

Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church

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Sermon manuscript

“On Mission” for the Great Commission

(1 Peter 2:9-10; Ephesians 4:11-12)

Introduction: My dead tree...

Over three years ago I planted an eight foot tall red oak in our front yard, envisioning, years in the future, a beautiful shade tree.

I watered through drought and fertilized on schedule. The tree grew nicely, even surviving two of the hottest San Antonio summers on record and one of the colder of our recent winters.

A few weeks ago, the tree just up and died.

One day, Kathy and I both noticed that the leaves were turning, as if it was fall (on a 100+ degree day). Within three or four more days, the leaves were all completely yellow and there was no sap in the branches. I broke off a couple of small limbs that had gone tinder dry. The tree was dead.

An apparently healthy red oak died in my front yard. I'll tell you in a few minutes why it died and how its demise might tell us something about life in Jesus.

Next Sunday, I plan to launch a series of studies in the book of Romans. I am very excited about this new series! If you are not familiar with the Apostle Paul's letter to the Romans, you are in for a treat.

However, before beginning an epic journey through that watershed of the New Testament, a book that clarifies Christianity like no other, I want to speak today about the mission and the ministry of our church.

Beginning in the summer of 2010, the Elders began a prayerful process of seeking the Lord regarding our church's unique purpose and mission and vision. That prayerful process included much conversation along with reading and study - and more than a few meetings.

The past couple of years at Northwest have been filled with normal ministry, rejoicings and sadnesses, new initiatives, Missions trips, worship, growth in community - and a lot of reflection about what God would have us be all about in the next chapter of our congregational life.

Along the way we have seen the Lord provide some great insight into who we are and where we should be going.

Uncovering God's Fingerprints in Our Church

Mission statement

Early on we spent time thinking about how to say what believe we are to be all about and how to phrase our church Mission Statement.

We finally re-arrived at a Mission Statement that has been in place for a very long time and, with a little tweaking, still articulates what we believe is the heartbeat of our church. Here it is:

“Having tasted God's amazing grace through faith in Jesus Christ, we passionately pursue life-changing relationships with God, with each other, and with our world.”

That statement addresses the three most famous and “named” commands of Jesus.

With respect to the passionate pursuit of a life-changing relationship with God, we hear His **Great Commandment**.

[Mark 12:30] “and you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.”

With respect to the passionate pursuit of life-changing relationships with each other, here in the church, we hear His **New Commandment**.

[John 13:34] “A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another, even as I have loved you, that you also love one another. [35] By this all men will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another.”

And, with respect to the passionate pursuit of life-changing relationships with people in our world, we hear His **Great Commission**.

[Matthew 28:18] And Jesus came up and spoke to them, saying, “All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth. [19] “Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations...”

We’ve also given a lot of time to identifying values to which our church clings.

Values

There are dozens of values expressed and championed in the Bible. All those values embraced in the Bible, we embrace.

But we have identified six *core* values (or we might refer to them as core *practices*, things we are committed to actually doing) that we at Northwest either believe God has helped us to flesh out or to which we especially aspire.

Back in April and May, I had an absolute blast bringing messages that addressed these six values. To review, we value:

- Loving and living the Bible (2 Timothy 3:16-17);
- Bringing our friends to Jesus (John 1:40-46);
- Generous living and giving (2 Corinthians 8-9);
- Building faith at home (Deuteronomy 6:4-9);
- Masks-off relating (2 Corinthians 3);
- Dependence on God (2 Corinthians 4:7).

These values (whether partially realized or mostly aspirational) speak to the passions and the “to die fors” of our church.

So...

We first wrestled through a decision as to whether to tackle the issue of purpose and mission. We decided to do so and then crafted a Mission Statement and then identified six core values/practices that particularly speak to who we are.¹

Only one piece of the purpose puzzle remained, and that “missing piece” has been the subject of conversation among the leadership for the past several months. The missing piece? The verb.

Of course it is helpful to state our commitment to biblical values and to have a well-articulated Mission Statement.

