

MISSION: POSSIBLE – DISCIPLES OF JESUS CHRIST

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Matthew 16:21-28

Last week, I began this sermon series that I am calling Mission: Possible. And through this three-part series, I am developing a mission statement for our congregation. Now, our church does not currently have a mission statement and I'm not proposing that this becomes the official statement to post on the website. What this is, is a working document—something that we can use to wrap our heads around what we believe our church should be. If we want to use this to create our own, unique statement, that would be great.

This mission statement that I have written is about as concise as I could make it weighing in at just 13 words. For comparison's sake, the Lord's Prayer has 64 words. Each week, I will lift up a different phrase from this mission statement.

The mission statement that I have written says that First Presbyterian Church shall be “A welcoming community of disciples of Jesus Christ striving to demonstrate God’s realm.”

Last Sunday, we explored the idea that we, as a congregation, should be “a welcoming community.” Using the model of the earliest church as described in the book of Acts, I asked how First Presbyterian Church might be such a community—a community of believers that live in common, sharing freely with one another.

We also looked at what it means to be welcoming. A church cannot be exclusive. It must engage with the world. It must be hospitable to all in the name of Jesus Christ. It is not our job to judge who comes to us. It is our job to welcome.

Being a welcoming community does not come easy. It takes commitment by all; it requires a shared vision; it demands sacrifice. I propose that we as a church must always endeavor to be a welcoming community.

However, a church has to be more than that. Any group of people can be a welcoming community. That is why the second part of our mission statement calls us to be “disciples of Jesus Christ.” That is what sets us apart from the rest of the world. We are not just a community, but we are a community grounded in our commitment to follow the teachings of Jesus of Nazareth.

To help us better understand what this means, I would like now to look at a familiar passage from the Gospel of Matthew. In this passage, Jesus is traveling with his disciples and for the first time he tells them what will eventually happen to him. He tells how he is going to suffer at the hands of the religious authorities and be killed. But on the third day he will be raised.

Peter, one of the disciples, is not thrilled with this news and pulls Jesus aside to speak with him privately. Peter is appalled that anything like this might happen to their leader. Peter doesn't like the fact that it will affect him as well. I like to imagine Peter saying to Jesus, "Hey boss, that talk of you getting killed is not good for morale. We all left a lot to be with you. We figured there was a future in it for all of us. You are the Messiah. You are going to lead our people to freedom. You will be great. We will be great. We are here with you, but not on a suicide mission. So, just explain to the guys that you were telling one of your parables and it will all be fine."

But Jesus will have none of it and blasts Peter saying, *Get behind me Satan. You are dragging me down. You are thinking of yourself and don't see the big picture here.* Then, to the group, Jesus says, *If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.*

To be a disciple is to be a student. Jesus chose these 12 so that they might learn from him about the ways of God. They are not an army of his soldiers tasked with enforcing his will. They are to be a holy people charged with spreading Jesus' message. And when Jesus is gone, they are to continue his work, spreading his word throughout the world.

So, what exactly is Jesus' core message? Well, it is the kingdom of God. As we read in Mark's gospel, *After John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, and saying, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news."* (I'll be talking more about the kingdom next week.) Jesus' message is to tell the world the good news that God's kingdom has come near—that it is present for us all. In fact, he tells the disciples that some of them will experience the kingdom before they die.

As we know, that is not all that Jesus teaches about. Another core teaching is about love. *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.* I like to think of Jesus' statements on love as being the keys to the kingdom. With love, we can unlock and enter into the glory of God's realm. To be a disciple of Christ is not just to teach Jesus' message, but to live it.

On Thursday night of this week, there was a shooting at a church. The church is Saint Stephens Episcopal in Vestavia Hills, Alabama. Vestavia Hills is an affluent suburb just south of Birmingham. On Thursday night, about 25 members of Saint Stephens were gathered in their fellowship hall enjoying a potluck supper. A man entered the fellowship hall and went and sat by himself at a table. This man is 71 years old, and it is believed that he had attended worship at Saint Stephens on several occasions. But it is a large church, so he wasn't known to anyone there. One of the church members, Walter Rainey—but everyone calls him Bart—went over to this man sitting alone invited him to come and sit at his table. The man refused and then some moments later pulled out a handgun and shot Mr. Rainey and two other

people. Another church member jumped into action hitting the shooter with a chair and wrestling the gun from him. Three people were shot; all three died. They were Bart Rainey, age 84, Jane Pounds, also age 84, and Sarah Yeager, age 75. Mr. Rainey died in the church held by his wife of 61 years.¹

A statement written by Mr. Rainey's family says this, "We are proud that in his last act on earth, he extended the hand of community and fellowship to a stranger, regardless of the outcome."²

Without a doubt, Bart Rainey was a true disciple of Jesus Christ. He could have chosen to ignore the stranger and simply enjoy his meal with his wife and friends at church as they had done countless times before. And if he had, he might be alive today. But Mr. Rainey had a mind set on *divine things*, not *human things*, and he walked over to the stranger and welcomed him and invited him to be part of his community. He had no idea what the consequence would be.

Jesus told his disciples, *If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me*. To be a disciple, one must put aside their own interests and adopt the teachings of Jesus. The cross is a large wooden structure that is the means of execution. Metaphorically, taking up the cross means dying to our old ways and adapting to a new way of life. Literally, taking up a cross means that following Jesus may put you in a situation that will get you killed.

As Christians, our job is to do whatever it takes to usher in the kingdom of God. That is a risky business. It means giving up our own self-interest and focusing on the needs of others. It means denying ourselves and picking up a cross.

It is not easy to be a disciple. In fact, it may be the toughest thing you do. To be a disciple demands an absolute re-alignment of our values. Instead of asking, "How can I make myself great?" a disciple asks, "What can I do to bring God's realm a little closer?"

My heart breaks at the loss of these three lives at Saint Stephen's. My heart goes out to the congregation and pastors as they will struggle with the continuing horror of that night.

However, as a disciple, you can't be a bystander or a spectator. You can't watch from the sidelines. You have to get into the game. You have to play. We can't call ourselves a church if we aren't committed to being disciples drawn together to form a community that welcomes all.

¹ <https://www.npr.org/2022/06/16/1105772475/alabama-church-shooting>

² <https://www.al.com/news/birmingham/2022/06/st-stephens-church-shooting-bart-rainey-84-was-the-nicest-gentleman-anyone-could-have-met.html>