

## What Does it Mean to be "Missional?"

### John 3: 1-10

#### WEBSITE VERSION

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**Text: John 3:1-15 (NIV)** <sup>1</sup> Now there was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a member of the Jewish ruling council. <sup>2</sup> He came to Jesus at night and said, "Rabbi, we know you are a teacher who has come from God. For no one could perform the miraculous signs you are doing if God were not with him." <sup>3</sup> In reply Jesus declared, "I tell you the truth, no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again." <sup>4</sup> "How can a man be born when he is old?" Nicodemus asked. "Surely he cannot enter a second time into his mother's womb to be born!" <sup>5</sup> Jesus answered, "I tell you the truth, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is born of water and the Spirit. <sup>6</sup> Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit. <sup>7</sup> You should not be surprised at my saying, 'You must be born again.' <sup>8</sup> The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit." <sup>9</sup> "How can this be?" Nicodemus asked. <sup>10</sup> "You are Israel's teacher," said Jesus, "and do you not understand these things?"

Nicodemus. Apparently he was a man interested in Heaven. Most people are. And Nicodemus had friends among the rulers of Israel who were also interested in the question of Heaven. We can tell that because of how he began his comments to Jesus:

**"Rabbi, we know you are a teacher who has come from God. For no one could perform the miraculous signs you are doing if God were not with him."**

He said "We..." But the friends did not come with him probably because the Heaven question was not quite worth getting in trouble over. In fact, even though Nicodemus was interested in Heaven, he came at night so that no one would see him...he hoped! Why? Because Jesus was not an official, ordained, certified, registered member of the local clergy. So, no self-

respecting leader would go and ask questions of such a man. But he did go. Despite being a teacher himself, he went. Why? Because he did not have the slightest idea how to enter the Kingdom of God or Heaven...and most people do not either. But what is really uncanny and marvelous about this is that Jesus knew exactly what Nicodemus was all about! We may say "Well, of course Jesus knew because he was the Son of God!" But when we see Jesus share the Good news we must not always think he just did it supernaturally. Jesus was fully human as well as Divine and Jesus models for us the way to interact with lost people. Jesus was "missional."

So, on this last Sunday of Missions Month 2011, here is the question: are we as a church and as individual Christians..."missional?" Is the *mission* clear to us? Are we prepared to share the Good news and be perceptive about the worldview of others? Put another way...if someone comes to you or to me seeking Heaven...wondering about the Kingdom of God...do we know what to say? Let's consider what it means to be missional. But first let's pray.

Let me tell you a story. A true story. In the early nineteen fifties, a very handsome young guy named Jim was graduated from college in Florida. Not certain what he wanted to do with his life, he settled in on a solution. He would lead the good life. Pretty girls, parties and some serious drinking. All of this became easier as he earned his living as an instructor at the Arthur Murray Dance Studio. But somehow, Jim was not satisfied with that life...although he had no idea what to do differently.

One particular Saturday night he came home very late, Sunday morning really. Badly hung over Jim awoke to his alarm clock and for some reason it was set not to music but to a church service. As his eyes were rudely forced open all he heard was some preacher asking loudly "So...if you die tonight...and God asks why He should let you into His Heaven...what will you say?" For a man with a nasty hangover who was not particularly thinking of Heaven, this was a rather unpleasant way to wake up! There he was up on one elbow with a headache realizing that he had no idea what he *would* say to God if he died that night! But that was for Jim the beginning of the great eternal journey.

Jim was converted to a vibrant Christian faith not long after that. Better known as D. James Kennedy, he went off to seminary and was ordained into the Gospel ministry. In the late nineteen fifties he became the Pastor of a Presbyterian Church in Corel Ridge, Florida. Laboring hard with about fifty people, James Kennedy was led of the Lord to develop the "Evangelism Explosion" Program. "EE" as it is called trained dozens and then hundreds of people to follow up on new visitors to his small church and to share the Gospel. Today "EE" has been taught all over the world

and I have had the joy of using his techniques for presenting the Gospel many times myself.

