

Sermon – April 10, 2022
“The Mission of Jesus”
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Pray with me: Father, let the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer. Come, Holy Spirit, come, visit, fill and anoint the sharing of these words. Make them a blessing for your people that leads to life eternal and fruitful labor as we join with you to work in your harvest on this mission field. Lord, come and astonish us with your word this day. Amen

Good morning on this Palm Sunday. This is the day we celebrate Jesus’ entrance into Jerusalem amid the shouts of “Hosanna! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord. Hosanna!” Jesus came into the city riding on a donkey. A humble king arrives to the shouts and praises of his followers and some people of Jerusalem. This crowd, in great hope, welcomes a humble king. Their praises unknowingly point forward to the coming of God’s salvation. Their praises carry far more meaning than most, if not all, understood. Salvation is coming. Jesus’ mission was not to be an earthly king, but to fully follow God’s plan and die on the cross.

The praise and welcome that began on the summit of the Mount of Olives does not spread throughout the city and pour into the temple. Instead, this king’s welcome fades away as Jesus descends into Jerusalem. Jesus does not stop the crowd’s praise and welcome, but it ends. The jubilant crowd fades into the city, and the temple leadership pays no attention to the arrival of Jesus, God, in their midst. Our own celebration these 2000 plus years later marks the arrival of our humble king who will bring salvation through his death and resurrection. Jesus’ mission will lead him to the cross and death. The cross is a strange endpoint from the joyful reception that began on the Mount of Olives’ summit. This is the mission of Jesus, a mission that continues today through the body of Christ. Let’s look beyond this temporary welcome of Jesus and at his continuing mission.

Have we ever seen a poster fixed to a power pole placed by someone searching for a lost pet? Maybe we have placed one ourselves. Sometimes people with the gift of humor use these posters to share their gift. Some of the better attempts include a poster showing a picture of a unicorn with the words “Missing unicorn. If you have seen him, you are probably on drugs.” Another displayed a picture of a pigeon and read, “Have you seen this bird? (Because they’re everywhere.)” Or another where the poster read, “Missing puzzle piece. (It’s the final piece, and I’ve looked everywhere.)” At our house the poster would be a plea to find my keys, cell phone, or

one of those many items that I saved over the years for a special job that is now lost somewhere in the garage.

If God created a poster, what do we think would be on it? It might have a picture of a diverse group of people with the words, “LOST: My prize creation. Made in my image. Wandered off and may be beat up and hungry.” We need to realize that many people today do not have a relationship with God. Many have never heard of God and many have been exposed to God, but don’t think they need God in their lives. They seek to live as if God does not exist.

In Luke 15, we find three parables Jesus told his disciples. They all have the same theme: God is searching for people. The first two of the parables speak to an all-out search for what was lost. The first is about a shepherd who loses a sheep and goes searching for it. The second is about a woman who has lost a tenth of her life savings and searches for the lost coin. Both of these searchers drop everything they are doing and search diligently for their lost item until they find it. Jesus told these parables not to instruct his followers to be those who search diligently for lost items. He was speaking to the idea of how he searches for those who are disconnected from God, the lost. Jesus’s point in these parables was that he had come to find the lost, help them repent, and then help them start a new relationship with the God who created them. This is my own developing image of what followers of Jesus are to be doing. They are to be people following Jesus and going out into the world to search for the lost.

In these parables, there are principles to guide our search for the lost. The first principle is the greater the danger, the greater the urgency. I remember being a new parent of a two year old, who in the middle of winter learned to open the outside doors by herself. I recall thinking how easy it would be for her to get up at night and go downstairs while Kay and I were asleep and go out into the cold. It was at that point that I put dead bolts on our doors that were out of her reach. Can you imagine what you would do if you woke up to discover your child had wandered out into the woods at night when it’s zero degrees? You would call in the police to help search, because your child is in significant danger. You’d drop whatever you were doing, because your child is lost and there is no time to lose. It doesn’t matter if you are tired, you do it, and it doesn’t matter if others are tired; you enlist them, because your child is in danger. With great danger we respond with great urgency. In these parables, Jesus speaks to some urgency in the search for the lost. The shepherd knows the dangers a lone sheep faces. It might easily be killed or starve. Through urgency included in the parable, Jesus is implying that lost people are in spiritual danger. We see this theme in the Palm

Sunday arrival of Jesus. There may be joy when Jesus arrives, but people are not connected to Jesus and they fall away. They are lost, but Jesus has come to save.

