

# OAK GROVE PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

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Mathew 22:36–40, 28:18–20

2 Corinthians 5: 18–20

We continue today with the sermon series on the nature and attributes of the church. Last week I talked about why the church even exists, and today I want to focus on the purpose for the church, and how the church is called to be in the world. The scripture for the day comes from the book of Mathew and from Paul’s second letter to the church in Corinth. As we turn to the scriptures, let us pray for an awareness of and inspiration from God’s Spirit.

Startle us, O God, surprise us with your word. Open our hearts and minds by the power of your Holy Spirit, that as the Scriptures are read and your Word is proclaimed, we may hear with joy what you say to us today. Amen.

## **Matthew 22:36–40, 28:18–20**

<sup>36</sup> “Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?” <sup>37</sup> He said to him, “‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.’ <sup>38</sup> This is the greatest and first commandment. <sup>39</sup> And a second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ <sup>40</sup> On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.”

<sup>18</sup> And Jesus came and said to them, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. <sup>19</sup> 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, <sup>20</sup> and teaching them to obey everything that I have

commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.”

## **2 Corinthians 5:18-20**

<sup>18</sup> All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation; <sup>19</sup> that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us. <sup>20</sup> So we are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us; we entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God.

About 30 or 40 years ago, every business from large corporation to small shop was told that it was important that they have a mission statement. A mission statement articulates the purpose for a business, an organization, or person. The mission statement defines the entity’s reason for existence. Mission statements often include the goals of the organization, the product or service provided to the customer of the organization, and what makes the particular organization unique. Most companies have them.

AT&T’s mission is “Today, our mission is to connect people with their world, everywhere they live and work, and do it better than anyone else.”

“Facebook’s “gives people the power to build community and bring the world closer together. That reflects that we can’t do this ourselves, but only by empowering people to build communities and bring people together.”

Starbuck’s mission statement is “to inspire and nurture the human spirit – one person, one cup and one neighborhood at a time.”

Amazon.com's mission statement is "Amazon strives to be Earth's Most Customer-Centric Company, Earth's Best Employer, and Earth's Safest Place to Work."

Eventually, companies also began to establish vision statements to go alongside their mission statements. Then there was great debate if a company needed both a vision and a mission statement, and there was plenty of debate about what the difference between the two was.

For most, the vision statement is about naming a future hoped-for reality, and the mission statement was more immediate of what the organization would do in the present to help make the vision happen.

More recently, organizations have also begun to articulate their core values as well. Values can be the organizations underlying ethic, the foundation they use to make one decision over another.

In the 1990's it became very popular for churches to fashion mission statements and it's never really gone out of favor. If you look at most church websites, you will find a mission statement. In a similar manner to a business mission statement, a church's mission statement can be an articulation of the church's purpose and reason for its existence.

Now there is a huge difference between a company and a church in that the church is not about creating products for people to consume.

Although, and this point probably deserves an entire sermon on its own, the church and people sometime forget this. So church leadership talks a lot about creating programs to attract people so that the church can survive – or people shopping for a church will evaluate what's in it for them, and I am not kidding when I tell you that I have heard that some have made a choice to attend one church over another because of the quality of coffee.

But here's a trick question for you all, and if we were gathered physically together, I would ask you to raise your hands, how many of you think the church has a mission? Now, I realize I just gave you a hint, in the way that I asked the question and by telling you that it was a trick question. But if I were to answer the question, "Does the church have a mission?" My answer would be "No – no, the church doesn't have a mission, but God does."

As I mentioned last week, I don't think the church exists for its own purpose, rather, the church exists for God's purposes in the world. It is not the church of God that has a mission in the world, but the God of mission that has a church in the world. Let me say that again, it is not the church of God that has a mission in the world, but the God of mission that has a church in the world. Put another way, the church doesn't have a mission, the church is the mission.

So, what is God's mission for the church? In a blog post called, "Do Churches Need to Develop Mission Statements?" Alan Bevere questions whether churches should develop a mission statement. He asks "I know that when churches develop mission statements they mean well, but in doing so do they unintentionally suggest that they can improve upon the mission Jesus gave the church some two millennia ago?"<sup>i</sup> Jesus already gave the church a mission statement when he gave us the Great Commandment and the Great Commission.