Here is a question: what does it mean to be "missional?" Why does this word keep coming up? It sounds simple but we're not quite sure what church leaders mean by it. "Missional." In the nineteen sixties, a television series began on CBS called "Mission Impossible." You may remember it. Each episode opened with a secret agent type telling one of his super hero guys about an impossible mission that was needed to save the world or rescue some high official. Whatever. And he always opened his remarks with these words: "Your mission...should you choose to accept it...is..." and then he'd tell him the assignment. But he never needed to explain the word "mission." The super-agent fellow understood that word..."mission" in its everyday sense: "An important assignment given by someone in authority to a subordinate who is expected to carry that assignment forth to a satisfactory completion."

Ok. So, my mission today from the church Elders is to preach a sermon that will edify the people of God and exalt the Lord Jesus Christ. That's easy. I must be committed to that mission and consider it of greater importance than anything else. I am the wrong guy for the mission if I decide on a Sunday morning to just go golfing and not do my work. And I must be prepared and I must have a meaningful knowledge of the people whom I am trying to reach. Being missional with the Gospel means:

1. Knowing your assignment
2. Understanding the people you're trying to reach
3. Being prepared as God presents the opportunity to carry out the mission

Think of it this way: Jesus stands before us and says here is your mission if you choose to accept it:

**Matthew 28:19-20 (NIV) <sup>19</sup> Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, <sup>20</sup> and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age."**

OK. So now let's think like the super-agent in the TV show "Mission Impossible." The key for him was that until that mission was accomplished, no matter what else he did or where he went ...he had the mission on his mind! He had to know about his task and know as much as possible about the people with whom he would be dealing! Nothing took precedence over

his mission. I think that is how Jesus wants us be “missional.” More precisely, I suggest this definition of being “missional” in the church:

**“Every Christian individually and with others in the church committed to making genuine disciples by sharing the Gospel as the Holy Spirit provides the opportunity to do so.”**

But being truly missional must be rooted in an attitude, as always, that I am willing to get out of my comfort zone. Put another way, we can be either **MYOPIC or MISSIONAL**. Here’s what I mean. Remember that “Myopia” is a condition of near-sightedness where you can only see what is right in front of you. A person suffering from Myopia is called “myopic.” Christian Myopia is a vision problem in the Bible-believing church because sometimes we can only see what is right in front of us. Here are some “Spiritually Myopic” statements:

1. I don’t care what non-Christians think; it doesn’t interest me
2. If people don’t believe the Bible is the Word of God then they are free to go straight to Hell
3. Our job as Christians is to tend to each other as believers until the Lord returns
4. I’ll reach the lost for Christ but I don’t want to hear their arguments

But thinking “missionally” means that we do care what they think and why they think it. We have a perfect example of this reality and I will touch on it again. Last winter I caused a stir because we examined different ways of looking at the creation passages in Genesis. At that time I said that my view is that they are probably best understood as figurative language filled with theological themes. I believe they are the Word of God but that their meaning was not intended to give us scientific detail about the creation timeline etc.

At that time, and still to an extent, I had people saying they thought I was rejecting the trustworthiness of the Bible. I had people suggest that I not even discuss it as it can be divisive and troubling. I had people say “Who cares?” But again I say “We care! Or we should care!” Many if not most of the lost in our culture believe that the creation is very old and that evolution may well be true. Most of the people lost in our culture believe that we believe the only way to read the Bible is as a literalist on the creation narratives. Most of the lost in our culture think...I would say correctly...that Bible-believing folks have not even examined the issues that inform their views. But if I’m going to missional with the lost, I must be prepared to offer insights into their worldview before I suggest my worldview is superior. But I cannot do that if I do not know their worldview and...*how they arrived at it and why they believe it!*

Let me suggest this: most of the lost today in a highly technical and science-minded culture believe in a material worldview. They believe in matter. They believe in what they can see and touch. They believe that the only thing about which we can be certain is material. They hear the strident atheists saying that science has disproven the need to believe in God because science has an alternative explanation for how the world came about! We have to know what they think and why!