We don't seem to have a great sense of urgency today to share our faith with people, especially those who seem to be doing fine without a relationship with Jesus. One haunting statistic for the United Methodist Church is that the average member invites someone to church once every 34 years. And some of us are above average. Think about our neighbors. They are very likeable, not argumentative or abrasive. They appear moral and generous. They love their kids and family. And from the outside looking in, even if they follow a non-Christian religion, it's difficult to imagine that they're going to miss being with God in heaven eternally just because they don't feel the need for Jesus. They appear to be good people. This idea comes from the assumption that we earn salvation by the goodness of our lives. If we are good, we get into heaven. Those around us are often nicer and much more thoughtful than many others we are aware of, so we assume they should be accepted by God. However, Scripture says something very different. Salvation does not depend on being good or bad; salvation is about us being spiritually alive or dead. Let's look together at Ephesians 2: 1 – 5. "You were dead through the trespasses and sins in which you once lived, following the course of this world, following the ruler of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work among those who are disobedient. All of us once lived among them in the passions of our flesh, following the desires of flesh and senses, and we were by nature children of wrath, like everyone else. But God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ — by grace you have been saved—." What we find in the Word of God is that each of us has sinned and as a result, our spirit is dead. Only Jesus can make us alive, and he does that not because we are good and have earned life, but because of his grace for us. Our good neighbors, friends, family members, and coworkers who are seeking to enter heaven by their goodness are dead in the spirit. The question we need to ask ourselves is "What level of urgency do we have for them?" Does our urgency begin to approach what we would have for a child lost in the cold and facing death?

The next principle for searching we find in Jesus' parables is the greater the value, the longer the effort. The idea for this principle is that even if it is frustrating to search for something and not find it immediately, we will continue to search if what is lost is valuable to us. There are things I know are in my garage, but I can't find them until I buy another one. An old bolt that cost 50 cents doesn't get much search time before I will go to a hardware store and buy a new bolt. If we

had lost a winning lottery ticket for millions of dollars, how long would we search until we found it? I am confident that none of us, if we knew that somewhere in our home was a winning ticket, would go out and buy another ticket to replace it. We would search until we found our missing item. We should realize that God has been searching for people to save since there were people. This is the story of the Bible. It is a story of God drawing His people back to Himself. Jesus' entry into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday looks like the beginning of the awakening of the people of Israel, an awakening that fades by the time the procession reaches the temple. But the mission of Jesus does not stop with the loss of a cheering crowd. The questions we should ask ourselves in response to this principle are "How valuable are lost people to us?" and "Do I see the lost with the same eyes of love God sees them with?"

The final principle in these parables is the greater the love, the greater the joy. Let's look at Luke 15:6-7 and 9 – 10 to find this principle. "And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and neighbors, saying to them, 'Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep that was lost.' Just so, I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance." And in verses 9-10, "When she has found it, she calls together her friends and neighbors, saying, 'Rejoice with me, for I have found the coin that I had lost.' Just so, I tell you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents." Do we hear this principle? There is great joy among the angels over a sinner who repents. Heaven celebrates the new life of the lost. On the day each of us surrendered our lives to Christ, there was a great celebration in heaven, the same celebration that occurs for every one of those around us who becomes a Christian and follows Jesus Christ.

We might wonder why Jesus tells these parables. The point is not for us to be willing to search diligently for lost things, but to lovingly and urgently search for the lost around us. In Luke 19:10 Jesus tells us, "The Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost." This is the reason Jesus rides into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday, not to become a king, but to seek and to save the lost. This is Jesus' mission and he equips us, his followers, to participate in his mission. He trained the twelve closest disciples and then seventy-two others, sending them out on preaching and healing missions. Today God chooses every believer to be His messenger. Our message is not an invitation to church, but an invitation for us to tell the lost the Good News.

