

**Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,
Kingstowne, Virginia, on Sunday, November 25, 2007**

**THE FUTURE OF FAITH: THE NEXT 20 YEARS
PART II**

Matthew 9:35-38

Having celebrated the first 20 years in the life and ministry of Faith last month, we began last Sunday to think together about the next 20 years. I said last Sunday that if we are to fulfill God's purposes for us in the next 20 years, if we are to be the church God wants us to be, if we are to experience the fullness of God's blessing in our life and ministry as a church and be the blessings God wants us to be, we need to increasingly cultivate these four qualities in our lives:

- A heart for God
- A heart for God's Word
- A heart for God's people (one another in the body of Christ)
- A heart for God's world (a world of people who are spiritually lost without Christ)

If you were here last Sunday, I hope you will recall that we talked about the first two of these qualities: A heart that is passionate about knowing and loving and serving God; and a heart that is committed to knowing and applying and living out the teachings of God's Word.

Today I invite you to think with me about the two remaining qualities: A heart for God's people; and a heart for God's world – a world God loved so much that He sent His Son, our Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, into the world to give His life for it.

A HEART FOR GOD'S PEOPLE

One of our core values here at Faith is the importance of relationships. We believe that people matter. People matter to God and to us. We were made not for isolation but for relationships. We were made for relationship with God and for relationships with one another. One of the most precious gifts God has given us in the church is the gift of one another. Trusting in the saving work of Christ on our behalf and living as a follower of Christ connects us not only to our Savior and Lord but to one another as members of His family. The Christian life involves not only believing in Christ but belonging to Him and to the fellowship of believers in the church.

The Bible has a lot to say about how we are to relate to one another. Above all, it instructs us to love one another. That is the message Jesus left with His disciples on the night before His death on the cross. He said: "A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another" (John 13:34-35).

The call to love one another is reinforced in 1 John 4, where the apostle John says: “Dear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God... This is love, not that we loved God, but that God loved us and sent His Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins. Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another” (1 John 4:7, 10-11). And it is meant to be a practical love, a love that expresses itself not in warm, fuzzy thoughts or feelings, but in action. In practical help. 1 John 3:18 says: “Let us not love with words or tongue (only), but with actions and in truth.” Or, as it says in The Message: “Let’s not just talk about love; let’s practice real love.”

John is not the only apostle to emphasize the importance of love. Peter urges us in 1 Peter 1:22 to “love one another deeply, from the heart,” and again in 1 Peter 4:8 to “love each other deeply, because love covers over a multitude of sins.” In his letter to the Romans, Paul urges us to “be devoted to one another in brotherly love” (12:10).

Love – the kind of love with which Jesus loved (and loves) us, the kind of love that expressed itself in His willing sacrifice of Himself on the cross for us – is to be the dominant characteristic of our relationships with one another.

And we are to persevere in this love for one another. Hebrews 13:1 says: “Keep on loving each other as brothers (and sisters).” Ephesians 4:2 says that we are to bear with one another in love (cf. Colossians 3:13). Galatians 6:2 says that we are to bear (carry) one another’s burdens, and when we do, we are fulfilling the law of Christ – which is to love one another.

In addition to all this, the Bible tells us to encourage one another (1 Thessalonians 4:18; Hebrews 10:25), to honor one another above ourselves (Romans 12:10), to be kind and compassionate to one another (Ephesians 4:32) and to forgive each other, whatever grievances we may have against one another (Ephesians 4:32; Colossians 3:13). It tells us to confess our sins to each other (James 5:16), to pray for each other (James 5:16), to live in harmony with one another (Romans 12:16), to live in peace with one another, as far as it depends on us (1 Thessalonians 5:13; Romans 12:18), to offer hospitality to one another without grumbling (1 Peter 4:9), to act with humility in our relationships with one another (1 Peter 5:5; cf. Philippians 2:3), and to submit to one another as an expression of our respect and reverence for Christ (Ephesians 5:21).

All of this is how we are to treat one another and care for one another as members together of the body of Christ here at Faith. How we treat one another and care for one another matters, because people matter. Because people matter to God, people matter to us.

