

The Living Church Matthew 5:14-16

Today is the first Sunday in Lent and so today we begin a journey. It is a journey of discipleship. A journey that leads us to a cross, and to an empty tomb.

I encourage you to use this season of Lent to reflect deeply on what it means to be a disciple of Jesus. One way you can do that is to make a commitment to be here every Wednesday evening at 7.30pm for our Lent midweek EPIC services. The theme will challenge you for your journey of discipleship.

But today is also Annual Meeting Sunday here at St. Andrew's, when we celebrate our journey as a congregation, a journey that began 183 years ago. A journey that is rooted in the past, is lived out in the present, and anticipates the future.

But those two journeys – the journey of Lent and the journey of St. Andrew's – are not disconnected. Both are the journeys of Christ's Church.

What is the Church? As Presbyterians we confess that (Living Faith 7:1)

*The church is Christ
together with his people
called both to worship and to serve him
in all of life.*

Let's think about what that means for us to be the church.

We all know the great commandment Jesus left us with. Matthew 28:19, "Go into the whole world and make disciples". That's the task Jesus gave us. But you can't do that on your own. The "whole world" is a big place.

The good news is that we aren't meant to do it on our own. Scripture describe the church this way (1 Corinthians 12:27):

*"You are the body of Christ and each one of you **part** of it"*

In other words, God calls us into community. He calls on us to work together, as brothers and sisters in Christ, to transform the world.

That has both an inward, and an outward focus. Inwardly, inside the church, it means that we must devote ourselves to each other. We have a responsibility to love one another, to pray for one another, to encourage one another, and to serve one another in a variety of ways. When we do that,

when we take that responsibility seriously, it makes for a healthy Church, a lively church, an attractive church.

Ephesians Chapter 4: 7-13 (Msg) says this about Jesus:

He handed out gifts of apostle, prophet, evangelist, and pastor-teacher to train Christ's followers in skilled servant work, working within Christ's body, the church, until we're all moving rhythmically and easily with each other, efficient and graceful in response to God's Son, fully mature adults, fully developed within and without, fully alive like Christ.

When the church functions this way, the way God intended, the results are amazing and the church becomes a place of healing for its community and for the world.

But we're not to love and serve our fellow Christians, just for the sake of our own congregation. God's plan is much bigger than that. His plan involves reaching the "*whole world*". His plan of redemption cannot be complete if we think only of those already within the church, already within our own congregation.

An inwardly focused church is an unhealthy church. It's a church that's just marking time. It's a dying church. Read the Scriptures. The evidence is there. A church that fails to look at the world around is only playing at being the church.

We are disciples of Jesus. That's why we are called Christians. To call yourself a Christian but not to actually be a disciple of Jesus, is like calling yourself a citizen of Canada but never actually exercising your right to vote. Or as someone once said. "*You don't become a Christian by going to church any more than you become a hamburger by going to McDonalds.*" It's not a new problem. Jesus often dealt with people who wanted to follow him, who wanted to identify with him, but who were simply unwilling to actually commit to live as one of his disciples.

Jesus, you see, was very clear about His purpose on earth. Luke 19:10, "*For the Son of Man came to seek and save those who are lost.*" As his disciples, we are called to reach those who do not know God. Jesus said, Matthew 5:14-16:

14 "You are the light of the world—like a city on a hilltop that cannot be hidden. 15 No one lights a lamp and then puts it under a basket. Instead, a lamp is placed on a stand, where it gives light to everyone

in the house. 16 In the same way, let your good deeds shine out for all to see, so that everyone will praise your heavenly Father.

Our focus as Christians, as a congregation, must never be inward.

Now, of course, we value each other here at St. Andrew'. We love each other. We love our church family. We can't fulfil our mission unless we serve each other in love. But let's be clear. Living together in a tight-knit membership circle is not our ultimate goal. God has placed us here in the midst of a much wider community so that we can spread his love, his hope, and his healing into the lives around us. To use the imagery of church planter Frances Chan, we are not to be a "bomb shelter" where we can hide from the troubles of the world. We are to be a "lighthouse" to guide people away from trouble.

