

## Who Does Mission Work?

What do you think of when you think of mission work? Many of us have a picture in our minds of an African savannah, of elephants and giraffes in the distance, of trekking across rough roads to isolated villages. I used to be a world missionary and I did not serve in a situation like that. But I still have that picture in my mind. I bet a number of you do, too. There are places in the world where mission work does look something like that. But many places where missionaries are working today look like the video we saw after church last week about outreach in New York City. The church is in a storefront right underneath a subway line. In Latin America, in Japan and China, in Europe and throughout the United States, missionaries go to large cities and they pound the pavement.

That's what it often looks like. But who does it? **Who does mission work?** That's the key question I want to address today. Of course, part of the answer is full time pastors and teachers. We send missionaries to every corner of the world and all around the United States. Twice this summer, Pastor Schmidt preached here while I was on vacation. He's a missionary who works in Detroit reaching out to people with a Hispanic background.

Going all the way back to St. Paul – really all the way back to the day of Pentecost – God has sent out full time workers to be missionaries. But is mission work just sending men out to places we can't go? Is it just sending in a mission offering so that they can do the work? Certainly, that's part of it and the Bible teaches very clearly that when we support the work of people who are spreading the gospel, we share in that work even if we never set foot in the place where those men are working.

But mission work doesn't just happen in places far away. Congregations do mission work right in their own back yards. We here at Peace do mission work. And a big part of it is the men and women God has called to serve you here. Every time our principal sits down with a family that's interested in our school and talks with them about Jesus, he's doing mission work. Every time our teachers explain God's love to children, they're doing mission work. Whenever I make a call on someone who visited here and who wants to know more, whenever I teach a Bible Information Class to people who are new to the faith, that's mission work. And by the grace of God, we have more than 15 adults currently enrolled in a class like that. And in a spiritual sense, every one of you is there in the classrooms with our teachers, you're there when the principal meets with those families, you're there when I teach and visit because you support our ministry.

But is that all that you do to reach out? You know I'm going to say no, don't you? But do you know why? Maybe, we need to stop for a moment and talk about what mission work really is. It's sharing the gospel, right? Sometimes, we call it evangelism – which is a big scary theological word. Sometimes we call it outreach. But what it really comes down to is sharing the good news about Jesus.

How does a congregation do that? Because we're 21<sup>st</sup> century Americans, we tend to think in terms of a program. We need a board or a committee to organize something. We need a plan and date and people whose job it is to do whatever. But you know what? Evangelism or outreach or mission work or whatever you want to call it is not a program. It's not a committee having endless meetings. It's not a set of hoops that we jump through. It's just talking about Jesus. Do we always think of that way? Or do we think of knocking on doors? Do we think of making calls and confronting people and trying to convince them? It's natural to think that way, right? And what effect does that model have on us?

Let me tell you a couple of stories here. After my first year at the seminary, I spent a summer in New York City working at a mission there. Right after I got there, the pastor sent me out to visit a lady who was on his "prospect list." She didn't know I was coming. I was supposed to just show up and talk to her about Jesus. How do you think I felt? All the way there, I kept thinking, "I hope she's not home! I hope she's not home!" I was studying to be a pastor. I knew the word well enough to preach and teach already, but I was terrified to go to this woman's house. A few weeks later, we had a booth at a street fair. And the pastor told me and member of the congregation to work the crowd. We were supposed to walk around and strike up conversations with people and talk about Jesus. So we walked all the way down the street one way and all the way done the street the other way. Guess how many people we talked to? Zero. And we slunk back to our table and hoped people would stop by.

Those situations might seem pretty foreign to you. But can you identify with the fear? I bet you can. So does that mean none of us can do mission work? Of course not. What we did in New York City is one way of doing mission work. But reaching out with the gospel doesn't have to be that formal. It doesn't have to be a part of a program or a part of a specific effort. Programs are helpful. They're a great way for a congregation to organize itself and to be consistent. Our preschool is an outreach program and it's brought a lot of people to hear about Jesus over the years. Our school has an outreach component to it. We do have a Board of Stewardship and Outreach and they do have plans in place and programs that they're going to bring to you – one that they're going to ask you to help with today. That's all to the good.

But mission work cannot only happen in a program. It happens best when it's a natural part of our Christian lives. We all know people. We bump into their hurts and their struggles. We share in their joys and their victories. We live together in a community or work together in an office or a shop. As our lives connect with their lives, we have the chance to talk with them about Jesus.