By the way, that worldview really did not begin with Darwin or modern science. It began much earlier before the word evolution ever came up. It began in the so-called "Age of Enlightenment" in the eighteenth century in Europe. That period saw a rapid expansion of language and learning and art and science. It was the period where men really began to dismiss religion as primitive and believe that man was the measure of all things. That God was vague at best. The Enlightenment gave us modern humanism. That is why I think godless evolution by the way is not the cause of modern depravity but godless evolution is a symptom of it. Godless evolution says man developed without God...it is the perfect religion for unspiritual people because it gives them a worldview that they can lean on. But the great thing is that God is saving many of these people.

We sit here in this beautiful Sanctuary and think "OK Pastor Alberta...but I don't know anyone who thinks that way." But I would say politely "Yes you do!" There are people in your office or neighborhood or family who think exactly that way *or...and THIS IS A VERY IMPORTANT OR*...they are considering thinking that way but they are open to having some missional Christian talk with them! But we cannot talk with them without insight into how they think. To be missional is to not be myopic! To be missional is to not focus only on what you think but what the lost person thinks! Here are a couple of examples from the Word of God that show us missional activities.

Consider the Lord Jesus Christ on a hot day in Samaria twenty centuries ago. He deliberately works it so he will be near a well at noontime but without his disciples. Why? Because they did not yet understand what it meant to be missional. Jesus was eager to share the Gospel with a lost Samaritan woman and his disciples would have...in their myopic spiritual state...have been scandalized. Jews hated Samaritans and they would have said to Jesus "Oh...don't tell *her* about the Kingdom of God!" But Jesus knows all about her and what she thinks and believes.

You remember that Jesus asks her for a drink and she is surprised. Then they talk about water and she totally misunderstands what he means about himself being the living water. But notice how Jesus knows all about her and how he is available to share and how he is concerned for her soul. We read:

**John 4:19-24 (NIV) <sup>19</sup> "Sir," the woman said, "I can see that you are a prophet. <sup>20</sup> Our fathers worshiped on this mountain, but you Jews claim that the place where we must worship is in Jerusalem." <sup>21</sup> Jesus declared, "Believe me, woman, a time is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. <sup>22</sup> You Samaritans worship what you do not know; we worship what we do know, for salvation is from the Jews. <sup>23</sup> Yet a time is coming and has now come when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for they are the kind of worshipers the Father seeks. <sup>24</sup> God is spirit, and his worshipers must worship in spirit and in truth."**

The Lord Jesus Christ is totally missional. He knows several key things that go into missional thinking:

FIRST, that all people somewhere down inside believe in God. Even the hardest ones who say they are atheists know very well that there is a God and that they should worship him. Paul writes in Romans One:

**Romans 1:20 (NIV) <sup>20</sup> For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities--his eternal power and divine nature--have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that men are without excuse.**

SECOND: Jesus is totally missional because he knows that everyone believes there is an afterlife and everyone really wants to go to Heaven! Some may say "Nonsense!" to that but the Bible proves that everyone knows there is an afterlife even if they deny it! Consider this remarkable verse from the pen of Solomon:

**Ecclesiastes 3:11 (NIV) <sup>11</sup> He has made everything beautiful in its time. He has also set eternity in the hearts of men; yet they cannot fathom what God has done from beginning to end.**

The Word of God just said man knows he or she was designed with an eternal soul that will live on. And count on it, he or she is worried about it! That's why Jesus says to her:

**John 4:10 (NIV) <sup>10</sup> Jesus answered her, "If you knew the gift of God and who it is that asks you for a drink, you would have asked him and he would have given you living water."**

Jesus shows us what it means to be missional because he is ready and he is knowledgeable about the other person. And he values their souls. Peter hung around with Jesus for three years. Little wonder after Jesus departed, Peter wrote to the young Christians and said:

**1 Peter 3:15 (NIV) <sup>15</sup> But in your hearts set apart Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you**

**to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect...**

Being missional means caring about the lost, knowing their worldview and being prepared to tell them the Good News! It is not myopic.

