

“Willing to be Found”

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Up until actually the last few years mission meant caring for people somewhere else; mission was outreach, mission was done for the less fortunate, or in the mission field. When I was growing up, and in the first churches I was in, you would have pictures of the missions you supported in The Commons or different parts of the church, and show the parts of the world they [the missions] were in - and that was very important and meaningful ministry. But we are in a different time. Mission isn't just something that happens somewhere else now. Mission is right here and right now.

We are living in a time when Christianity is on the decline. The Presbyterian denomination is losing six percent of its membership every year. You keep that up for very long and there won't be anyone left - and it isn't just us. Back in the 1990s the mainline started losing members, and the evangelicals said, “They [mainline churches] are not very faithful.” Well, oops! Now we are in 2016 and the evangelicals are right there with us losing membership. We are in the mission field right here, right now, and how we evangelize becomes very important to the future of Christianity. I think we at Westminster have something very special to share, because this cultural shift we are living in - where we have real problems with church growth right now in this country - maybe it's a blessing in disguise.

Now we can't sit back on our laurels. We have to define who we are in order for people to want to come and be a part of the ministry of Jesus Christ. We can't even assume that people know the history of the Christian faith. This is a generation where their parents didn't take them to church, so the ones who even find their way to our congregation have no idea what the Christian faith is, and we as Christians have to define who we are. So Westminster has a wonderful ministry - a positive ministry - that desperately needs to be heard. It is about hearing the truth about the inclusive Gospel and feeling that blessing. The community needs a self-less Christian experience, focused not on a God looking for a reason to cast us into hell, but a God who calls us to be the hands and feet of Christ, reaching out in service.

Further, we must share every day and not wait to see who we can cast into hell, but who we can redeem for Heaven. Further, we no longer can compartmentalize our ministries: “I'm part of the Christian Education,” or “I'm part of the music program,” or “I'm part of outreach,” or “I'm part of this or that.” We have something so much greater that we need to share. It is a “holistic” ministry of sharing the Gospel, so we all can feel that sense of joy and hope.

So I'm going to address what it means to be “lost and found.” Not so many years ago, you were lost, if you didn't say the right salvation prayer or [make] a personal commitment to Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. You were probably lost, and they said, “Lost.” It wasn't that you couldn't find your way to a church - it was that you were lost from Salvation. That theology scares me. It hurts me. We have to find the way to be inclusive enough to share a ministry in being “found,” because being lost doesn't mean being cast out. I believe in a God who loves and cares and responds, and whose mercy is more powerful than our ability to sin.

If any of us are cast out, that means that God's power to forgive and to have mercy is limited, and we do not worship an unlimited God. We worship an infinite God who is all loving, who is all powerful and who can heal even you and me: the lost. I don't believe you're lost and cast out into hell. The lost are all those who can't find their way to that relationship with God and Jesus Christ. It's not about being cast out; it's not knowing where to be found. Our goal is not to save lives from damnation. Our responsibility is to take those people who are hurting, and with everyone else, to a faith and relationship with God through Jesus Christ, and express to them the joy of what it means to have the Holy Spirit moving in and through them. We don't find them and we don't cast them out. We are just a tool to introduce them to the God who can provide.

Most of us have been lost at one point or another in our lives. We have been lost in our frustration. We have been lost in our despair. We have been lost in our bitterness. And the Holy Spirit carries us through it, finds us where we are and moves us to a more meaningful and healthy place. That is evangelism: finding those who are hurting. Saying, "I know a way. I can help you back from those moments where you don't have any faith or hope." Our Deacons do that all of the time and it has nothing to do with their soul's damnation, I don't believe in a God who does that. It is about taking the hurting and helping them find peace, in a renewed belief that they are worthy and they are loved by a loving God. It's about being lost, which means you are not using the faith. You are looking elsewhere. How can we guide you back to the faith God is trying to impart upon you? God is reaching out. All you have to do is reach back and grab the outstretched hand of the Almighty, and you will find your goal.

Today is Christian Education kick-off day, and what the teachers and volunteers are doing is mission work. No longer is mission work something you do in the outstretched places of the world. It is also done right here. So when those children, and those youth, and we adults are lost, we will know how to be found by coming back, reaching out, being prayed over and cared for again. It also prepares them in the same way, when they have friends or strangers who come in, or are out in the community, and reach out to them. They will know what to do. They know what passages of Scripture have given them strength, and they know how to share them [Scripture passages] with someone else. They prayed for their own struggle, so they know about praying for others who are struggling.

That's what Christian Education is on Sunday morning and Wednesday night. It's not just an intellectual endeavor. It prepares you for the moments when you are lost. It prepares you to help, when someone who God places in front of you is lost, and you may be the only one who can help them get found.

You are preparing yourself to do the ministry of Jesus Christ. So when Christ says, "Look, they are in need," respond, so you won't be left flat-footed, not knowing what to do, or what to say, or how to pray. You will be ready.

No athlete ever did well on the field who didn't practice two or three times as hard before they got into the game. You have to practice your faith three times as hard, so when God puts you in that moment you will be ready, you won't drop the ball, but you will be able to make a difference. The Holy Spirit will work in you and through you. Be ready. The lost will be found, and it will be done through you and me. We are found when we are lost.

Pray for one another. Work with one another. Learn from one another. That is what this kick-off day is all about.

May God bless you and keep you, and may God light a fire under you and me, that we might make a difference now and always, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.