But we all know that, alone, such statements and lists offer no guarantee of faithfulness to the Great Commandment, the New Commandment, or the Great Commission.²

The big questions remaining are what will we DO? and how will we go about actually FULFILLING our Mission?

You might say that what follows for the remainder of our time this morning is the verb.

Our Mission Statement says that we are to be all about the passionate pursuit of a life-changing relationship with God.

With Respect to Worship

The “verb” (the ACTION) at the end of that phrase is this:
We encourage everyone who is a part of Northwest Community Church to take part in group and private worship experiences.

¹ One of our first steps, and one which took a while, was to forge what Will Mancini calls a “Kingdom Concept” based on our understanding of our Local Predicament, our Collective Potential, and our Apostolic Esprit. Whew!

² Years ago, a good friend pointed out that the core values of Enron, the disgraced company brought down by fraud and deceit, were “communication, respect, integrity, excellence.” My friend pointed this out as a warning against putting faith in bannerizable “core values” in our church. Sobered by the reality that a list of core values *can* be ignored, I’m still hopeful that reminding ourselves of what we hold to *could* keep us focused on these values.

I'm officially "preaching to the choir/congregation" when I say this, but I'm still gonna say it. You nurture a life-changing relationship with God when you attend our worship services.

When we come together on Sunday mornings, you are exposed to the preaching of the Word. You join with others in worship through song. You regularly take the Lord's Supper. You hear testimonies of God's work in others' lives and you witness baptisms.

In your Care Groups and Adult Bible Fellowships you have the opportunity to worship and to seek the Lord together, as a group.

There are often men's and women's studies and events that are geared toward nurturing that essential, life-changing relationship with God.

At Prayer Meeting on Tuesday evening, you have the opportunity to draw near to God. On Sunday morning at 8am, you can join with others in "the Couch Room" (named so, cleverly, because we have couches there ☺) to pray and ask God's blessing on the ministries of the morning.

And then of course, each one of us is to nurture a life-changing relationship with God through our own personal time with Him in prayer and in the study of His Word.

In all of these ways (and many more besides) we passionately pursue a life-changing relationship with God.

And what about our passionate pursuit of life-changing relationships with each other?

With Respect to Community

Just this:

We encourage everyone who is a part of Northwest Community Church to become a part of a faith-in-Jesus-centered community.

There are all kinds of ways to becoming a part of a faith-in-Jesus community. It could mean starting to attend an Adult Bible Fellowship class (at either 9:30 or 11:00) or joining a Care Group (call Jeff Harrison to find out how to get involved!).

Men, you could attend the Saturday morning Bible study or the just about to start "Inside Out" study on Thursdays (contact me or Roderick Barnes if you are interested).

Women, you might sign up for Interface in the spring (see Marian Zinter) or join the about-to-start Beth Moore study. (see Sandy Young for more information)

Youth, I've love to see you plug in to what is happening with the Youth ministry on Sunday mornings and Wednesday evenings. If you do, you'll build great friendships and taste rich community.

I can promise you that the church leadership will constantly be on the lookout for ways to assist you in carrying out the parts of our Mission that concern the passionate pursuit of life-changing relationships with God and with each other.

In the near future we may host retreats or seminars, provide training times (for instance, in prayer, fasting, spiritual disciplines, relationship building, etc...) or have church-wide emphases that will bring these to the fore.³

And what about fulfilling the third part of our Mission Statement - the part that has to do with the passionate pursuit of life-changing relationships with our world?

About this I'll say two things.

With Respect to Mission

Doing "Missions"

First, I want to assure you that we will continue to have a very active cross-cultural Missions program.

³ In addition, the church leadership will constantly be evaluating and seeking to improve the quality of our ministries so that everyone at Northwest is equipped to grow in embracing and living out our values.

As in the past, this program will be generously funded by the congregation through the annual church budget.

We will continue to have a standing Missions Committee and will actively support missionaries whose ministry focus is outside of San Antonio.