"You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind." and "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." "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." More simply put, love God, love yourself, love others, spread it around and share the love." That's God's mission for the church.

Most church mission statements, when you break them down, are just a re-articulation of those things. Even the really pithy ones like “Know, Grow, and Go” or “Reach Up, Reach Out, Reach In” or “Love, Grow, Serve” or Revive, Reach, Renew.”

Now, I realize that this is easier said than done, and that a lot more detail is needed to define exactly what that means. That is where an individual church’s mission statement might be helpful. When I was discerning if God was calling me to be a pastor at Oak Grove, I looked for how Oak Grove articulated its understanding of God’s mission, and one of the first things I did was look for its mission and vision statement on the website. I didn’t really find one. I looked on the Facebook page. I didn’t really find one. I looked at an annual report, and I didn’t really find one.

I did find some statements as I looked. I found the statement, “Loving God... Changing Lives.” And I found “Celebrating Diversity, Growing in Love, Open to All,” and “All are welcome here,” and this statement “Oak Grove Presbyterian is a vibrant, loving, open-hearted, generous community, always learning and growing in Christ. Our Church strives to express God’s love in all we do and affirms the sacred worth of all persons and the earth.” And I found, “Our heart is mission” and I found, “Oak Grove is a joyful, inclusive, compassionate community of faith seeking to do justice, act mercifully and walk humbly with God.” And then last Sunday, as we were singing the Sending Song after the children’s time in worship, some of the words struck me... “Resting in God’s peace, Praying for God’s hope, Serving God’s joy, United in God’s love.”

So, in my time leading up to being here, and over the last few weeks of being physically present, I have found many different statements, but not one articulated statement labeled as “The Oak Grove Presbyterian Church Mission Statement.”

Now, don't panic. I'm not about to call an emergency Session meeting, or suggest that we hire some high-priced consultant to lead us in workshops to align our resources to maximize our strategy as we cast a vision for the future. Great mission statements don't make great churches.

It might be helpful at some point to articulate a mission statement, or values, but it's not essential if we pay attention to God's mission. God's mission is better served when we do the work and we are intentional about the work.

While every church is called to love God, love themselves, love others, and spread that love around, what that means for each individual church is different. Each church should understand who it is in God's larger mission. What role does that specific congregation play, what is their part? Or, why does it matter that we are who we are and that we are placed where we are placed? Each church should ask itself, "what would it matter if we didn't exist?" "If we shut our doors for good, who would miss us or what part of God's mission would go undone?" Think about that for a second. "What would it matter if Oak Grove didn't exist?" "If we shut our doors for good, who would miss us or what part of God's mission would go undone?" These, I think are critical questions, because I think God's mission is incredibly important, particularly for the time in which we are now.

A significant change has occurred. As we move further into the twenty-first century, a shift has occurred in North America from a period some have labeled as church-culture to a post-church culture. During the time of the church-culture, the Christian faith and the church experienced relative stability and power. The surrounding culture supported the church and its identity; stores were closed on Sundays, or community sporting activities were not scheduled on Wednesday

evenings. It was understood that these times were for church activities. People were expected to be involved in the Christian church and the wider community was expected to not only support the church, but also help form people in a Christian way of life.

In a post-churched world, the wider culture is no longer supportive of, or helps form people in a Christian identity. Congregations that have not recognized this shift in the wider culture “continue to expect their immediate environment to provide the primary resources for making Christians, forming disciples, and forming Christian community.”<sup>ii</sup> The primary responsibility of the church, in a churched-culture, was simply to orient members of the organization, because the assumption was that the person was already a fully formed disciple of Christ. In a post-churched culture, the mission of God through the church is hugely important and carries more urgency.

