

Mission: Passion Unleashed

From the series: On the Threshold of the Third Millennium

Text: Isaiah 58:12; Luke 4:17-18

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Transcription of the spoken sermon

"You will be called the repairer of the breach, a the restorer of streets to live in."
Isaiah 58:12

"...The scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him ... The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me..." Luke 4:17-18

On the threshold of the third millennium Christ Community is newly structured for a forward movement. We struggle with a fresh expression of Christian faith, seeking to translate the tradition in order that we might connect our faith with our human experience. This morning I want to call you to a new sense of mission, a new commitment to be the people of God. I call you to effect the purposes of God in the world as the agents of grace and reconciliation, bringing people together in the name of Christ our Lord.

Mission: It has always been a part of the Christian tradition. *Missio*, the Latin word, means to send, to send out or to be sent. I want to suggest that we ought to be sent out with passion. Passion unleashed. Passion that is compelling emotional engagement with the task. I want Christ Community always to be passionate. Passionate about what we believe and passionate about that which we do in the name of Christ. No kind of routinized ritual, external form, dead-in-the-water, but passionate - with deep conviction, compelling conviction leading to compelling action with emotional engagement. It is that, I believe, to which we are called as the people of God. And as we stand on the threshold of the third millennium, God needs a people who will fearlessly, courageously, unstintingly, unrelentingly be there as a concrete community of love and grace, bringing peace and reconciliation to all people in the local community and throughout the world. I want to call you this morning to be a people unleashed for mission with passion. I want to call us as a community to be committed to the humanization of the world, to the humanization of society.

One of the nice things about having the Perspective class after worship is that I can clarify the fogginess of the sermon, and I can answer the question that I raise in the minds of some. I had a very good question raised to me last week, because I had suggested toward the end of the message that I was not so concerned that we make the world Christian as that we make the world human. And the question was asked, "Well, is that just humanism?" It's a good question, and the answer is, no it is not. There is a kind of classic humanism that would be defined as over against God. Atheistic naturalist humanism would see human society and the world as a purely human project with no intervention and no involvement by a God if there was one. No, that's not what I mean.

I am thinking rather of the phrase of the Catholic theologian Hans Küng who said, "God's cause is the human cause." What I would love to call us to this morning is that we be the agents for the humanization of society, the humanization of the world, meaning that we seek to do that which would make for all people a fully human existence possible. So all people might be set free, set at liberty, the shackles off, all forms of human bondage removed so that all people in all sorts of conditions could move into the fullness of human existence as God intends. Jesus lived such an existence. In him, we believe, was full humanity modeled out for us. When I say that I believe the Church is called to work at the humanization of society, I mean that the church is that group of people who are called to seek to effect the purposes of God in human lives and in human society as a whole. That, to be sure, is a little different than the classic understanding of mission in the history of the Church.

The modern missionary movement was initially born in the 19th century, although there has always been from the beginning this impulse to "go into all the world to preach the Gospel." But the modern movement, the evangelization of the world, really had a new birth in the 19th century and the object there was to bring all of the world to Jesus Christ. It was world evangelization. There was a great missionary conference in Edinburgh, Scotland in 1910 and a great missionary statesman named John R. Mott had a cry that really motivated the student population of the day: "The evangelization of the world in this generation." There were always educational missions, and medical missions, and farm-agricultural missions which were the accoutrements to the missionary impulse, but the major focus of it was the proclamation of the Gospel, the goal of which end was to bring people to a saving knowledge of Jesus Christ.

