm pretty sure that is where God wants me to be. And you, too. Let's help each other and encourage each other to get away from the safety of the shore, to get into the lifeboat where, just maybe, God will use us to rescue people who are lost and dying without Him.

May it be so in us. To the glory and praise of God. Amen.