

Sermon on Outward-Looking (mission 3 of 5)
(Amos 5:6-7, 12, 14-15 and Matthew 28:16-20)

David Bosch is noted for saying that “To participate in mission is to participate in love, for God is a fountain of sending love.”

In his book *The Healthy Churches Handbook*, author Robert Warren reminds us that the Christian Church is full of stories of people who did this, including, in our own time, Mother Teresa of Calcutta’s care for the poor, Martin Luther King’s championing the cause of racial justice, Archbishop Desmond Tutu’s call for the Church to be the ‘rainbow people of God’ joyfully celebrating racial diversity as a gift from God, and Dame Cicely Saunders’ pioneering work in starting the hospice movement for care of the dying. They probably didn’t start out with that in mind but somewhere along the way they saw a need or an injustice and became a participant in “God’s fountain of sending love.”

Today, often in hidden and smaller ways, this passion is what many understand the Christian faith to be all about. St. Thomas’ has been and continues to be very good at this. There was the Christmas Dinner which we are still involved in ecumenically, and who knows may even get it back some day. There is the Prison Ministry and aftercare we are known for. We were one of the original partners in the establishment of The Gathering Place and we are still very much involved in the Emmaus Food-Bank ministry. In addition to that we give, free of cost, space in the parish hall to a number of outside charities – the guides and AA just to name a couple. St. Thomas’ has always been passionate about outreach and social justice. And if possible we are going to take that to a new level.

During the discernment process we were listening to what God wants. Well God spoke loud and clear on this one. Our second Core Value is Outward-Looking, which includes the ministries of outreach and social justice. Robert Warren reminds us that a church with an outward-looking focus has a ‘whole life’ rather than a ‘church life’ concern. This is a church that is deeply rooted in the local community, working in partnership with other denominations, secular groups and networks. It is a church that is passionate and prophetic about justice and peace, locally and globally. Moreover, it makes connections between faith and daily living, and responds to human need by loving service.

But before I go any further with that I want to say a few words about right belief. What you believe matters, immensely. For example, if you believe that Jesus is coming soon to beam you and your friends up to heaven, you’ll find plenty of reasons not to protect the environment or any other part of God’s creation.

I must tell you this little story which is both comical and disgusting at the same time. A man felt he needed to tell me what he believed. I said, “continue.” He said, “I believe in a good woman.” Knowing this person I knew exactly where he was going with this, nevertheless, I prompted him. “Tell me a little more,” I said. “What do you mean.” He said, “when I come home at the end of a hard days work my supper is on the table. When I am ready to watch a little sports on the TV she brings me a beer at my request.” And there are details to his story that is just too distasteful to share. So we all know what he believed. Belief is what forms our actions (and passions) – right or wrong!

Conversely, if you believe that every human being matters and bears the Holy image of God, from your friends with mental illness to your precious relatives on the autism spectrum, from the homeless man sitting on the sidewalk holding an empty can and can’t hold his head up to the

little boys and girls who are being conscripted as child soldiers at this very moment, or to the significant other in your life who is a child of God and deserves equal respect, then your belief is significant indeed, **if it leads you to action. Motivates you!**

And where do we get our belief from? From the One who showed us what God is like – a loving, forgiving, compassionate God who desires mercy and not sacrifice, the God who prophetically calls us to love good and hate evil. We get our belief from the One who humbled himself and became the form of a servant. The way of Jesus is the way of love, the way of self-giving that others may have life and have it abundantly. What we believe is so important.

As mentioned earlier one of the attributes of a church with an Outward-Looking focus is to be passionate and prophetic about justice and peace, locally and globally. There was no prophet more prophetic about justice than Amos. Our First reading this morning from the Book of the prophet Amos is about how the injustice of humanity brings about God's justice.

During the Exile the people of Israel had made a covenant before God in the Sinai wilderness on this whole idea of justice, the moral attribute that belongs to both God by his nature and to the person who obediently conforms to his will. But now that they have settled into the land of Canaan and have become a nation, they have turned their backs on this ancient code. By their greed and false measurements they are exploiting and oppressing the poor.

Verse 7: "Ah, you that turn justice to wormwood,
and bring righteousness to the ground!"