One rather contemporary missionary statement spoke of the missionary movement of our forbearers as a movement motivated because they could not conceive of people dying without Christ. D. T. Niles said, "In our generation it is more that we go because we cannot conceive of people living without Christ." But, when I speak of the humanization of society, I have to admit to you - I want to acknowledge to you - that I am not speaking so much in that classic sense of trying to Christianize the world because I am not at all sure that we are called to Christianize the world in terms of bringing the world into the institutional

structures of the Christian church. I believe that we are there to witness to the whole world to the God to whom Jesus points us. It is the God of Jesus that we want to point all people to, and we want to do that by all means possible. I think that the missionary movement with all of its good intention and all of its sincerity, and all it has accomplished, nonetheless, because of the very institutionalization of the Christian faith, tended to become a rather arrogant and triumphalistic and imperialistic movement into other cultures. I must say that I don't really believe, in spite of hundreds of years of witness and sincere effort, that we have done more than slightly dent a Muslim culture or an Oriental culture.

Now in Africa today there is an astounding rate of conversion into the Christian church, but that is in a third world; that is not in the first world. The first world is secularized and sometimes that can perhaps dull our sense of the Christian mission. But let me make it clear. I believe that we are called to be the witnesses of Jesus Christ, pointing to the God of Jesus, the God that Jesus reveals, and we are to do that by all means possible. St. Francis of Assisi said, "Preach the gospel by all means possible even in last resort with words." The humanization of society is a Christian imperative, and I believe we are called to do that.

Let me give you a little autobiographical sketch for a moment. When I came here in 1960 I wanted 50% of the budget to go to missions and 50% to stay at home. I was so young and so idealistic that I even turned down a raise. I refused a raise one year because I said, "if you will not go 50% I won't take a raise." One of the great pillars of the congregation looked at me and said, "Young man, you've got a family coming. Wise up. You'd better start thinking about retirement - it's not too soon." He was right. I was wrong. I was idealistic. I was going to change the world. And then I came back here in 1971 and I went with some of you over to the Institute for Successful Church Leadership where Bob Schuller told his story. When he arrived in California, an old pastor took him aside and said, "If you want this new church to prosper, use this formula: give 50% away and put 50% back in." And Schuller was smarter than I was. He said, "No, I'm going to give only 10% away. But we're going to build a missionary center right here because mission is where you are." He said, "You know if I give 50% away I'll never build a base here, and I'll never be able to give much more than I give the first year. But if I build a bigger base here I'll be able to give ten times more than what 50% would have been." His math was right, and reality has proved him right. I came back and his vision became our vision - this was to be the place of our mission. Not to neglect the world, but to begin here and to build here a center of creative Christian faith which would be a fruitful movement issuing out of this very place. For two decades we have been working at that. We've been stretched. We've really always been reaching beyond our means - always dreaming a little bit beyond what we could possibly do.

But I think that it's time for us to be fully unleashed. To unleash our passion in the mission of Jesus Christ here, in the nation, and in the world. Not in order to

make the world Christian, but in order to humanize the world, transform it so that it might be as the God we have found in Jesus would have it be. That's the prophetic word I hear here. Jesus stood in the prophetic tradition. Jesus was a prophetic, charismatic figure. The world evangelization, the institutionalization of the church was down the line.

But if we really hear what we heard this morning, then God was saying to that Old Testament people a long time ago, "Don't get all caught up in your rituals, in your church structures, in your sacrifices, in your priesthood and all that business, because I don't really care about that. If you want to do that, you ought to do that because it can help you be what you ought to be. But you see, religion is never an end in itself. The practice of religion is never an end in itself. Worship, devotion, ritual, liturgy - whatever it may be - is not an end in itself. It is to imbue in us the depths of the mystery of God in order that out of the experience of worship, out of the experience of the reality of God we might be galvanized into significant and meaningful living in the world - significant human living in the world, and the humanization of the world. Old Judah said, "Hey, what's up. We are doing all this sacrificing and incense and candles, and all of that, and you don't seem to heed." And God says, "Is that why you fast? You want to mortify yourself? I'll tell you what mortification I want. Put your life on the line out there in the community: feed the poor, give shelter to the homeless, clothe the naked, take them into your home. And then call and I'll answer."