The time we now live in is very similar to the time and to the community that Matthew was writing to. The original setting of the people who received the writings of the Gospel of Matthew is a diverse one. Because of this great diversity, Matthew is interested in providing “guidance to a community in crisis on how it should understand its calling and mission.”<sup>iii</sup> Matthew writes to his community to “assist them in developing a missionary ethos that will match the challenges of a new [time].”<sup>iv</sup> The writing itself is a missionary text. These early Christian communities, like the one that Matthew is writing to, “shared the conviction that they existed for Christ’s mission. They were the result of the apostolic mission, and their purpose was to continue that mission.... they understood themselves to be ‘missionary by their very nature.’”<sup>v</sup>

A similar pluralistic and diverse culture faces us today; Because of this similarity, this original mission-oriented understanding of Matthew’s gospel, and the Great Commission in particular, is extremely pertinent

for our church today. As Matthew attempted to do for followers of Christ in the early church, so the contemporary church needs to form members into a particular faith community with an understanding of being missional members by assisting “them in developing a missionary ethos that will match the challenges of [this] new [time].”<sup>vi</sup> We need to become missionary by our very nature, and focus on just what it is that shapes us. That is why it is important to not understand mission as just one more thing the church does, or as one of the many functions of the church. The church is the mission, we are missionary by our very nature. We don’t do mission, the church is the mission.

The mission of God is to use the church to form disciples and invite all to join in creating a redemptive world. As Paul says, in his second letter to the Corinthians, Christ “has given us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to [Godself], not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us. So we are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making God’s appeal through us.”

Ambassadors take on the role of representing the one who sent them. Ambassadors become familiar with the culture in which they are placed in order to speak to those with whom they interact. As ambassadors for Christ it is incumbent upon us to understand the circumstances and the surrounding in which we are called. We have to learn to speak the language of those around us, and sometimes be able to translate the language of God in ways that those unfamiliar with it will understand it. As part of a post-church culture, our role as ambassadors is extremely important. We are the integral part of the Great Commandment and Great Commission.

The calling of us all is to join God in this redemptive reign, and to share this good news with others. At the core of God’s mission, is Jesus’

command to make disciples in the Great Commission. “If we took that command seriously, we would understand that the front door of every church and indeed of every Christian opens up onto a mission field.”<sup>vii</sup> Every day we are entering the mission field as God’s hands and feet out in the world, where we work, live, and play.

The church’s purpose is not its own. The church is present in the world on behalf of the God by whose grace it has been called into existence. At the heart of the church’s act of self-definition is a basic theological question: what is the nature of God’s presence in the world?... God’s presence is creative and redemptive in nature. Where there is chaos, whether in the natural or social realm, God is present to create harmony. Where there is bondage, God is active to redeem the enslaved. Where there are walls dividing humans into privileged and deprived classes, God seeks to remove oppressive divisions through judgment and release. Where there is brokenness, loneliness, and sickness, God is present to heal.”<sup>viii</sup>

My desire is for Oak Grove to live fully into God’s mission. Loving God, loving ourselves, loving others, and spreading that love around. Maybe we will articulate a brief statement about that one day, or maybe we will have several statements. Maybe we won’t. Either way – God has given us the mission, and if we continue to do it, that will make the statement.

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<sup>i</sup> Alan Bevere, <http://www.ministrymatters.com/all/blog/entry/1457/blog-do-churches-need-to-develop-mission-statements>

<sup>ii</sup> Patrick Keifert, *We Are Here Now: A New Missional Era* (Eagle, Idaho: Allelon Publishing, 2006), 34.

<sup>iii</sup> Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission*, 57.

<sup>iv</sup> *Ibid.*, 58.

<sup>v</sup> Lois Barrett, *Treasure in Clay Jars: Patterns in Missional Faithfulness*, The Gospel and Our Culture Series (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2004), 61.

<sup>vi</sup> Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission*, 58.

<sup>vii</sup> Richard W. Rouse and Craig Van Gelder, *A Field Guide for the Missional Congregation: Embarking on a Journey of Transformation* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress, 2008), 23.

<sup>viii</sup> Paul D. Hanson, *The Identity and Purpose of the Church in Theology Today*, Vol. 42 No. 3, October 1985