

“Igniting...the Mission”

Today is part two about Igniting our Mission. Last week, Aaron shared how Jesus calls us to join him on his mission and be “fishers of people”. That’s the phrase that Jesus used when he called the disciples to follow him, and it means to draw people nearer to the God who created them and loves them. It’s about how Saint Paul’s is called to help draw people who have wandered far from God back into a relationship with Jesus. And we do this because when those people encounter the living Christ, their lives are transformed...it makes all the difference. And we heard several stories last week about lives that have been changed through their encounter with Jesus and because of their connection to others here at Saint Paul’s. That is why we exist...it’s the first part of the mission Jesus gives us.

And we’re reviewing our mission and purpose as a church because as we are moving into our Ignite Capital Campaign, we want to see exactly how critical our mission of leading people to an active faith in Jesus Christ really is...why Saint Paul’s matters. And Ignite is about releasing us from the debt we currently have so we can unleash those resources to help us do our mission in even better ways!

Today we are going to look at the second part of the mission Jesus gives us... serving the world. There’s a “both and” to faith, not an “either or”. If we come to worship and don’t put our faith into action in the world, then our faith is incomplete. Likewise, if we serve people because of our faith but don’t engage in worship, our faith is also incomplete! It’s not either/or, it is both/and. There are lots of places where Jesus couples faith and putting love into action. Jesus once said that we are blessed when we become doers, not just hearers of his word. In John 15, Jesus uses a word picture to show us the whole cycle of life in God’s Kingdom. It’s a beautiful picture. Take a look.

“I am the vine; you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing. If you do not remain in me, you are like a branch that is thrown away and withers; such branches are picked up, thrown into the fire and burned. If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. This is to my Father’s glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples.

“As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Now remain in my love. If you keep my commands, you will remain in my love, just as I have kept my Father’s commands and remain in his love. I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete. My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you. John 15:5-12 TNIV

It’s a great picture of the life Jesus wants us to experience through him. Stay connected to God’s love and pay attention to that life-line from God; that’s last week and the stories about what a difference it makes to people to discover God’s love for them and grow in their faith! And as the life-line of God’s love comes to us through the vine, it doesn’t end there, it goes through us to others, to bear fruit in the world. Bearing fruit simply means to put God’s love into action and that is another critical part of our mission because when we do that it always has the potential to grow into something more.

So it’s both/and; stay connected to the vine AND bear fruit.

In another setting, this time in Luke, Jesus is asked by a lawyer what are the most important commandments. The scriptures tell us that the lawyer was motivated to test Jesus. His actual question to Jesus is “What must I do to inherit eternal life?” Jesus turns the question around and asks the expert what is written in the law that would answer the question. The lawyer says that it is written that we should “love the Lord our God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind” and a second command is to “love your neighbor as yourself”. Jesus says, well done. Do those things and you will live.

These two sayings are called the great commandments and in this scene you see Jesus putting the “both/and” of faith together. It is both loving God and loving your neighbor.

What does it look like when we are out there in the community doing good works? Why is it important that our church is really out there in the community, in the world? That’s where we are going, but before we do, I want to make a brief disclaimer here.

We are going to be looking at our good works today, how we put God’s love into action in the world (serving the world) and I just want you to know that we are not proclaiming that our good works will lead to our salvation. As a church, we are totally in agreement with Ephesians 2:8-9 TNIV, ***For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast.***

Grace, we call it. God’s love is given to us as a gift. We can’t earn it, don’t deserve it. No amount of good works in God’s name will ever make us worthy of this gift. It is just something we accept and receive and in

accepting this gift, we accept that we are unworthy of it, and by faith we believe that God through Jesus wants to give it to us anyway, because that is just how much God loves you. This is a critically important understanding in the Christian faith. *Sola fide*, Luther put it...faith alone. And it is true; it is by faith alone in the saving works of Jesus that we are saved.

But you know, the next verse in Ephesians 2 is also critically important; ***For we are God's handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do. Ephesians 2:10 TNIV.*** Both/and, not either or. I think there's a lot in this one verse. We are God's handiwork, formed and fashioned and rewired by the Holy Spirit for a purpose – that purpose is to do good works, demonstrate God's love in action. And this is so important to God that the verse says that God is going to get busy setting up opportunities for us to show the world what his love looks like!

So we are saved by our faith, our salvation does not happen because of what we do, but doing good works is what we were created for! We are saved from something...from our sin, from death, and we are saved for something...to do good works. Now the word "good" in the Greek means "Kindness and generosity". So we are saved from sin and saved for works of kindness and generosity. We are created for this...

