

Shepherding Every Person

Matthew 9:35-38

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35 Then Jesus went about all the cities and villages, teaching in their synagogues, and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom, and curing every disease and every sickness. 36 When he saw the crowds, he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. 37 Then he said to his disciples, 'The harvest is plentiful, but the labourers are few; 38 therefore ask the Lord of the harvest to send out labourers into his harvest.'

As a kid, we did a fair amount of travel by car. Most of the time, summer vacations and winter breaks consisted of trips to see family. Because our family was spread out across the country, this provided opportunities to see new things along the way – landmarks, historic sites, Presidential birthplaces, and more. Since these trips took place in the days before GPS, our trusty tool was a map – a road atlas. And because I wanted to know “when we would get there,” I got to be pretty good at reading the map.

However, when I got into Boy Scouts, one of the required merit badges was Orienteering. Orienteering is the art of using a map and a compass to navigate from point to point in diverse and usually unfamiliar terrain. I thought I would be really good at this because of my great map-reading skills. However, I discovered early on that orienteering was much different from interstate travel. Instead of a nice colorful map with cities, highways, and distance markers, I was given a topographical map. On this map there were squiggly lines which defined the terrain – elevation, waterways, mountain peaks...and not much else. Somehow, with these minimal identifiers, we were supposed to navigate and travel from a starting point to an ending point.

Some describe orienteering as the sport of navigation. That's not how I would have described it when I was trying to earn my merit badge. It was tough work. Yet, it was a

skill that could bring about a significant win, especially when you are trying to get somewhere you want to be but just can't see.

The art of orienteering begins with a map and two very specific points on the map: your starting point and ending point. That's seems simple enough, but sometimes, the best route between the starting point and the final destination isn't the shortest route. Sometimes, there are obstacles in the way that make straight-line travel too dangerous or challenging. That's where the compass comes in.

If you have ever used a compass, you know that what makes it useful is the magnetic needle aligned to the earth's magnetic pole. No matter which way you turn the compass, this needle stays true, always pointing north. This feature allows you to properly align the map, and then your path, making sure it aligns to true north. And, once you've determined the direction of your path, you get your head up to take a look at your surroundings. It's much easier to walk towards a fixed point than to make steps with your head down looking at your compass.

While it wasn't as easy to understand as a road atlas, all of this "orienteering stuff" made sense. However, what I learned the hard way - what can throw everything off - is not knowing where you are to begin with; not properly identifying your starting point. Several of my friends and I spent one afternoon baking in the hot sun in the Davis Mountains thinking we were on course to arrive at our campsite, only to discover that we had wrongly identified where we were on the map. Knowing where you are starting from is critical.

The same is true for us as a church. That's what the Vision Team spent several months doing. Getting clear about where we – First Christian Church of Wichita Falls – are. This involved getting our heads up and looking around; taking a deep dive into our place, our people, and our passions.

The first thing we looked up to see was where God had placed us. As we considered the unique needs of our community and the special opportunities in our sphere of

influence, we realized that Wichita Falls is home to lots of people away from home, especially at MSU and at Sheppard Air Force Base. Yet, our community is also a place where people “return home.” Perhaps you are one of those who grew up here, moved away, and then returned here to raise your family. It was clear to our team early on that both groups were here in great number and in need of support systems.

However, when we looked at our community, what also became apparent was a collective anxiety among our population. Some of this anxiety stems from our community ties to oil and gas exploration, and its swings between booms and busts. But equally as anxiety-producing were the memories of 1979. Many of those who remember the deadly Wichita Falls tornado are warily waiting for the next one. We realized that these two realities make us somewhat reserved as a community; somewhat cautious about where we will invest our resources.

Nevertheless, nearly 60 years ago, our congregation made a conscious choice and investment to move from downtown to this location because the population center of Wichita Falls was moving west, our church leaders chose to move from downtown to our current location. We found that this decision 60 years ago put us in a prime position today to provide support to those away from home and to minister to the anxieties of our community.

The second step in figuring out where we are was to identify the unique resources and capabilities of our people – of our members. We discovered that we are a congregation of educated professionals and skilled workers. Even if on the other six days of the week we found ourselves in diverse spaces, every time we gathered in this space, we found community. For example, First Christian Church is a place where people of diverse faith backgrounds can find common ground – where all believers will be welcomed at the Lord’s Table. It was evident that this is a place where you could be known and cared for, perhaps seen most tangibly in the Sunday visits by our Elders and the way they pray for and send notes to more than 200 people each week.