The prophet of our reading said, "The spirit of the Lord is upon me. The spirit has anointed me to proclaim good news." Jesus came to his home synagogue and he read that word aloud to his home congregation, "The spirit has anointed me." That's what Christ means, the anointed one - "I am anointed to proclaim good news, relief to the captive, healing to the broken, setting the prisoner free." They said, "My, that fellow really speaks quite well. Isn't that Joseph's son?" Sure enough, Jesus, Joseph's son - that's who it was. But you see he had been on the outskirts of Israel, on the outskirts of God's people. He had mingled with those who were outsiders and he had done some healing and they had heard about that. And so he knew that underneath that first blush of enthusiasm there was a kind of hostility brewing because Jesus had the audacity to consider the outsider also embraced by God's love and grace.

And so he said to them, "Let me remind you of your own tradition. Do you remember the instance of the famine, when Elijah was a prophet? To whom was the prophet called? To no one in Israel, but to a widow, a woman, an outsider in Zarephat. And what about Naaman? What about Naaman, the leper? No leper in Israel was cleansed, but Naaman the Syrian was cleansed. You see, God has always been concerned about the outsider. My ministry is to all people, and if that offends you, I'm sorry." Well, it offended them alright. They said, "Let's throw him over the ledge. Let's do away with him." There was wrath and anger, and hostility that are so often in religious people - Christian people. And Jesus ran afoul of it, and everyone who has had the audacity to stand in the prophetic

tradition has run afoul of it because it is a very human characteristic to turn religion in upon itself and make it self-serving, when actually God would have God's people turn inside out, to live on behalf of those who are on the outside, to let them know that they are not on the outside.

The old philosophy of mission was to go to the outsider to *bring* them in. But, with all my heart, I believe we ought to go to the outsider to tell them they are *already in*. That's the good news of what God has done in Jesus Christ. Not to make them *like* us. Not to force them into our structures, into our institutions, but to tell them of the promiscuous grace of a God that already embraces them, and that has come to a particularly full focus in Jesus Christ our Lord. Not to make them Christians like *we are*, but to point them to the marvelous God to whom Jesus points us. That's the mission to which we are called, and I am ready for this place to be unleashed for such a mission, laced with passion.

You know a couple of weeks ago I was out at the Crystal Cathedral at a conference of churches uniting for global mission, which is the movement that Bob Schuller is hoping to get going. It's a rather loose affiliation of congregations - a congregationally based movement with very little administration and bureaucracy, but the ability to move immediately with flexibility into opportunities for mission. When he was negotiating the Hour of Power in Soviet television, they said to Bob Schuller, "Here is 50,000 acres of land. Could you make it productive for us? We will give it to you if you can bring us tractors. Bring us seed. Bring us know-how." When I was in Chicago last summer at the Churches Uniting meeting, David Schouts who has preached for us in the past, of the Hinneton Avenue Methodist Church in Minneapolis, volunteered to head up the Russian farm project. Just a couple of weeks ago in California, David Schouts reported on that project, and he has got Ralph Hostadler who was the CEO of Land of Lakes, retired, who has taken over that project and has taken all kinds of people and resources. Two young men from the Soviet Union, one a member of the parliament, is helping him organize a cooperative project sponsored by CUGM, Churches Uniting for Global Mission, on behalf of the Soviet people. They are helping them gain some knowhow as to how to make farms productive and how to distribute what they produce. Those kinds of opportunities, I believe, are out there in our world. These are the kinds of things we have to do. Let God take care of what God would do with those Russian people. But for God's sake, let's get them some grain and some cattle, and get them fat.

Then on Wednesday morning, the last morning, there was a black speaker named Leon Sullivan. I hadn't really heard of him, but when he began to speak, (this man must be in his middle seventies) - I had to look up to him, a big man. When you walked by him it was like there were all kinds of vibrations. This was *somebody*, and when he spoke I learned he was a Baptist preacher from Philadelphia. And could he preach! Oh, my goodness, he could preach! I learned that he was Leon Sullivan of the Sullivan Principles. The Sullivan Principles were written by Leon Sullivan when he was on the board of General Motors. He came

