



The Exhibition of the Kingdom of Heaven to the World

SCRIPTURE:
Matthew 28:16-20
John 13:34-35

October 3, 2021 — Sermon by Rev. Tom Are, Jr.

I wonder if the disciples found Jesus annoying. He had a particular habit that might have annoyed those who spent the most time with him. Even when he was right there with you—teaching you, maybe healing you, opening your eyes to see the truth—he was also distracted, looking over your shoulder to a world out there, a world that he just couldn't get off his heart.

It's how Matthew's gospel ends. For 28 chapters, the disciples follow Jesus as he walked by the sea and as he walks on the sea, as he teaches and preaches and heals. And then, after all that time following, he tells them to go. Not only go, but go to all the nations, to the Gentiles. That was not something Jewish followers ever expected the Jewish messiah to command, but it seemed to be the whole point of his ministry. He just couldn't stop thinking about the world.

John's gospel is the same. Jesus gathers his followers and tells them I have loved you with my whole life, I have given you everything I have to give, and I want you to love one another in just the same way. It was a big ask and it no doubt intimidated his followers a bit. We are supposed to act like Jesus? But then Jesus does that thing again. He looks over their shoulders and says: How else will the world know that you belong to me unless you love like I love? In Christian faith, even our love for other Christians serves a missional purpose.

I wonder if those twelve disciples felt more than a little overwhelmed with Jesus' expectations of them. It seems Jesus has more faith in us than we have in ourselves. He is constantly calling us to do that which seems, well, unreasonable. Particularly when it comes to the world. He never stops thinking about the rest of the world. The church shouldn't either.

The great ends of the church speak of the reasons the church exists, the calling we share and they all, every last one, can be more than intimidating but none like the last one. Our spiritual grandparents told us we are to be an exhibition of the kingdom of heaven to the world.

This one, like all the others, is an already/not yet reality. At times and in ways, the church has always shared the love of God with the world. But the church has also fallen short, embarrassing our Lord, and even hurting those we were called to love. The church embraces this great end not because we are confident in ourselves, but because we know it is what our Lord expects of us. So, we live toward that day, and we seek to show the world what the love of Christ looks like.

I have traveled to Nicaragua during wartime, and Sudan during the same, and in both countries I met with faithful Christians who are endeavoring to share the love of Christ. I have worshiped with Christians in Ghana and in Chile and in Argentina. I have broken bread in the West Bank of Israel and danced in the aisle in Kenya. I have talked about Jesus with faithful folks in the Dominican Republic. More places than not, you can travel the globe and there you will find the church. It's come a long way from those early disciples.

But this great end reminds us that it is not enough to make Christians of others; it is more important that we be Christian *to* others. That is the theological foundation we have for all of our mission. We endeavor to be Christian to others. You do that.

Some of you have experienced firsthand our relationships among the nations. We have a longstanding partnership in the Dominican Republic. One of the largest groups ever is preparing to visit the D.R. again in November. We share in a partnership with

our Presbytery for mission in Thwake, Kenya, inspired by our amazing friend, Rev. Dr. David Nzio-ka. Dr. Ted Higgins has privileged us with opportunity to support the Higgins Brothers Surgicenter for Hope in Haiti, a nation desperate for the kind of care provided. And some of you have traveled to the U.S./Mexico border and experienced the ministry with migrants through Frontera de Cristo.

Let's remember a bit of what these missions are about. [Video about Village Church's international partnerships.]

I am so grateful for the ministry you make happen there. You are doing good and faithful work in these places; it is an exhibition of the kingdom of heaven to the world. But here's the important thing: So are the efforts of the people we meet in these places. They show us what the love of Christ looks like, too. If you have been on any of these trips, then I imagine you have your own moments of seeing the love of Christ displayed with the kind of clarity that changes you. You can no doubt speak to moments and experiences and name people who have shown you what it means to live toward God's promised day.

One of my earliest international trips was to Nicaragua. I traveled to a beautiful mountain village called Jicaró. The people there were simple.

They raised their chickens, grew coffee, and went to church. Small places like this are peaceful. They may have arguments, there will be fights at times, but they lack the power to make war. War comes from the powerful with grand ideals. But war came to Jicaró. They had to suffer what they couldn't make.

I met Maria Blandon. She had just buried her son who was a coffee farmer. While tending his crop, he stepped on a land mine which had been planted to keep the farmers from farming. It killed him.

Our small delegation of a few Americans was invited to her modest home. She welcomed us and then she hugged each one of us. I said, "I'm a little surprised by your welcome. After all, my country is heavily invested in this war that just killed your son. I suppose I helped pay for that land mine." She said, "They told us you are followers of Jesus. That means we are family." And she hugged me again.

It was an exhibition of the kingdom of heaven—a glimpse of what it can be like. There, with a heart broken because of the way the world is, she showed me how the power of God's love can remake this world.

The church is to live as an exhibition of the kingdom of heaven to the world. It is a bit intimidating, but we are not alone. Sometimes we can get it right. I've seen it.