



March 7 & 8, 2020
Pastor Mark Toone

20/20 Vision: Our Mission

Matthew 22 & 28, John 13

Welcome to worship! If I cough during my message, please don't freak out! I went to the doctor yesterday and have a touch of bronchitis...but nothing to worry about. I know that we are all being extra cautious in this nasty flu season so whether you are able to be with us in person or are taking advantage of our new video capability, I'm glad the whole Chapel Hill family can come together around God's Word.

I wish I had 20/20 vision. I don't. I'm pretty near-sighted. And when I went in to get Lasik, I was told that I was not a candidate because I had "saggy" corneas. No one wants the adjective "saggy" describing any part of their body, am I right?

In this year of our Lord, 2020, it seemed a unique opportunity to speak of our vision as a church. Frankly, that vision had gotten a little blurry in recent years. But with some hard work...and some outside help...your Session has brought it back into focus and we are excited to share this with you. We will do that over the next five weeks in a sermon series we are calling 2020 Vision. Isn't that clever?

The past few weeks, we've been talking about "getting into the game;" how every single member of this church has a part to play in God's work. Now we are going to define what that "game" is and our starting point is to clarify our mission. A mission statement is a way of answering the question, "Why do we exist."

For many years, our mission statement was "Working together to present everyone mature in Christ" based on Colossians 1:28. In a season of fast growth, we didn't want to be a mile wide and an inch deep. We wanted to help those who came to Christ to really mature in their faith.

In a way, we were successful. Through church-wide surveys, we discovered we were becoming more mature in many important ways: Bible study, Bible knowledge, small groups, service, generosity. Lots of strong markers for Christian maturity. But 4 years ago, we discovered one area in which we were NOT excelling. Evangelism. We were not doing well at inviting unchurched friends to church. On any given weekend, only 2.6% in attendance described themselves as non-Christian or newcomers. Since the average church turnover is about 10% a year, that meant we were losing ground.

And we were. For at least ten years, we were in a slow but steady decline in attendance. At our high point, we had 1700 people on a weekend. At our low point three years ago, we were sometimes below 1000. That's a significant drop. What was going on?

Well, for one thing, church attendance is dropping nationally so we are fighting strong cultural headwinds. But there were also internal issues for us to face. So we hired an organization called “Unstuck” to help us get “unstuck.” And one of the things we came to understand was that, as a church, we had turned increasingly inward. We enjoyed each other, enjoyed our bible classes and seminars, enjoyed our style of worship and the programs we offered. We were content. We were happy. We liked church the way it was...and we didn’t have much appetite for inviting outsiders in and the disruption to our routine that they might bring.

So two years ago Session made a decision. We decided to evaluate everything we did with an eye to becoming a more welcoming church to outsiders. Obviously, we want to continue to minister to our own church family...but to put it bluntly: we had become increasingly indifferent to the fact that thousands of people around us face an eternity without God because they do not know Jesus. We had a high percentage of self-described “mature believers” but our passion for reaching the lost had begun to grow cold.

BUT...those embers were not dead! Beyond These Walls helped us discover that. When we announced a campaign to eliminate \$ 5.5 million in debt and direct the savings to ministries beyond our walls...to give ourselves away as we had never done before... it lit a fire in this congregation. In July we hope to conclude the most successful capital campaign ever...and the entire focus was to give and serve and reach out beyond our walls. Your record-setting response told us that we had had tapped back into Chapel Hill’s evangelistic heart.

And encouraged by this we began a sometimes painful reevaluation of everything we do. It meant change...and most people love change, right? It meant giving up or pausing beloved programs in order to focus on more essential things that will reach the unchurched in our community. It meant asking you to make room in your pews and room in your hearts for newcomers. It even learning to love your neighbors in a new way.

And may I tell you....it has begun to work! We are in the midst of a turnaround. Over the last two years, we have seen a 21% increase in worship attendance...something one consultant described as “almost unheard of” for a church our size and a pastor my age. (That hurt!) Last year, 194 people professed faith in Jesus for the first time, the largest single year ever. God is doing an incredible work of transformation and we are blessed.

In this process of self-examination, we came to realize something: our mission statement didn’t work anymore. When we found ourselves either ignoring it or working around it...we knew it was time for a change.

Then the question was: so what IS our mission as a church? How do we decide? Here’s where we landed. We turned to the superlatives of Jesus. A “superlative” is the highest extreme of comparison. The biggest, the longest, the smartest, the tiniest...those are superlatives. We decided to focus on three of Jesus’ superlatives: the Greatest commandment...the NEW commandment...and

the Great Commission. We figured that if Jesus called special attention to these teachings, we ought to pay attention, too.

We spent a lot of time talking about the Greatest Commandment last year so this will be review for many of you. We find the story in Matthew 22.

But when the Pharisees heard that he had silenced the Sadducees, they gathered together. And one of them, a lawyer, asked him a question to test him. "Teacher, which is the great commandment in the Law?" And 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. This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets."

"What's the greatest commandment?" the lawyer asks Jesus. He responded with a passage from Deuteronomy 6: "Hear O Israel, the Lord your God, the Lord is one and you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might." This was the most important prayer in Judaism. Jesus was saying, "The SINGLE most important commandment is to love God with everything you have."

But he doesn't stop there, does he? Jesus says, "I won't give you just one, because there is another essential part to this commandment. You shall love your neighbor as yourself." "Love God with everything you have," says Jesus. And then, immediately he tacks on, "AND....love your neighbor as yourself." The Greatest commandment is not one part...it's two parts. And every other commandment hangs on these two.

