

The Mission of God

Isaiah 65:17-25

Twenty-third Sunday after Pentecost/ 13th November 2022

The organizational consultant Peter Block says four things “kill” a sense of community in the church. First (we might not like this) is pews facing forward so that only the person in front is heard; second, answering questions instead of asking them; third, expecting people to perform for us – our children, friends, colleagues, leaders, pastors, worship leaders (like the choir); and fourth, *being helpful*.

These are each worthy of our attention, but maybe it’s the last one that is most surprising: *being helpful*. What’s wrong with being helpful? Isn’t this what the church is supposed to be about? Ministry is often viewed as finding a need and then filling it. Not so, says Block. By helping, Block means *fixing*. Someone is hungry, and we fix a meal. Someone is without shelter, so we build a home and “fix” that problem.

So what’s wrong with being fixers? Serving the needs of our neighbors, isn’t this what it means to love one another? Aren’t we as a church in the fix-it business? Isn’t this what *mission* is all about – being helpful, fixing things, fixing people’s problems?

Yes—and maybe that’s precisely the problem. The Anglican Bishop Mandell Creighton (1843-1901) once said, “no people do so much harm as those who go about doing good.” We would think more people doing good would be good for everyone. But what if the people doing good are naïve about how improvement happens, and how systemic social transformation occurs? What if the people doing good are too idealistic, too confident in their ability to realize the good for everyone? What if people doing good are doing what *they* deem is good instead of listening to the people on the receiving end of all our goodness? What if we listened to discover what they need and *don’t* need from us?

There’s a flip side to wanting to help and fix too much: it might produce more harm than good. But I think we also know that unless we work for systemic change in communities, all our efforts are like band-aids on the festering wounds of society. What if the church’s desire to help and fix prevents us from being attentive to the deeper structures of power and economic inequality that are the root cause of so much pain and suffering in the world? This is where all our good does little to bring about real change and might, in the end, do more harm.

George Macleod (1895-1991), founder of the [Iona Community](#) in Scotland, told the story of when he was a pastor serving in the impoverished working-class parish in Govan, near Glasgow, in the 1930s. He got tired of visiting and praying for people living in old, damp tenements suffering from tuberculosis without also praying for the entire society, the system, a community rotting to its core, caught in the grips of poverty, hunger, and unemployment.¹

Yes, we know the needs of God’s people are enormous. Yet, if we ran about trying to meet or alleviate every need, help every person in need, and fix every problem, we would soon

be exhausted. We're maybe overwhelmed by compassion or disaster fatigue. But isn't this what the church is called to do? Isn't this our mission?

My friend Tim Hart-Anderson, past in Minneapolis, MN, says, "Mission is basic to what we do. Get mission wrong and we get church wrong. Drift away from mission and we drift away from church. Stop mission and we stop church." If it's so important, then what exactly is it?

This gets us to the heart of the matter. There's something not quite right with how the church has used this word "mission" for the last two hundred years or so. I wish we had a better or different word, but we don't. We tend to view mission as the work of the Mission Committee. We think of it as "charity" or aid and support beyond the church's walls to those in need. The church, then, becomes a vendor of religious services and goods, doing good, fixing problems out there in the mission field, beyond the doors of the church, or someplace other than where we live, someplace we must go to get there, whether to downtown Baltimore or Puerto Rico. But this way of understanding mission worked in a culture that viewed itself as primarily Christian. Mission work was always considered as being elsewhere, someplace else. As we know, today, our culture is far from having a Christian outlook.²

If we return to the root meaning of the word, "mission" from *missio* means, simply, "sent." Throughout scripture, right from the beginning pages of Genesis, we encounter the sending-God who sends people, nations, and eventually the church off on a journey with a purpose: to proclaim good news to the poor, to proclaim the redemptive love of God, to represent and embody the compassion, justice, and peace of the reign of God. Even the sending of Jesus should be viewed as part of God's mission. Rather than seeing mission as the church's efforts to extend itself, we exist to extend the mission of God in the world.³ I like the way practical theologian Alan Hirsch (who spoke here at CPC about fifteen years ago) reframes our thinking. "We frequently say 'the church has a mission,'" but a more theologically correct statement, he says, would be "God's mission has a church."⁴