back from South Africa and he said, "In South Africa when American corporations do business, they must dismantle Apartheid in the workplace." And it happened. The American corporations in South Africa for some years now have operated on the Sullivan Principles. And this was that Leon Sullivan. He had just flown in from Brussels where he had been meeting with the economic community in Europe. He had just met with Helmut Koe and Francoise Mitterand. And he is all turned on about Africa, because right now Leon Sullivan is in the business of raising enough money to send a thousand teachers a year for the next four years to Africa. It only takes \$10,000 to support one teacher. He sees the need for education, to teach children. He is looking for 1000 teachers for the next four years. He said (There was a group there of 40-50 pastors, I suppose.), "How many of you could support one teacher - \$10,000 for the year? Raise your hands. "Should I have raised my hand? Well, should I have? Would you also keep paying the building debt off? I mean, don't give me the \$10,000 out of your envelope! I need my salary! (Laughter) But, have you got some more? Would you dig deeper if I had raised my hand? Would you? And I thought to myself, "You've really changed." In 1960 when I first came to this place I would have wanted to raise money to send a missionary to tell them about Jesus. Now I want to raise money to send a teacher to educate them so that they might *feel* the presence of a God whom Jesus incarnated.

Someone in the congregation sent me an article and said, "This might be interesting in light of your present series." It was an article about the Arlington Street Church in Boston, a church that is called "The Conscience of Boston." It's a church that has been a center of social activism and social protest for 200 years. It is the place where Unitarianism was born. William Ellery Channing was a great minister there for 40 years. He had the likes of Ralph Waldo Emerson in his congregation. He had the best and the brightest, and the mightiest of New England there. It became a significant center of Christian witness on all kinds of issues that divided and tore society apart.

And the Arlington Church was always on the "wrong" side. It was the place where the Abolitionist Movement to dismantle slavery found its headquarters. In the 60s it was the place where William Sloan Kaufman and Benjamin Spock invited the young men of Harvard and Yale to burn their draft cards in protest against the Vietnam War. It was the place in the subsequent decade where every social cause found expression. Its present senior pastor is Kim Crawford Harvey, the first woman senior pastor, who is lesbian. You notice I say she *is* lesbian. She is not *a* lesbian. Because people are not gay or lesbian, people are human beings. They are people. Their orientation may be one way or the other, but you don't refer to me as *a* heterosexual. I am a person. The Arlington Street Church has found a new issue that needs addressing. There is a great flourishing congregation again, with a budget bigger than it has been for 20 years because they have addressed this issue, which is tearing our society apart.

Randall Terry is the head of a movement he calls Resistance . You see him on television on Christian broadcast channels (that I don't watch), eliciting from people their baser motives, creating fear and division and trying to raise money. He was quoted as saying that if he had scripted Bill Clinton's first two weeks *himself*, he could not have done a better job. He's just delighted at all of the controversy around the White House because fundraising letters are in the mail, and he calls it a bonanza.

I read the article on the Boston church, and I'm not a very pious guy and I don't lay a lot of stuff on you, but when I was done, my eyes were moist and I said, "Dear God, I would that Christ Community would be a community of such integrity that it would provide a shelter for all sorts and conditions of human beings, that would create a space where people could be together, where there would be the acceptance of diversity, the encouragement of dialogue, the embrace of grace, and a love that was a true reflection of the love of God in Jesus Christ, our Lord." It seems to me, in the words of the title of a book by James Davison Hunter, that in the midst of this time of "Culture Wars," this world, this nation, needs a people who will be a voice for reconciliation, who will seek to bring people together, who will seek to honor every person's dignity, who will guard the dignity of every person, and will create a place for people to be fully human in the worship and the service of God.

I don't know why churches, why religions, seem to breed the kind of hostility that in Nazareth wanted to kill Jesus, and did kill Jesus. But I know this, that in the face of Jesus I want us to be something other. I want us to be full of love, dripping with compassion, able to deal honestly with every social issue. I want us to be civil and committed - a place of light, love, healing.

Dear God, wouldn't that be great! Wouldn't that be great!