There was a court case in Massachusetts in the 1920s that we might find startling. A man had been walking along a pier when he fell into the water. He came up screaming for help, then

slipped below water. His friends were too far away to get there in time. Just yards away, though, a young man was relaxing on a deck chair. He was an excellent swimmer, and he heard the man cry, "I can't swim!" But he did nothing. He watched as the man finally sank and drowned. The family of the victim sued the man for extreme indifference. They lost. The court ruled that he had no legal responsibility to try to save the man. It may have been immoral, but it wasn't illegal. It seems unbelievable that this young man could sit and watch another person drown and do nothing. Yet, we all know people who are without a relationship with Christ who are drowning in aimlessness, selfishness, and sin. And like this young man, we are the ones that God, who loves them enough to have His Son die for them, has placed in a position to search for them and rescue them. Years ago, there was an often-quoted statistic about the lost. It had been determined through surveys and interviews that 80% of the people who did not go to church would go if someone invited them. Today that statistic is changing. Most people will not come to a church. Our society and our churches have inoculated people to church. An invitation to come and join a congregation will most likely not get a positive response, but people will develop a relationship with us if we will make the effort to seek them out. How can we develop relationships with the lost that allow us to share the Good News with them?

For those who are reading the book *A Jesus-Shaped Life*, you will find that Steve Cordle references a technique developed by Dave Ferguson that uses the acrostic BLESS. It is a five-step rhythm for life that helps us engage the lost and share the Good News with them. Let me give a quick summary this morning. The first step is marked by the letter B and it stands for "Begin with prayer." Before we do anything else, we are to talk with God about the people who are lost in our lives. Pray for the people around us by name. Ask God to lead us to opportunities to interact with them. The "L" is Listen. As God opens doors for us to interact, we are to talk with the lost and ask them questions. Our goal is to get to know them and to hear their needs, concerns, and dreams. We should be seeking to hear their life story, and when they share, to listen carefully. The "E" stands for Eat. We are to eat with them to bond with them. Table fellowship is a technique that Jesus used. He ate with sinners. We also are to seek to interact with people in this manner and as we do, we are to develop a deeper relationship with them. The first "S" stands for Serve. We are to serve them where they have needs. As we meet with them and listen, we will learn about their needs. As we do, we are to serve them through the love that Jesus has given us. We are to look for those opportunities for small things we may do for them with great love. The final "S" is Share. As we listen carefully

to those we are growing a relationship with, at some point the Holy Spirit will open a window when they will ask a question about why we love as we do. That is our opening. It is our moment in Jesus' mission to be Christ for people, and our response to their question is to share our story of how Jesus has and is impacting our life. This is not a long, detailed story, but a three-minute description of our life before we met Christ, how we began a growing relationship with Christ, and how our life has been since we began to follow Jesus. This is your story, a story only you can tell, a story that you know. A story that the Holy Spirit is seeking to use to open the door to hope so that a lost soul may come into a relationship with Jesus and be found. You see, Jesus is urgently searching for his people, his valued treasure, and we get to be part of his search party. Jesus rode down from the Mount of Olives and the joyful cries faded, but he continued in his mission all the way to the cross so that all people may be reconciled to God through him. Jesus is looking for those who follow him to be searchers, not TV evangelists, but those who are with the lost, praying for them, talking to them, listening to them, growing relationships with them, loving them, serving them, and always ready to share our story about how Jesus has impacted, transformed, and is transforming our lives. This may be something that we need to work on, learning to tell another person of Jesus' love for us and for them. For most of my life, I thought that inviting people to church was the job I had in Jesus' mission. I thought that I was to invite them to church and when they got there, the Holy Spirit and the pastor did the rest. But as a Christ follower, a part of the body of Christ, and being part of continuing Jesus' mission, there is a key step that we all need to be prepared, ready and willing to take with Jesus in his mission. We are to be in the world, praying for those God puts into our lives, listening to them, getting to know them, serving them, enjoying table fellowship with them, and always being ready to respond to the Spirit's leading us to tell our story of Jesus' transforming filling of love in our lives. Whose life is Jesus urgently leading us to work in today? Are we ready to tell our story? Will we continue the mission of Jesus beyond the palms, beyond the cross, into the lives of those Jesus leads us to right here, right now? People, get ready, Jesus is at work in his mission and is asking us to join him there.

Pray with me. Jesus, open our eyes to those in our lives in this place who are lost. Give us new hearts of love to pray for them, listen to them, enjoy table fellowship with them, serve them as we are able, have courage to share our story of your saving grace that was given to us, and to invite them into the fullness of your love. In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.