Our goal at Faith is that every person who is part of our church family, every church member and regular attender, every person who considers Faith to be their church home, will be cared for and will know that they are cared for. We don’t want anyone to fall through the cracks. We want every person, from the youngest to the oldest, to be connected to others in relationships of support and encouragement and care. Every

person. Because the letters EPC don't just stand for the Evangelical Presbyterian Church. They also stand for "every person counts."

Every person to be cared for and to know they are cared for. That's our goal. Do we live up to that goal perfectly? Of course not. Sometimes we slip up. Sometimes we mess up. But we press on toward the goal. And one way we seek to accomplish this goal is through our Deacon/Elder Care Groups. Each member of our Board of Deacons is paired up with an Elder on the Session, and together the Deacon and Elder are assigned a certain number of church members or families with whom to build relationships and to provide spiritual support, care and practical assistance in the ordinary and not-so-ordinary events of life. Each of you, if you are a member of Faith, has been assigned to a Deacon/Elder Care Group. If you are not a church member but are a regular attender, most likely you have been placed in a Care Group, too. If not, or if you're not sure who your Care Group Deacon and Elder are, you can contact Helen Franssell, the Moderator of the Deacons, or Elder Len Deibert, the Clerk of the Session, and they can tell you which Care Group you are in, or they can get you connected to one of the Care Groups.

As a pastor, it always warms my heart and brings joy to my spirit when I hear from members of our church family how other members of the church family have rallied around them and provided them with much needed and much appreciated help and support at significant moments in their lives. It prompts me to give praise to God and to give thanks for you.

To be the church God wants us to be and to fulfill His purposes for us in the next 20 years and beyond, we must intentionally continue to cultivate a heart for God's people. A heart for the church, not as a building or a place, not as a denomination or an institution, but as a fellowship of people who are committed together to the Lord Jesus Christ, to one another in the body of Christ, and to the work of Christ in the world. A heart for one another. A heart of love that includes and incorporates and embraces every member of the family of Faith, and always makes room for more.

A HEART FOR GOD'S WORLD

The fourth quality we must cultivate is a heart for God's world. That is, a heart for the world God loved (and loves) so much that He sent His Son into the world to die for it – to die for us and for all who will turn to Him in faith, trusting in the sufficiency of His saving work on the cross for us. A heart for men and women, boys and girls all around us and around the world, who are spiritually lost apart from faith in Christ.

Our mission statement says that God has called us "to share the saving love of Jesus with our neighbors." What do we mean by that? We mean that we have a God-given mission to share the love of Jesus and to extend the reach of the gospel right here where God has placed us in Kingstowne.

We are surrounded by people in Kingstowne and Franconia and Springfield and Rose Hill who do not know Jesus or understand the message of the gospel. In some cases they

probably have no clue what we Christians believe or what the gospel is, except that they have concluded the church has nothing of value to say to them. Some may even profess to be atheists. A recent letter from the C. S. Lewis Institute here in northern Virginia suggests that there is a “new atheism” emerging in America, and it seems not to be a passing fad. Recent research indicates that atheism and agnosticism are actually strongest among those between 18 and 22 years of age (19%), followed by those in the 23-41 age group (14%). Researchers say that the trend is toward each new generation having a larger percentage of persons with no faith at all. That is the cultural reality in the world today.

Another troubling reality is that among those between the ages of 16 and 29, only 16% have a favorable impression of Christianity, and only 3% view evangelical Christians (that’s us) in a positive light. That would suggest we have some serious work to do.

We have a God-given mission to share the saving love of Jesus not just here in the Kingstowne area, but in every neighborhood and community where we live, and in every workplace where God plants us throughout northern Virginia and metro D. C. For each of us, our mission field is the place where we live, the place where we work, or the place where we go to school. As a church, but also as individuals, God has given us the mission of being winsome and faithful witnesses, pointing others to the grace and truth and saving work of God for us in Christ. Each of us has a mission field of relationships where God desires to use us.