We'll solicit funding for special Missions projects, will pray for and seek to encourage those serving in Missions, and we'll encourage people in our church to take part in short-term Missions trips and even to consider Missions as a career.

That's thing one. Here's thing two.

Going forward we are going to emphasize to a greater degree than ever the importance of every one of us at Northwest being "on mission for the Great Commission."

Being "Missional"

Over the last several Sunday mornings we have been focusing on the ministry of the Holy Spirit. We have seen over and over again that one of the prime activities of the Spirit in our lives is His work of gifting us for service.

YOU have been given a "spiritual gift" that equips you to serve God.

As we move forward into the next chapter of life in our church we are going to increasingly highlight the truth that *the Holy Spirit has released you* to put His gifts into service, to meet needs in Jesus' Name, and to advance the work of the Kingdom.

Here's a thought. When more and more of us at Northwest are "on mission" for the Great Commission, our church of hundreds can easily impact thousands. God could use our church to have an impact in San Antonio way out of proportion to our size!

Many of those who are touched by your loving service may be attenders, themselves. Others may become active members of our church because of your service. But many of those who are impacted may never pass through the doors of our church.

That is not a problem.

God's mission to us did not include a mandate to become a numerically large church.

He has, nevertheless, given us a mission. That mission is that for Jesus' sake we are to serve. The emphasis of your service may be inside the church, or the bulk of your service may be outside the church. The non-negotiable is service. You and I are gifted to serve, and we are to serve.

Because of the Spirit's gifting you are equipped to penetrate your culture with salt and light and can infiltrate your culture for Jesus like leaven in a lump of dough.

And so, our strategy for mission is this:

You, a child of God because of your faith in Jesus; you indwelt and empowered by the Holy Spirit are freed (unleashed/released) to enter in to the field of human need (physical, emotional, spiritual) here at church, in the community, and globally.

This is our strategy for mission and it is built on two foundational principles. First, the principle of identity, direct from the pen of the Apostle Peter.

On Mission for the Great Commission

Your Missional IDENTITY in Jesus (1 Peter 2:9-10)

[1 Peter 2:9] But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for God's own possession, so that you may proclaim the excellencies of Him who has called you out of darkness into His marvelous light.⁴

⁴ See also Hebrews 13:15-16; Romans 15:15-16 for references to believers in Jesus being priests to God and fulfilling priestly function.

Peter wrote these words to a group of Christians in the first century, Jewish Christians who had tasted Roman persecution. These believers stood out like sore thumbs in a society that knew nothing of God or His ways.

Peter's words gave to these suffering Christians an empowering vision of who they were.

They were not the dregs of society. They were more than down and out sufferers. They were priests to God, with a mission to proclaim Jesus.

As encouraging a message as that would have been two thousand years ago, it is just as encouraging a word to us, today. You, a believer in Jesus, are a priest to God!

The doctrinal truth

This teaching was one of the pillars of the Protestant Reformation, and when we speak of the "priesthood of the believer" we mean that:

- every believer is gifted (by virtue of the indwelling Holy Spirit) to understand Scripture without the aid of a church authority.
- every believer has the privilege of praying directly to God without needing to go through an intermediate human priest.
- every believer has a special call to ministry.

The idea of the priesthood of the believer comes right out of Scripture. So, yes, it is true that I have a call to ministry. I am fulfilling my priestly call to a pastoral ministry. But it is also true that YOU have a priestly call to ministry.

The doctrinal truth in shoe leather

It doesn't matter how old you are, in what station of life you find yourself, or whether you are male or female. This is your identity. You are a priest to God and you are a minister, called to serve.

There is nothing more thrilling than serving God in the arena of your calling, an area where you are passionate and gifted.

There is nothing like knowing that it is your birthright to be involved, up close and personal, in God's plan for advancing His kingdom.

As His priest, you can know that it is God's will for you to be fully deployed in significant, Kingdom-of-God sized, eternally significant MISSION.