SO...if Jesus said that of everything he ever taught, this was THE MOST IMPORTANT ... then surely, we ought to pay attention to that when we are trying to articulate the priorities of our mission statement. Love God passionately...and love your neighbors selflessly. Tuck those away. And...maybe we could stop right there.

But there was another superlative. Jesus spoke of it in the Upper Room on the night of his betrayal. This was his last teaching before he went to the cross. Jesus says to his frightened disciples, "I'm going to give you a NEW commandment." This was audacious. Who has the right to add to the commandments? But Jesus did. John 13: 34-35. Listen:

A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another. By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another."

This is the ONLY time Jesus ever gave his disciples a "new commandment." Why? BECAUSE...the standard of love was himself...and the world had never seen anything like Jesus. The distinguishing feature of the disciples of Jesus would be love.... love like JESUS loved. Sacrificial, humble, selfless, courageous. This was different from neighbor-love. Neighbor love is one-directional. We love them as we love ourselves. We love regardless of their behavior, their response, their reciprocity...we just love them.

But the new commandment is mutual. People will recognize that we are disciples of Jesus because we love each other. As different as we are, as angry as we might make each other, as screwed up as we might be...we will love each other with the love that Jesus modelled for us.

So, love God with everything you have, love your neighbor as yourself, love one another like Jesus loves us. There is one last superlative. We find it in Matthew 28: the Great Commission:

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, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.

The first three superlatives are all about love: God-love, Neighbor-Love, Brother/Sister-Love. Perhaps we could say that the fourth is "World-Love." We call it the Great Commission. These are the last words of Christ before he ascended to heaven. He could have said anything, repeated anything, reinforced anything. But what he chose as his last words to his disciples were his marching orders for the Church. It is "great," perhaps, because this was Jesus' parting shot and we always consider that significant. But it is also great because of the magnitude...the scope of that commission. It is nothing less than a global mission to love the whole world with the gospel of Christ.

So...these are the superlatives of Jesus that guided us as we wrote our mission statement. As you'll see, it's not completely original... but then, we don't want to be completely original. That's called "heresy." We sought to capture God-love, neighbor-love, brother/sister-love and world-love in one short, easy to remember phrase. Why does Chapel Hill exist? This is the answer that your session has provided:

Chapel Hill exists to exalt Jesus, elevate others and launch disciple-makers.

There are three parts, two of which are pretty obvious...and one of which might require a little explanation. You will notice that each of the verbs...exalt...elevate...and launch... are uplifting words. This is a nod to our name: We are Chapel Hill. A city set on a hill, as Jesus put it. We wanted a mission statement that reminds us of our upward call of God in Christ.

First, we exist to exalt Jesus. "Love God with everything you have." Our primary purpose as a church is to lift up the name of Jesus. In worship, in music, in teaching, in program...we believe that Jesus alone is the salvation of the world; that Jesus alone is the way, the truth and the life, that Jesus alone provides deliverance from sin and shame and, through his spirit, a sense of belonging and purpose and destiny. Our mission must always start with the exalting...the lifting up...of Jesus Christ.

Jump down to the third for a moment. We exist to "launch disciple-makers." This is the Great Commission. It is our job to raise up and launch into the world men, women and children who understand that THEIR call is to make other disciples of Jesus. This is the antidote to the inward focus our elders were concerned about. We must never forget that we exist for the sake of those outside our walls...and not just inside.

Exalt Jesus...launch disciple-makers...those are pretty obvious. But what about that middle one? "Elevate others?" What does that mean? This refers to the call of Jesus to love our neighbors and love each other. Obviously we could have USED the word "love" ...but that word is so over-used it has almost lost its meaning. Besides, biblical love as modeled by Jesus is an action word...and "elevate" speaks to Biblical love in many ways.

First of all, it speaks of humility. In a culture that encourages us to elevate ourselves, to make more of ourselves, the New Testament encourages us to make less of ourselves and more of others. Jesus came not to be served but to serve. Jesus knelt on the floor to wash his disciples' filthy feet. Paul encouraged the Philippians to "count others as more important than yourselves." We are a large, well-resourced church full of high-achieving people. When we remind ourselves to elevate others, it is a constant reminder to remain humble before the Lord and before His world.

Secondly, "elevate others" reminds us of the unique call upon our church to lift up broken people. Psalm 3 describes God as a "lifter of my head," a reference to the soldier who would walk around the battlefield and lift up the heads of those who lay on the ground to find if any life remained within them. Through Celebrate Recovery and Lay Counseling and Titus and other ministries, we consider it our privilege to lift up the heads and hearts of broken people, remind them of God's love and offer them new life in Christ.

Thirdly, it is our hope that when people walk out of this building, especially after worship, they will be "elevated." Their guilt will be lifted, their hearts will be lifted, their hopes will be lifted, their spirits will be lifted. In a world that puts people down, down, down...we want to lift people up, up, up!

Chapel Hill exists to exalt Jesus, to elevate others and to launch disciple-makers. We believe this describes who we are becoming...and who we long to be. May the Lord bless us as we seek to fulfill this high calling. PRAY

Benediction- Exalt Jesus, Elevate Others, Launch Disciple-makers. The elders believe this is our mission going forward. But the question is...do you? Could you get behind this mission as a congregation...a mission of worship that lifts up the name of Jesus as King of Kings and Lord of Lords...a mission of humility that puts the needs of others before ourselves... a mission of evangelism that challenges and trains every member of to share the life-giving news of the gospel. Is this a mission that YOU can get behind? If so...would you raise your hand? Now...raise both hands...because we cannot do this without a filling of the Holy Spirit.