Another perfect example of being missional is Paul when he went up to Athens. This was also a great event. Athens was considered the center of learning and philosophy. Paul did not say "Oh I don't care what they think or why they think it." No, he studied the Athenians and he even went up to the pinnacle of their society where they liked to sit around and debate ideas. It was called the "Areopagus." Paul cares about them and he knows their worldview and he is prepared to meet them where they are and begin to share.

Now we must understand that Paul, being a devout Jew who had come to Christ, would have been most offended at any form of idolatry. And these people in Athens had dozens of "gods" ... yet Paul did not turn away because he was missional. We read:

**Acts 17:22-23 (NIV) <sup>22</sup> Paul then stood up in the meeting of the Areopagus and said: "Men of Athens! I see that in every way you are very religious. <sup>23</sup> For as I walked around and looked carefully at your objects of worship, I even found an altar with this inscription: TO AN UNKNOWN GOD. Now what you worship as something unknown I am going to proclaim to you.**

He knows all about them and what they believe! He says "My goodness you folks are really religious! You've got all kinds of gods and in case you missed one you've even got an 'unknown' God! But listen closely and I will tell you about the real God!" Paul was missional. He cared about the lost and he was prepared to share with the lost and he knew the worldview of the lost. And we must be missional.

Now, as if to help me in this humble sermon, God provided me with a perfect illustration of being missional the other day. This is a story about myself so please forgive me for sounding as if I'm saying "What a good boy am I." [Although I am a good boy!:]

Early last week when I was pretty sore from my surgery, I was not feeling very missional. In fact, I was feeling completely myopic! And as God would have it, the guy who services our water softener rings the bell. Now...I really like this man but...he talks a lot. I mean...a lot! And he tells me so much detail about how the system works...about salt scaling and brine build-up ...I mean my eyes glaze over and I find myself praying "Oh Lord...I don't care about this stuff...give me patience!" So anyway...I'm sitting there pretending I'm interested while I'm mentally tapping my fingers

and imagining the fourteen other things I'd like to be doing. Finally, he wraps it up and I sign the paper saying we owe them twenty one dollars or something...and I'm ready to say "Thank you and good-bye." And he sits back down and says "Can I ask you something? I know you're a minister so...can I ask you something?" [And I can hear the Lord saying "OK...Mr. Myopic guy...it's time to be missional!"]

And my friend says "My wife is a Christian and she goes to a Bible church...and I should go with her...I know that...but Sunday is my only day off..." And I interject "So you're a bum right?" And he says "Yeah I am. I'm a bum. But tell me what you think about this...my wife says that all the people God made are all right here on this planet but I think that with all those billions of other planets and stuff out there...that there are probably lots of other sorts of people *out there* somewhere...right? What do you think?"

So I said "Ah...I...have no idea. But if you're interested in the creation, I've got a DVD called "The Case for Creation that is all about God and the incredible universe that He designed and created...I'll give it to you." He said "Really? I'm really interested in all of that! I'll watch it tonight!" And I said "Speaking of tonight...if you die tonight will you go to Heaven?" And that opened up about a half hour conversation at the end of which we prayed together. I don't think he got saved at that moment but he left very interested. I'll let you know what comes of it...please pray for our water-softener friend!

Seeing people come to Christ is the most exciting thing in the world. These are the days of Elijah when the way is being prepared for the Lord's return. We must be missional! And we can hear Jesus saying "Here is your mission...if you are willing to accept it...as you go...make disciples!"

Let us pray.