However, when the Vision Team dug into the statistics about our people, it found that we are a “seasoned” bunch. 65% of our congregation is age 45 or above. Further, our congregational makeup isn’t composed of many new believers. We have a large base of people on the middle rungs of the faith ladder. This poses a challenge for us. We have to recognize that our assumed knowledge base may accidentally remove the lower rungs new believers need to climb up and grow in their faith journeys.

The third step of figuring out where we are brought together with our consideration of our place and our people a consideration of our passion. We asked: “What energizes us as a congregation?” “What are the things we pray for most?” “What bothers us the most as a congregation?” What the Vision Team uncovered is that you and I are energized by hands-on action, being Christ-like in our service. We saw this in the way we provide Coats for Kids, Thanksgiving baskets to hungry people, supplies to new college students, and off site Vacation Bible Schools and Trunk or Treats. Likewise, as a congregation, we have a hunger for sharing Christ with those who don’t yet know Jesus, even if we struggle with how to do this most effectively.

We also found a passion for leadership within our congregation, easily apparent as we walked the halls of our church. A quick stroll will take you past the long line of our senior leaders’ pictures and past the pictures of our Timothys and Priscillas – those members of our congregation who went on to ministerial careers. Similarly, we found this passion for leadership in our youth and our long history of our teens serving as area and regional officers. It was clear, time and again, that as a church, we felt a passion for developing leaders, not just for our congregation, but also for our denomination.

Last but not least, the Vision Team found a prayerful passion for growth. This desire to grow was not for the sake of institutional survival. Instead, there is a belief among our congregation that there is something different and something great about First Christian Church. As such, we found a deep desire to maximize our impact and influence.

Bringing together our place, our people, and our passions was a turning point in the work of the Vision Team. It gave us clarity about our starting point. It allowed us to see where we are as congregation so that we could turn in the right direction towards our destination – towards the specific point Christ is leading us to go.

Our scripture lesson this morning also describes a turning point in mission. If you were to read chapters 5-7 of Matthew, you would find that Jesus is presented as the Messiah in word. Then, if you read chapters 8-9, you would find Jesus is presented as the Messiah in deed. The actions of these five chapters are summarized in verse 35:

Then Jesus went about all the cities and villages, teaching in their synagogues, and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom, and curing every disease and every sickness.

In that singular verse we find a description of the threefold activity of Jesus. Jesus was a herald, a teacher, and a healer. And what's interesting about this is that these activities weren't something only to be associated with the earthly Jesus. What our scripture lesson orients us to is the fact that those activities – this authority – will be handed over to the disciples...and ultimately to people like us – Jesus' disciples today.

Just as Jesus was one who brought a message from God, taught how that message made a difference, and worked to restore and mend what had been broken, that same mission has been handed on to us. And what's apparent is that our community needs us – First Christian Church – to bring a message from God of love and compassion, to teach with certainty the significance of peace in our daily lives, and to heal divisions, to solve loneliness, and to support families of all ages.

Just as Jesus called his disciples to pick up his work and ministry, we believe Christ is calling us to do the same in our time and in our place. That's why our part of fulfilling Christ's mission involves **“Shepherding every person to encounter the abundant peace of Christ.”**

These ten words point us forward. They help us see where to go, even when there seem to be obstacles in our path. And they counteract the “gravity inward” – that unseen force that pulls at us to focus solely on those who call First Christian home. It was Dietrich Bonhoeffer who declared that “the church is only church when it exists for others.”ⁱ Our mission of shepherding every person to encounter the abundant peace of Christ calls us outward – to minister to every person, not just to every person here. And our end point; our destination; our mission accomplished will be found where every person encounters the abundant peace of Christ.

The language of this statement is intentional beginning with the first word – shepherding. In our scripture from Matthew 9, Jesus had compassion on the crowds because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. In verse 36, the phrase “had compassion” is a translation of the Greek word *Splagchnizomai*, which literally means the bowels.ⁱⁱ When it says that Jesus was moved to compassion by the world’s pain, sorrow, hunger, loneliness, and bewilderment, it literally means he was moved in his guts at the state of the people, deserted, and led astray by both spiritual and political leaders. A people unable to help themselves.