And we have a God-given mission to share the saving love of Jesus with our neighbors around the world. Whether God calls us to go on short term missions, or calls us to serve as long-term or vocational missionaries, or simply calls us to support those who go with our prayers and financial support, the mission of sharing the life-saving and life-changing message of the gospel belongs to us all. As you know, the EPC has made a commitment to taking the gospel to Muslim peoples in the Middle East and Persian Gulf region, in the former Soviet Union, in Asia and even in nations like France which have largely been de-Christianized and must be re-Christianized.

All of these aspects are involved in our mission to share the saving love of Jesus. To carry out this mission, we must increasingly cultivate a heart for God’s world, a heart for others who do not know or trust in the Savior God has provided.

One huge way we’re trying to carry out our mission is by our commitment to plant a new church in the Lorton-Woodbridge area. Church planting is a missionary approach to outreach, with a recognition that America itself is a mission field. As Tim Stafford recently wrote in Christianity Today, “The missionary surge that took the gospel from America and Europe to Africa, Asia, and South America is now washing back over the West.” Today church planting is the cutting edge of evangelism in America, as churches like Faith and denominations like the EPC plant new churches with a vision of reaching individuals and families who are unchurched or have become de-churched with the message of the gospel, which is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes (Romans 1:16).

“Church planting,” says Stafford, “is a missionary approach, typical of the apostle Paul and of most missionaries since. Where there is no church (or, where most or much of the population is not connected to a church), you have to plant a church. You have to find ways to penetrate the culture with the gospel, and then you have to provide a secure place for disciples to grow and to explore their new identity. A short while ago, we didn’t think this way in North America. Now we do.”

David Fischler is a missionary. So is Maryanne Fischler. So is every member of our Redeemer Launch Team. They have been sent out from Faith as missionaries to the Lorton-Woodbridge area. It has long been our dream to be a church-planting church, to plant a daughter church in order to extend our reach and to establish a church in a community where there is a need for an evangelical and Reformed church. We targeted the “greater Lorton area” a few years ago, but God has not yet provided a meeting place for Redeemer in Lorton itself. But we continue to wait and watch and pray. In the meantime, as you know, the Redeemer Launch Team is meeting at Belmont School in northern Woodbridge, preparing for its official, public launch sometime in the spring.

Our primary outreach as a church is the establishment of this new church. We believe God wants to use Redeemer to reach people who have no connection to any church and have never responded to the message of the gospel. We have invested in Redeemer as a church by calling and supporting Pastor David in the work of church planting, by encouraging members of Faith to become missionaries by serving on the Launch Team, with our financial support and the support of our prayers. I encourage you to pray daily for Pastor David and the Redeemer Launch Team. And I encourage you as well to consider prayerfully if God is calling you to join Pastor David and the Launch Team in this missionary work.

A second way we are committed to reaching our neighbors is through the development of a vibrant, biblically-based ministry to children and families in our community. As you know, this past summer we had nearly 200 children involved in our Vacation Bible School. Some of those children were from our church family – and we are committed to ministering to the children and families of Faith. Some of our VBS children regularly attend other churches. But there was a significant number who are not connected in any meaningful way to a Christ-exalting, Bible-believing church like Faith. We believe God is calling us to intentionally develop a ministry that will not only positively impact the children and families of Faith, but which will serve as a vehicle for ministry to our neighbors. Our church nursery, with its need for a new coordinator to build on the excellent work of Theresa Barnett, and our weekly need for caring adults of all ages to serve in this ministry, is a central and critically important component of an effective ministry to children and families. Because the need is so clear, and the possibilities for ministry to children and families outside the church are so great, I want to ask each of you to prayerfully consider how you can serve in this ministry. And then do it in the name of Jesus.

When the Lord Jesus saw the crowds who came to Him and gathered around Him wherever He went, the Bible says: “He had compassion on them, because they were...

like sheep without a shepherd” (Matthew 9:36). He was moved in His spirit by the confusion of the crowd, by their spiritual blindness and lostness, by their hunger for meaning and direction and peace in their lives. That same confusion, that same condition of lostness and blindness, and that same hunger exist in the lives of people all around us. In Kingstowne. In Lorton and Woodbridge. Throughout northern Virginia. Throughout the metro D. C. area, including the halls of power in our nation’s capital.