EG Hardy was a Chaplain in the British Military at the turn of the 20th Century, and he said this powerful statement. "The purpose of religion is not to get a man into heaven, but to get heaven into a man." Our good works are the way that we show others what a little slice of heaven looks like! Jesus wants to fill us with his spirit so that our lives bear resemblance to him. So that we embody his compassion for those in need, so that we embody his love for everyone – doesn't matter who they are or where they come from or what they believe or how they dress or what they do for a living! Good works put the fruit of our relationship with Jesus out there in a way that the world can taste and see for themselves that the Lord is indeed good! Good works make God's love for people visible to them.

I believe we are getting better and better as a church at serving the world! And I want to share some ways that I see us living out this part of our mission. These are just a few places where you are bearing fruit in the world...

RAINBOW NETWORK

Maybe when you take the sweeping glance across this world with all it's problems and heartbreaking realities of poverty and need, you ask the question I once asked, "What can I do about all of that?" Well, here is what we are doing as a church.

When I think about the ways that the people of our church are bearing fruit in the world, I think about our partnership with Rainbow Network and the village of Las Rosas in Nicaragua.

We've been faith partners with Las Rosas for over 4 years now. Through Rainbow Network, collectively over the last four year, we have invested somewhere between \$80-100k into ministries that help create self-sustaining communities in rural Nicaragua. And in those four years we have sent 4-5 teams of people down to witness what is happening and build relationships with our friends in Las Rosas.

About a year ago, Tammy Swab went on a trip to visit Las Rosas with a few others from our church and I'd like you hear a short message from her.

The amazing results that she is talking about: In a region where malnutrition rates among children reached over 70%, and there were malnutrition related deaths, that rate is now down to 8%. Where only a handful of children would have received an elementary education in our village, now all do. Many many more will get high school education and some will even go to university.

The economy of the region is being revitalized through micro-loan enterprises. Clean water, health education and doctors supplied with medicines now give the hope of healthier, longer lives.

Did you catch the passion in Tammy's voice? Do you see what a healthy pride she has for what we are doing as a church in Nicaragua? Maybe you could even catch a glimpse of the joy she feels about the difference we are making through our good works in Nicaragua. I've been there too. There is an amazing joy and fulfillment seeing what God is doing through us. Something in your soul says, "I was created for this."

SALVAGE YARD

Pastor Ben was telling me about Mike down at the Salvage Yard. Mike suffers from social anxieties and has been in town for over 20 years and tried lots of churches, but was never able to stay connected.

He started coming to the Salvage Yard when it opened and found it to a safe place for him to connect to people. He started making friendships and connections and going to worship every Sunday night and getting connected to God. A few years ago, he stepped up and offered to help out. Now, any time the Salvage Yard is

open, Mike is there. It is his link to God and a loving community. Even though Mike is estranged from his own family because of his anxieties, he says that he has found a new family in the people of the Salvage Yard who love him.

That's bearing fruit! That's good works making a difference. Mike has found a slice of heaven through the servants at the Salvage Yard. To those who serve there, you were created for this....

WATERED GARDENS

I think about our volunteers at places like Watered Gardens. Watered Gardens is one of our partner ministries in the Joplin, and in addition to receiving a monthly offering from us, we have people from Saint Paul's who serve the world by volunteering there in all kinds of capacities. We even have a team of about a dozen people who provide a meal for 60-100 people at Watered Gardens once a month.

I asked James Whitford, who with his wife Marsha, launched and lead the Watered Gardens ministry, what the relationship with Saint Paul's means to them.

He said, "A lot!" He said it in a way, with some hesitation, like he couldn't find a word to sum it all up! In addition to being a huge financial support, James said what really encourages him is that he knows the Saint Paul's volunteers are not all out of one Sunday school class, it's not just a pocket of our church who's taking on this project. Volunteers there come from a cross section of our church. He knows this because the Saint Paul's volunteers out there don't always know each other. And he find that very encouraging!

James says that this gives him great hope because his real passion is to see churches activated in ministry throughout the community! And he figures that because some people from our church are answering God's call to serve at Watered Gardens, they are also hearing and answering calls to serve in all kinds of places in the community! And that gives him tremendous hope that the people of our church are unleashed throughout our community! That the people of Saint Paul's are being doers, not just hearers of the word.

And he's right! You all are everywhere in our community.; Lafayette house, hospitals, magic moments, crosslines, homebound services, homeless coalition, cheergivers (ministry to shut ins), toys for tots, lifechoices, community clinic, habitat for humanity, Ronald mcdonald house, salvage yard, prison ministries, nursing homes, mom's club, wildcat glades, offering services like haircuts for foster children, God's resort, delivering meals, rapha house, hearts and hammers, red cross, Star Shop, Children's Haven, Children's and Family Services and I know I left a few out. And these are just the place I know about!