On Thursday I passed the unfinished sermon around to a few friends to get some advice on how to state things as clearly as possible. One of the pieces of feedback I received was from Jeff Harrison. Here is what Jeff wrote back to me:

"I like the idea of talking about our identity...In the Old Testament a priest was one who had special access to God that others didn't have. In Christ we are the "ultimate insiders," with special access to the King of the Universe - plus God's Spirit is working through us! We were blessed with this privilege so that we can bless others as we serve and as we invite others into the marvelous light of redemption."

That's good!

Another way of saying it is that in Christ, we do not divide between "ministers" and "regular Christians." The clergy/laity distinction is artificial and unbiblical. In Christ, there are no Mission Nobodies. In Christ, everyone is a Mission Somebody.

Embracing the truth of the "priesthood of every believer" will involve adopting a certain mindset. Namely, that we are all participants in God's great work, not spectators; the sideline is no place to be; we are each to rush on to the playing field!

As we move forward, the Northwest leadership will be committed to communicating through a variety of venues the vision of YOU serving in the area of your giftedness and passion, whether inside or outside the formal church structure.

We're going to ask you to join us in creating a church culture in which *everyone* is sensitive to their own passions to serve, where *everyone* is receptive to the direction of the Holy Spirit, and where *everyone* responds by serving.

Your identity - a priest to God! - assures you that Almighty God has placed you on His team. This is the first foundational principle on which our strategy for mission is based.

The second foundational principle is found in Paul's letter to the church at Ephesians. It is the principle of empowerment. Paul gives assurance that God has empowered you to fulfill a mission.

Your Missional EMPOWERMENT in Jesus (Ephesians 4:11-12)

We'd probably agree that getting someone to come to church is a good thing. Personally, I'm glad you're here this morning, and if you brought a friend, I'm glad you and your friend are both here.

But getting a person to church is not the "Great Commission accomplished."

After a season of being at our church, we hope that you will get plugged into community and will grow as a worshipping disciple.

But it is not a "win" if you are ONLY plugged into community and taking part in worship. Attendance at church, without ministry output, is not a Kingdom win.

Attendance at and involvement in church is not a final destination. Once you come to our church and start moving toward maturity, the church is to serve as a launch pad into ministry.

And everyone in the church - no exceptions; no sideline sitters - is to be "on mission" for the Great Commission.

As Ephesians 4 tells us, the ministry belongs to you.

[11] And He gave some as apostles, and some as prophets, and some as evangelists, and some as pastors and teachers, [12] for the equipping of the SAINTS (that would be YOU!) for the work of SERVICE (or, literally "ministry")

So, who are you? You are a priest to God, called to service.

And what are you to do? Minister in Jesus' Name, using the gifts given to you by the Holy Spirit.

Some of your *ministries* will be in church leadership positions. Some *ministries* will be in on-going church-based programs. Some *ministries* in which you serve will be focused in the community. Some of your *ministries* will primarily be located in your home or at your place of work.

And when you are "launched" into meaningful ministry, using gifts given by the Spirit, you will know the joy of partnering with God in a world-changing work.

And, as we move forward, the Northwest leadership is going to be fostering empowering conversations, congregation-wide, to help promote a culture that says, "*You are a minister! Here, everybody serves!*"

And what do we mean by "ministry"? Folks, the sky's the limit!

The sky's the limit!

Dare to dream about what you would love to do for God - and do it! Re-think what you are doing already and recognize that THAT THING may be the vehicle through which God wants to shine the love of Jesus.

It may be THERE - where you already are - that you are most "on mission" for the Great Commission.

Taking a meal to a new neighbor in Jesus' Name is *ministry*. Visiting a co-worker in the hospital is *ministry*. Taking time to listen to a discouraged friend is *ministry*. Pointing a friend to Jesus is *ministry*.

Fixing a meal for your family, discipling your children, praying with your roommate, meeting needs in Jesus' Name - it's all Ephesians 4, pointy-end-of-the-spear, Spirit-led **MINISTRY!**

And, in case some structure might help you launch into ministry, consider that there are abundant opportunities here at the church to serve.