Mission is more than the work of the Mission Committee and the Deacons. All that we do as a church is in service to God's mission—Christian education, outreach, stewardship, peace and justice, worship, how we care for one another, steward our resources, and care for the building—it's all about us, as a community, together, serving God's mission in the world. This requires, therefore, that we get out of God's way with what we want the church to be and place our lives into service to *God's* mission in the world.

What is God's mission? We know what matters most to God – justice, righteousness, peace, forgiveness, reconciliation, love, compassion, hope, people living in harmony with their neighbor, themselves, and God. It's beautifully summarized in Isaiah 65. Last Thursday, in Bible study, we read a paraphrase of Isaiah 65 from the Australian church, with an Australian voice. It beautifully describes the mission of God, God's creation of something new. Here's a portion of the paraphrase:

*Never again will there be babies who die young,
or adults who don't live to a ripe old age.*

...

*They will live secure in the houses they have worked for.
They will enjoy the fruits of their own labours.*

*Never again will anyone build a house,
only to have the bank confiscate it.
Never again will anyone sweat and toil
only to see the profit go to someone else.*

*My people will live long and sturdy like the great trees.
My chosen people will love their work and enjoy its fruits.*

*Their work will not be wasted.
Their children will not be doomed.
I, the LORD, will see that their children flourish,
and that all will be well for their children's children.*

*Before their prayers pass their lips, I will answer.
I'll tune in before they've opened their mouths.*

*The dingo and the lamb will feed side by side.
The crocodile will go vegetarian.
Snakes will bite nothing but the dust!
There will be no killing or maiming on my holy mountain;
I, the LORD, have given my word!⁵*

Now before you get all revved up and eager to work for this vision or become overwhelmed with despair given the enormous burden of this vision – before we run out bringing God's goodness and fixin' up the universe, meeting every need, we have to stop.

Stop.

Stop and remember this: *it's not about us.*

“For I am about to create new heavens and a new earth,” says Yahweh, “the former things shall not be remembered or come to mind. But be glad and rejoice” – why? – “be glad and rejoice in what I am creating; for I am about to create Jerusalem as a joy and its people as a delight” (Is. 65:18).

It's God who does this work – because it's God's mission to create and recreate. The Hebrew here for “create” – *bara* – is the same beautiful Hebrew word used to describe God's original act of creation. The word is only used to describe God's creative work. Only God

creates. Human beings work with what God has created and is creating, but we don't create, only God. It is God who builds and rebuilds – with us and through us, to be sure – but it's really God's work, God's power to create. And the good news is that it's not about us, which means we can relax and be less anxious about trying to help everyone and fix everything. This doesn't mean there isn't work for us to do. We get to be partners or co-workers, maybe even co-creators, in God's mission. And the good news, by God's grace, is that we as the church get to experience God's joy and delight because we have been called to serve – *not* the church, but *God's mission* – the mission of God.

¹ Ronald Ferguson, *George Macleod: Founder of the Iona Community* (Collins, 1990).

² See Darrell L. Guder, ed. *Missional Church: A Vision for the Sending of the Church in North America* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 77ff.

³ Guder, 93ff.

⁴ See Alan Hirsch, *The Forgotten Ways: Reactivating the Missional Church*. Foreword by Leonard Sweet (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2006); and Michael Frost and Alan Hirsch, *The Shaping of Things to Come: Innovation and Mission for the 21st Century Church* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2003).

⁵ I am grateful to Sue Moseman for sharing this with us at Bible this week. The paraphrase may be found at: <https://laughingbird.net/index.php/scripture-paraphrases/>.