Wormwood is a Palestinian plant with exceedingly bitter taste and was often used in metaphors to describe the bitterness of calamity. And that is exactly what is happening here – it is a calamity; a bitter national calamity. So Amos' prophetic voice calls the whole nation – **the Whole Nation** -- to repentance and to turn back to the God of justice.

Verses 14 and 15: "Seek good and not evil, that you may live;
and so the Lord, the God of hosts, will be with you, just as you have said.
Hate evil and love good, and establish justice in the gate;
it may be that the Lord, the God of hosts, will be gracious to the remnant of Joseph.

Justice is not an individual thing but a corporate thing. As someone once said, "Justice is the corporate expression of love in the concrete." There are over 2100 references in the Bible concerning the issue of Social Justice. Churches that are outward-looking care passionately about the world around them and their immediate locality. If we **believe** in social justice, and if that **belief** moves us to action, then we are living according to the teachings of Jesus Christ whose desire is to do the will of his Father in heaven.

An important part of our new mission/vision is to grow the church -- NOT to save it or preserve it, but to grow it. And we realize (through our visioning process) that in order to do that our target group is the younger generation and young families. From what I have read young people are not satisfied simply to show up in churches week after week, singing songs and listening to sermons about how God can solve their problems, and participate in rituals that doesn't mean a row of beans to them.

As important as we feel that might be, younger folks feel the Spirit calling them to go further, to care about the poor, the marginalized, the outcasts. They realize that the Gospel of Jesus Christ addresses social, political, and economic issues of the day and so must they. So they are

interested in ecological issues, environmental issues, and issues related to mental illness, and the like. Churches that are passionate about social justice are deeply attractive to that generation because their focus is not on themselves and their programs but on God's goodness and reality. (So that's the prophet Amos).

When we look at the Gospel you will quickly recognize it as the Great Commission. Here Jesus is sending us into the world: "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you."

The Church exists not just to bask in God's benediction but to carry out a mission. Another way of saying it is that the Church exists not for itself but for the welfare of others; the whole world. The Great Commission is specific. It is to go out and to reach out to others with the love of Christ, in whatever form that may be, (teaching, serving, baptizing, etc.) with the intent of making disciples. So we are in the disciple-making business. Why? What is so important about being a follower of Jesus Christ? Surely it can't be so they will become a member of a church, show up on a Sunday morning, and throw a few dollars in the plate to keep an old building open. Why would the final (earthly) words of Jesus Christ in the Gospel of Matthew be a "Commission" for us to make disciples?

Could it be that we become a better people because of that; a people who care about the things of God and wants to do something about it; a people who bears fruit, good fruit? A people with a mind and a heart for the greater good. Did not Jesus say in the parable of the fig tree that if it is not bearing fruit to get rid of it? Did he not give us a lesson in the importance of pruning in order to bear good fruit? To be a disciple of Jesus Christ is to be new creation, a people whose way of life or living adds beauty and colour to those around them. It is all about bringing God's kingdom to earth. "Thy WILL be DONE on EARTH as it is in Heaven."

In his book *The Great Spiritual Migration*, author Brian McLaren talks about how change happens and it begins with us. First, he says there is the *intra-personal change*, as the individual experiences a reorientation of heart and mind and they begin to adopt a deep and moral conviction. Disciple making is about becoming a new creation. This intra-personal change then leads to *interpersonal change*. You might say the change in you begins to rub off on others. New friendships are formed that bring healing to the social fabric. They help people envision the common good and work towards that. And then there is *Institutional change*. Like the church, an institution, people are working together for the common good, challenging anything and everything that may harm people. They are institutions that become more just with an outward-looking focus, concerned about the neighbourhood and the world at large.

I am a follower of Jesus Christ, a disciple of Jesus Christ, as are you. But I dare to say that the good Lord is not finished with me yet. He has a lot more to do in order that I may become the creature he desires of me; to be a full participant in "God's fountain of sending love." And I must admit that I am only one person, and that it will take more than one person motivated by God's love to bring about change. It will take churches like St. Thomas' with an outward looking focus; with a "whole life" rather than a "church life" concern.

No group or church is truly happy or healthy unless it has a task to fulfill beyond itself. This is the word and the mission of Jesus Christ.