Even before we talk with them, we have the chance to draw their attention to Christ by the way we live with them. Jesus said, **“Let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven.”** The way we live confesses what we hold most dear. We confess Jesus when we treat others as Jesus would treat them. That's the beginning of our efforts to reach out. It creates situations in which people invite us to speak about what's important to us, or about what's going on in their lives. But at some point, we do need to speak. We need explain what Jesus has done for us. We need to present the love of Christ at the cross and the empty tomb as the one way that any of us will get to heaven. That is mission work.

That's not just my job. It's not just our teachers' job. That is the job of every Christian. You don't have to go knock on doors and invite strangers. God has not called you to get on an airplane and evangelize people in other cities or other countries. God has not called you to preach in church or to teach in a school like ours. But every Christian is a part of reaching out. Every Christian shares the responsibility to support that work with their offerings and with their prayers. Every Christian shares the command to let their lives shine with the gospel. And every Christian shares the call to be ready and able to give an answer for the hope we have, to gently guide the people in our lives to see Jesus and to help them understand what God promises us.

Why is that hard? It still goes back to that fear, doesn't it? We're afraid to talk about Jesus. What are we afraid of? Embarrassment? Looking foolish? Not being able to explain it right? All those things and maybe a few more come to mind. But what is the real reason we are afraid? We're sinners. That's what it comes down to. Jesus was not a sinner and he was fearless. He stood alone against the powerful people of his day again and again. He was completely unfazed by their hostility and their desire to kill him. He trusted God perfectly, so he had no fear of the devil or the world around him.

We aren't like that, are we? Even though we do trust in Jesus, even though we depend on him to get us to heaven, when it comes to living in this world, quite often we find it much harder to throw everything onto his shoulders. That includes having the courage to talk about him to people who need most to hear about him. It's a strange thing that our sinful flesh does. There is no better news than the good news about Jesus. There is nothing more comforting than hearing how he died and he rose to give us eternal life. And yet, when people really need to hear that message from us, we struggle to spit it out. We worry that the richest, more comforting message ever given won't be good enough – that it will, in fact, sound stupid. Of course, in this sinful world, to ears that are hardened by sin, it just might. St. Paul called the gospel foolishness – to people who don't believe it, it does sound stupid. But built into the simple, foolish message of God's love is God's power to make us – and the people we speak to – believers.

In the end, our own sinful hearts constantly sabotage our efforts to proclaim the gospel. They demonstrate how little we deserve God's love and how much we deserve the death and the hell that Jesus suffered. They show how unworthy we are to have a Savior like him who was willing to give all for us, without asking us to earn it. But even though we didn't earn it, God still gave it. Even though we don't deserve him, Jesus still came and he still laid down his life for these sinful hearts. He died for our embarrassment about talking about him. He died for our fear of looking foolish and for the love of ourselves that it shows. He died for all the times we failed to share his love. And he paid for that sin. And he rose and he wiped it away. God has freed us from our guilt.

Today, God comes to us in the gospel and he builds us up so that we can share his love. He says, “I love you. I forgive you for all that you have ever done. I have made you mine and nothing in this world can

separate you from me. I have loved you with an everlasting, unbreakable love. And I will give you the courage and the strength you need to speak for me. I will give you the desire, and yes, even the words you need. I will do all that for you.” And when he says that to us, he does a miracle in our hearts. He takes stammering, self-pitying, self-absorbed sinners like us and he makes us his witnesses. He equips us to explain the hope that we have. He fills us with his gospel so that we can comfort our friends and family as they hurt, so that we can invite them to come and hear more, so that we can love them with the love we have received. He gives us the words we need to point to Jesus. Then through those very words we gives us to speak, he reaches into the hearts of those who hear us. And he makes them his.

That speaks to the most difficult question of all: how can we be better missionaries? There’s only one way: by hearing the gospel. By coming to communion. By studying God’s word alone and together. If we want our church to grow, if we want more people to hear the gospel from us, the key is for us to drink deep of the gospel of Jesus Christ because that’s how God makes us missionaries.

So who does mission work? We all do. We do it every time we bring an offering to church. We do it every time we pray for our pastors and teachers, our missionaries and our work. We do it in all the ways that we show love to the people around us. And we do it when we ourselves speak to others. When we tell them what Jesus has done, because they’re hurting and they need to know, because they’re confused and we want them to see the light, because they’re lonely, and we want them to know how important they are to God. May God fill your hearts with his message so that as a congregation and as individuals, we can share that good news about Jesus. Amen.