In Matthew 9:37, Jesus changed the metaphor from sheep without a shepherd to a harvest – a spiritual harvest that is plentiful and ripe. It is as Jesus said to His disciples in John 4:35, after He had carried on an evangelistic conversation with the Samaritan woman at the well. He said: “Open your eyes and look at the fields! They are ripe for harvest.”

The fields are ripe for harvest today. There is a world of empty, hurting, searching, confused people. Not everyone is open to the gospel, but I suspect many more may be open than we imagine. “The harvest is plentiful,” Jesus said, “but the workers are few.” More workers are needed in the harvest field. More missionaries, more Christians with a missionary mindset, are needed in the places where you and I live and work and go to school.

So what does Jesus ask us to do? He asks us in verse 38 to pray. He says: “Ask the Lord of the harvest to send out workers into His harvest field.” And when we pray, we may well discover that Jesus wants us to be the answer – at least part of the answer – to our own prayers as He calls us to go out into the field in His name.

Prayer is indispensable, if we are to carry out our mission and serve God’s purposes in the next 20 years. Martin Luther once said: “As it is the business of tailors to make clothes and of cobblers to mend shoes, so it is the business of Christians to pray.” Here Jesus tells us to pray. 1 Thessalonians 5:17 says we are to pray continually. Paul says in Colossians 4:2 that we should devote ourselves to prayer, in a spirit of watchfulness and thankfulness. One focus of our praying is to be on the harvest – the spiritual harvest which is ready in every generation to be gathered in.

Whether it is through the ministry of Redeemer, or our ministry to children and families, or through the relationships God gives each of us with unbelieving friends, neighbors, co-workers or family members, it is our desire and calling to reach unbelievers with the message of Christ’s saving love. Jesus Himself tells us (Luke 15:7, 10) that there is joy in heaven whenever a sinner repents and comes home to Christ in faith. And there is joy in the church as well.

You and I can each have a part in this kind of celebration by a simple three-part process: Invest, Invite, and Intercede. Invest in a relationship with someone in your sphere of influence who does not know Christ as Savior and Lord. Invite that person to come to church with you, or to a home fellowship group or another event where you can introduce them to the church and to the message of the gospel. And intercede for them at the throne of grace. Pray for them. Pray that God will open their hearts to respond in faith to

the gospel, trust in Christ as their Savior, and follow Him as a disciple. Invest. Invite. And intercede.

One of the things I think we're really good at here at Faith is welcoming people who come through the doors of our church. We drop the ball occasionally, but most of the time, I think, we do a really good job of extending a warm, winsome, loving welcome to newcomers in our fellowship. What we're not so good at, many of us, is the investing in relationships with unbelievers and the intentional invitations to others to come to church or to an outreach or fellowship event at church. When newcomers choose to join us, we are usually quick to embrace them with the love of Jesus. But many of us seem hesitant to take the step of inviting a friend to come with us to church.

Thank God for Christian men and women like Andrew. In John 1, the Bible says that the first thing Andrew did after he met Jesus was to go and find his brother Simon (Peter), to tell him about the Messiah and to bring him to Jesus (John 1:40-42). Whether it is our brother or another family member, whether it is a neighbor or co-worker or classmate or friend, I think God wants us to be like Andrew. I think God wants us to look for opportunities to bring our friends and neighbors and whoever it may be to meet Jesus, so they can discover for themselves who He is and the wonder of His saving power and love.

I find myself drawn to what Luke says in Acts 2:47. He says of the church in Jerusalem: "Every day their number grew as God added those who were saved" (The Message). And I think: Wouldn't it be awesome if God were to do that today? Wouldn't it be awesome if God were to do it here? Wouldn't it be awesome if God were to give us the privilege of being part of something like that? Wouldn't it be awesome?

Well, there it is. To be the church God wants us to be for the next 20 years and beyond, to carry out our mission and to serve God's purposes, we need to cultivate these four qualities:

- A heart for God
- A heart for God's Word
- A heart for God's people
- A heart for God's world

May it be so in us for the next 20 years, for as long as we live, and until Christ returns. To the glory and praise of God. Amen.