Ministry “open doors” at Northwest

If you are looking for ways to serve/minister, we’ll be happy to explain to you how you can get on board with something that is already going on here at Northwest.

Or you may be thinking of service outside the formal structure of the church.

Ministry “open doors” elsewhere

In the community in which God has placed us are lots and lots of established ministries that we can point you to, places where you can get your feet wet, serving.

There is the Agape Pregnancy Help Center, Habitat for Humanity, Youth for Christ, Inter-Varsity Christian Fellowship, other churches with mature recovery ministries - and so much more. We’ll be happy to point you to one of these Kingdom-advancing ministries to help you spread your ministry wings and soar.

Ministry open doors you see

As well, as a person in whom dwells the Holy Spirit, YOU may be prompted by your own passions and the Spirit’s nudges to serve in some fresh way, some way in which no one else is currently serving, to meet some currently unmet need, to help some previously “invisible people” in Jesus’ Name.

The arena of your service need not be grandiose. It need not be flashy. “Under the radar” and “behind the scenes” service IS Kingdom-of-God sized stuff.

But if your heart prompts you to serve in an outside-of-the-box way - go for it! (And please let the leadership know - we’d love to pray for you!)

Conclusion:

Over the past couple of years I’ve read and re-read, studied and absorbed, much of a book by Will Mancini, titled Church Unique. I really like the book and think that it has lots to commend it.

One of the major ideas in Church Unique is that each church should find the one thing that it does best - and do that. Mancini recommends that each church focus where God has gifted the membership and let that “one thing” be the defining trait of the church.

As our leadership has wrestled with this concept over months and months, we have come to see our “church unique” a bit differently...

As I’ve tried to make clear today, those in positions of leadership can and should lead the ministries of the church, things like the worship services, Care Groups, Sunday Schools, etc... So, we will lead and organize and train and recruit and see to the staffing of these ministries.

But the leadership is not in a position to chart ministry outside of the church, because the leadership does not know what the Spirit is going to prompt, you, the members of the church to do.

So, THIS is our church unique:

The unique “mission fingerprint” of Northwest Community Church will be a reflection of the ministry passions of the members of the Body. YOU - and YOUR ministry - are our “church unique”!

What that means is that we will no longer put together “local outreach events”. The church will no longer point the direction in which we will go in terms of making a kingdom impact in our community.

Instead, the church leadership will cheerlead and champion and promote and pray for YOUR outreach efforts.

For those who are new to our church and are wondering what we are doing by way of community outreach, we will tell them some of what we know some of you are doing and invite them to join you in that. And then will ask them, “*What do you want to do?*”

That is not a cop out!

It is a response to the biblical idea that every believer in Jesus is a priest with a ministry from God.

And this is the big, biblical thing: As a priest, you don't need permission to do what you want to do for God. You are free and empowered by the Spirit to serve!

At the beginning this morning I told you about the tree that died in our front yard. Well, on Monday of this week I decided to remove the dead tree. I was prepared for a lot of digging, so I hauled my shovel and a few other tools to the site.

Before I started digging, though, I first pushed on the tree, just to see how solid it was in the ground. I was surprised to find that I could move the trunk pretty easily. So I pushed it again and it rocked back and forth.

I decided to keep on pushing and pulling the tree. After about five minutes I literally rocked the tree out of its hole without ever using the shovel.

With the entire tree above ground I instantly saw why the tree had died. The roots had all wrapped around themselves and had never struck out away from the trunk. Hugging each other, the tree's roots didn't reach out to grab nutrients from the surrounding soil.

Had the roots reached out, they would have been fed, would have grown, and the tree would have lived. But staying insular and isolated doomed the tree. Branching out would have changed everything.

When it comes to life in Jesus, too, branching out changes everything.

God never intended for you to lead an isolated life, all wrapped up in and around yourself. He calls you to branch out.

He wants you to put the passions and gifting He has placed within you to work in the soil of your everyday life, become a tree that is flourishing and healthy, one that bears much fruit for God, and live!