Likewise, the phrase “sheep without a shepherd” is also more than it appears. This was a phrase used to describe a transfer of authority. In the Old Testament, the phrase was used in the context of Moses’ preparation for a legitimate successor. In the same way, here the phrase is used as Jesus confers authority on the disciples – his successors. The disciples’ mission was not voluntary activity initiated by them; rather, they were chosen, authorized, and sent by God through Jesus Christ. And so are we. We are called into today’s new and emergent contexts.ⁱⁱⁱ The deeds Jesus did in Matthew 9:35 are now ours to do – to proclaim, teach, and cure. And we are to do this as shepherds.

Shepherds provide strong leadership. They don’t ask the sheep where they want to go. They lead fearlessly, confidently, and boldly where they need to go. That’s because the sheep seldom know what is best for them. But the good news is that sheep build an

emotional bond with their shepherds. They know his or her voice and follow them. It's a relationship of trust. And part of what cements this trust is that the shepherd patiently adapts and adjusts to the fears and weaknesses of the flock.^{iv}

In the same way, that's our task – our mission. There are many in our community without a sense of direction, without an idea of where they are to go. They daily live with fears and a short view of what life is all about. When we go about shepherding every person to encounter the abundant peace of Christ, we are meeting them where they are, building relationships of trust which will then help lead them to places of healing and wholeness.

The word “encounter” is also intentional. Our mission to make introductions – to introduce the lonely and lost and hurting and broken and sad and overwhelmed and confused and anxious in our community to our Lord and Savior; to help them discover how a relationship with him can make all the difference. We can't arrange that marriage, but we can set up dates – moments which will allow the compelling love of Jesus to win them over.

And we believe that the most compelling thing we can point to as a congregation are those final five words: “the abundant peace of Christ.” We live in a time where peace is needed. Our calendars and schedules are overflowing. Many of our relationships are frayed. The bonds that hold us together are being stretched to the point of snapping. Peace is needed in our homes and workplaces and community and world.

Imagine what this could look like. Imagine abundant - more than enough -peace to give us a sense of rest from the daily demands. Imagine abundant peace that provides calm to our anxious children. Imagine abundant peace that provides a secure foothold when everything else in life seems to be new and uncertain. Imagine abundant peace when people of bright red political persuasions and dark blue political persuasions get together in the same room to work for the common good.

This isn't a pipe dream. This is the kind of reality we point to every Sunday here at First Christian Church. It's our true north – our compass setting. We point to it when we pass the peace of Christ. This is not a meet and greet moment. It's a declaration that there is a different way of being and living – as people of peace. And we anchor ourselves every Sunday in the abundant grace of God when we gather at this table.

The task is to share that same grace and peace with every person we encounter...at MSU, at Chick-Fil-A, at the soccer field, in our workplaces, and in our neighborhoods. To shepherd – to compassionately lead - every person to encounter the abundant peace of Christ. And to do this, we have to lead like a shepherd – from the front.

Cattle are driven. They are prodded from behind. Nobody wants to feel like they are being pushed into something. That's not who we are as a church. Instead, our approach is to lead like a shepherd. Shepherds lead from the front. Jesus the Good Shepherd said follow me. And so must we.

We have our starting point. We know where we need to go. There will be lots of decisions to make about how we will get from here to there, but what we are to do is clear. And we've got to be about this mission. We've got to be about shepherding every person to encounter the abundant peace of Christ. Because if we don't something will be missing in Wichita Falls. There will be a lot of lost sheep without a shepherd. And, Jesus will be moved in his guts all over again because we didn't listen when he said "Follow me."

ⁱ Bonhoeffer, Dietrich as quoted in Will Mancini, *Church Unique: How Missional Leaders Cast Vision, Capture Culture, and Create Movement*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2008.

ⁱⁱ Barclay, William B. "The Gospel of Matthew, Vol. 1" in *The Daily Study Bible Series*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1975.

ⁱⁱⁱ Carey, Greg. "Commentary on Matthew 9:35-10:18" in *Working Preacher*. June 15, 2008.

http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=98

^{iv} Osborne, Larry. *Lead Like A Shepherd: The Secret to Leading Well*. Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2018.