I asked James for a story, someone that God was able to reach because of the ministry at Watered Gardens. He told me about a homeless woman named Sunshine. She's in her mid 20's, with a tough exterior and she hung around their lot. James overheard Sunshine screaming one day on their porch, and she was mad. She was calling for him and calling him all kinds of words that I am not even going to ask you if I can say them in church! She apparently broke one of the rules and was asked to leave and she was mad. James said, "We see it as our job not to run them off, but to love them. At the same time, we have expectations for behavior, so we ask them to leave and come back later. "

Because of this incident, James was a bit worried about Sunshine. They had been trying to build a relationship with her for months, but she was so tough, externally and was reluctant to open up to them. He worried that she may never come back, but she did. A few weeks later, she attended a chapel service and came forward and said, "I want to change my life. I want Jesus in my life." And not long after that they celebrated a baptism. James said that God was finally able to break in on Sunshine's world and her life is going through some huge transformations.

Now that's putting heaven into someone's life. That's what good works lead to...they unleash the God potential in our world.

BRIGHT FUTURES

As school started last fall, we launched an initiative here at Saint Paul's that invites us to be involved in the lives of the children in our schools through a larger community effort called Bright Futures. The goal of Bright Futures is to empower the education process by building support and encouragement through relationships with adults.

So many of you responded and became lunch buddies who spend a lunch period a week with a student or after school mentors who spend an hour after school once a week with a student. Many volunteers from Saint Paul's have been matched up with students at Cecil Floyd. I've heard numerous times from Elaina Edman, the principal, what a big deal this for the kids. They get so excited about their lunch buddies or mentors spending time with them. She says that it is motivating and empowering the kids to achieve academically and that it is improving

behavior as well. Elaina notes that there is a morale boost among the educators in the school because people from the community are coming in and investing in the kids.

I talked to Mike Landers this week. He is an after-school mentor and he first felt compelled to get involved when he heard my wife, Jennifer, lay out the vision for this at an Ad Council meeting! His response was "here is something I can do to make a difference". He invited 3 others from his work to do it as well. They said yes and they go every week. He said he wishes he could show us a picture of the kids faces when the mentors arrive. They are thrilled that another adult in their life cares. He says that they get to know each other, they read the paper together to see what is going on in the world and talk about that; they work on a little homework together.

Mike may have expected that this would mean something to his student. What he didn't foresee was how much it would mean to him. He says, "It fills me up! It's something I can't get anywhere else! It brings me joy and fulfillment!" It even empowers Mike to be present more with his family. He said it makes him hungry to be more interested and involved in the relationships he does have with his wife and children.

It's bearing fruit in the world and in his own life too. And who knows what potential is being unleashed in the life of his student.

Serving the world, doing good works is a critical part of our mission. It's always been a part of the DNA of our church. And it's part of our mission that I think we are getting better and better at living out. But what if we could do even more. I mean that individually and as a church. You have to answer for your self about God's call in your life to serve the world and where that may be. We just had a mission fair last Sunday to help people find places to plug in and serve in the community. And that list of opportunities is in a brochure and it's hanging on the grid wall out there.

I just want to ask you to take these last few moments together here and dream with me. If we had an extra \$78,000 a year, what could we do in our community and in the world with some of that money? \$78,000/year is what we are paying in just interest on our debt. I'm not bashing our debt. We wouldn't be where we are in reaching children, youth or adults for Jesus without it. But what if we rose up to the challenge and eliminated it and immediately freed up almost \$120,000 year for ministry. What could we do in our community and in our world?

I want to invite you to write down your ideas and dreams about ways we can serve the world on the pink sticky notes on your program and just like last week, go place them under the cross in our lobby after the service.

I think about what is happening right now in Japan. We are always going to have natural disasters. Major recovery efforts are still going on in Haiti. What if? What if we had funds stored back and ready to release immediately for those disaster that are half a world away! And what if we had funds to train people and equip them with a trailer filled with anything they would need to take to be an immediate response team to travel to the disasters in our region and we could have people on the scene within hours to assist in the crisis?

What if we were not constrained by lack of resources to respond to needs locally and were empowered to help you launch new ministries to meet emerging needs in the community?

We have a group of people called God's Work Force and they are willing to do all kinds of projects for people who need assistance, but every time they get a project they have to go to individuals or home groups and gather up funds for materials. What if we could be better at helping them get what they need so they can serve more people?

The possibilities are amazing! Maybe we could be the major sponsor on a Habitat for Humanity House? Will you please dream with me? I really want to see what you see. Please write down your dreams about ways we could serve the world and share them with us.

The freedom we will gain from our Ignite Capital Campaign can help us be an even better blessing to our community! We can bear even more fruit in the world. As we get further into our campaign, please be sure you are taking advantage of the opportunities to get informed and if you have questions, please ask them. And I'd just like to ask you to pray the prayer that my family and I are praying. "God, what would you have me do, what would you have me give, for your kingdom and for the mission of our church?"