Now we all know the two great commandments, right? "*Love God and love people.*" Love is basic to what it means to be a follower of Jesus and that same love should motivate us to reach out into the world. As Christians we have been transformed by love. Romans 5:5 say:

"For we know how dearly God loves us, because he has given us the Holy Spirit to fill our hearts with his love."

But what's the purpose of this love? It's not so we get a warm fuzzy feeling when we think about God. It's so the world will recognize us. Jesus said (John 13:35):

*Your love for one another will **prove** to the world that you are my disciples."*

Jesus told us that he wants us to look, and act, differently from others because of our love for him. Something about the way we love others should signal to the world that we belong to Jesus.

Yes, our mission will include, preaching, teaching, encouraging, serving, studying, praise and worship, and many other things, but if those activities are not rooted in love, if they are not driven by love, if they are not expressions of God's love for us, then quite frankly we've missed the point.

Do you remember the night Jesus was betrayed? That night he prayed for his disciples and he prayed for all those who would believe in him because of their witness. In other word, he prayed for us. Here's what he prayed – for us:

"I am praying not only for these disciples but also for all who will ever believe in me through their message.

I pray that they will all be one, just as you and I are one— as you are in me, Father, and I am in you. And may they be in us so that the world will believe you sent me....

May they experience such perfect unity that the world will know that you sent me and that you love them as much as you love me.

Jesus prayed for the unity of the church. He said that the quality of our community life, our unity as Christians, and as a local church, is one of the ways that the world will know us and a principal way that they'll know his love.

Jesus assumes here that our life as Christians will be an open book for others to see. He doesn't expect church life to become introverted or privatized so that the world never sees the way we interact with each other. If all we do is gather in this building on Sundays, or for a Bible study, or a program or activity, how is the world going to know what the unity and the love of Jesus is all about?

In the middle of January, I was so excited when the Vision Committee of Session gathered together 50 of our congregational leaders, and we spent a whole morning talking not about new programs for our congregation but about how we could reach out into the community around our church building and engage them where they are.

It's time as Christians that we stopped hiding from the eyes of an unbelieving world. Remember, Jesus said (Mathew 5:14-16):

"You are the light of the world—...let your good deeds shine out for all to see, so that everyone will praise your heavenly Father.

Let me ask you. When was the last time someone asked you about your faith? If no-one ever has. Or IF no-one as asked you for a long time. Why is that? What does that say about the way we are living for Jesus?

You know sometimes we think that if we could just find the right minister, the right program, the right style of worship, the right media presence that people will flock back into our churches. And in thinking all that, we miss the obvious. That in today's world we may be the only Bible that many people are ever going to read. So if people don't see Jesus in us, it is unlikely they will be attracted in this day and age by anything we do. Mission today is

about presence not about programs. Actually, it always has been. We just forgot that.

When God called Israel to be his chosen people he explained what that meant in these words (Exodus 19:5-6):

"Now if you will obey me and keep my covenant, you will be my own special treasure from among all the peoples on earth; for all the earth belongs to me. ⁶ And you will be my kingdom of priests, my holy nation.' This is the message you must give to the people of Israel."

"*You will be my kingdom of priests*". The function of a priest was to represent the people to God and God to the people. Israel was to represent the nations to God, and represent God to the nations.

Guess what? That's what the New Testament says about us as Christians. This how the Church is described in First Peter 2:9 (NIV):

But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's special possession, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light.

The purpose of the Church, our purpose as Christians, is to work together in order to represent God to the world around us. That's why there are so many churches in the world. To reach the "*whole world*" with the gospel. That's why the local church is so important. That's why St. Andrew's is so important! Because God has placed us here. God has placed us in downtown Newmarket. God has rooted us here with 183 years of witness. And God has called each one of us here as members and supporters of St. Andrew's to be part of this congregation. Think about that. God has called you here. You are not here by accident. Why? So we can proclaim him to the community around us.

But here's the thing. If we do not pursue God's mission, then our community misses out on being exposed to the hope that God offers them in the gospel.

That means that each of you has an essential role to play by getting involved in all we do here, by being generous supporters of the ministries we undertake, and by being witnesses to Christ in your daily life. So on this Annual Meeting Sunday, as this season of Lent begins, let us step up, and step out, and prove ourselves to be disciples of Jesus who let our light shine for all to see! Amen.