

A People for the World

Scott Sauls, Redeemer Presbyterian Church of New York City

Christians are now Jesus' visible representation to the nations and peoples of the earth (Acts 1:1). While most Christians would affirm God's call to bring the Gospel to bear in the lives of those who do not yet know Christ, in many cases this is not a Christian's (or a church's) true priority. Using the story of the prophet Jonah, let's consider the primary attributes of a *missional* church.

Defining *missional*. To be *missional* is to be *on a mission*—specifically, the mission of *representing Jesus to the world*. Jesus' final instruction was to make disciples of all nations, teaching them to believe and follow everything he taught (Matthew 28:16-20). The apostle Luke writes that it is *the church*, Jesus' followers, who are given the mandate to *continue his work* in the world (Acts 1:1-8). Our task in this lesson is to explore precisely what it means to continue *Jesus' work* in the world. Before doing so, we need to identify two roadblocks which, where they exist, tend to squelch mission:

Cost/benefit people. There is an instant roadblock to mission when it comes to Americans in particular. We're taught from birth that our *inalienable right* is to pursue our own personal peace and affluence. As such, we tend to measure everything we invest in (whether it be time, relationships, resources, etc.) *on a cost/benefit basis*. We will give ourselves only to the things that "pay us back" or "reap dividends" that are greater than the investment we put into them. This attitude causes us to become passive and even resistant about serving the needs of the world around us, and the messy, struggling, and even sinful people who live in it whom we often don't even like (Jonah 1:1-3).

Justice lovers...for people God loves...and we don't like. There is another roadblock to mission, which is *our true dislike for most people*. Is this an overstatement? I don't think so. Like the Pharisee in Luke 18:9-14, we will either consciously or sub-consciously separate the world into the "good" people and the "bad" people. The good people tend to be those who agree with us, live in our kinds of neighborhoods, vote the way we do, and so on. Like Jonah, we can even get *angry* at the thought of God blessing people who are not like us (Jonah 3:10-4:4). *How did you react when the news reported that serial killer Jeffrey Dahmer gave his life to Christ right before he was executed—only to enter God's embrace upon his death?* Like Jonah, we prefer not to move toward the world in love, and with the grace and truth of the Gospel. We prefer instead to retreat out of the world to our preferred lovely, shady places, hoping deep down that God will take care of the people we don't like by condemning them (Jonah 4:5-11).

Facets of a *missional* church. Churches that take to heart the mandate Jesus left us with to carry out his continued work in the world (Acts 1:1) understand the following:

God's strategy for mission. The strategy Scripture gives is quite simple—*go where the people are* and seek to bring the Gospel to bear on their lives. Resist the urge to become an insulated, isolated community that exists primarily (if not exclusively) for the wants and needs of its members. Three times God calls Jonah *out* of his homogenous, sheltered, familiar, church setting *and to the "great city"* of Nineveh (1:2, 3:2, 4:11). Hebrew scholars agree that the meaning of "great" is twofold: *big* and *important*. God has a high regard for cities, which represent places populated by *lots of people*. When Paul planted churches in Acts, he always went to large cities, virtually ignoring the smaller, remote villages. This does *not* mean God is not interested in small towns! Rather, it is simply a matter of common sense—*missional* people (remembering Jesus' "fishers of men" metaphor) want to go where the "fish" are! If you have in your possession *the message of beauty, strength, and hope that all people are looking for*, you start with the masses and work your way out from there.

The heart behind mission. The heart of mission is simple—God is deeply and helplessly *attracted to people*. People are the crown of his creation (Psalm 8) and the joy of his heart (Zephaniah 3:17). Whereas Jonah wishes to retreat *out of* the city to get away from people and sit in the shade (Jonah 4:5), God sends Jonah into the *great* city whose greatness is due to the scores of people who live there. *God is enraged about Jonah's avoidance of people*. "You have more compassion for a plant than you do for 120,000 people who are in spiritual darkness," God says to

Jonah (4:10-11). One urban pastor, when asked why he wished to minister in the city, answered, "Because in the country there are more plants than people, and in the city there are more people than plants, and God loves people more than he loves plants." Consider the lyric...

If heaven ain't a lot like Dixie. If heaven ain't a lot like Dixie...then send me to hell or to New York City. It would be about the same to me. - *Hank Williams, Jr.*

Something to think about. Many of us dream of vacations and retirement "in the country." It is important to ask ourselves *why*. If some part of the motivation is to avoid people, we are departing from God's mission. We must remember that *heaven will be populated with billions of people* (Revelation 7:9-12). This being the case, it is upon us to do everything we can to love people, *lots of them*, in every way God enables us *before* we get to heaven!

The extent of mission. Most Christians have a relatively narrow view of God's salvation plan. As we relish in the fact that God came to save people, we often forget that he also came to save and restore *the whole world* (John 3:16; Romans 8:20-21). In the meantime, we are invited to be participants in his plan by doing everything in our power to *enhance the quality of life in God's world*. Why does God care so much about Nineveh? 2 reasons...120,000 people and (are you ready for this?)...*much cattle* (Jonah 4:11). He is talking economy here. Our wealth, our quality of life, is represented by stacks of paper in a vault or, more accurately, information that is stored on a microchip somewhere. Our wealth is in our currency...their wealth had to be fed three times a day, as cattle was their currency.

Distorted perspectives on God's world. *Ideological conservatives* can tend to use and abuse the world and the material things in it if need be to improve their own quality of living, but often with little regard for the environment or how future generations might be affected. *Religious conservatives* often reject the earth as a big, bad place they will one day be rescued from when Jesus returns (who saw *Left Behind, The Movie?*). *Liberals*, on the other hand, can over-attach themselves to the earth, perhaps thinking that the preservation of it is the answer to all of society's problems.

The missional perspective. *Missional Christians*, however, neither under-attach nor over-attach to the earth. Rather, they seek to love and serve it—to restore and to insert truth and beauty in economies, the arts, businesses, neighborhoods, education, family structures, and social structures. As such, the Gospel isn't just good news for Christians but *for the whole world*, especially the world (and the neighborhoods, businesses, restaurants, shopping malls, local parks, etc.) in which Christians live their lives.

Lloyd-Jones on being missional. The Welsh preacher Martyn Lloyd-Jones once fantasized about what it would look like for Christians to make such a huge, positive difference in the world, in their cities, and in their neighborhoods (in the arts, education, government, business, etc.) that if Christians planned to move out of their cities, the cities would do everything possible to keep them there. *This is what God envisions for his people living in the world!* Because they were such a life-giving presence to their communities, early Christians enjoyed favor from *all* people (Acts 2:47)! In the early church, the citizens of God's city were the very best citizens of the earthly city. If we are truly "heavenly minded," the fruit of this will be a people who do a lot of earthly good.

The basis for mission. The basis for mission is that "Christ Jesus came into the world to save..." (1 Timothy 1:15). Jonah is told to leave his world of comfort to bring God's message to people he hated, and he ran the other way (Jonah 1:1-3). Jesus left the beauty and glory of heaven for people *who hated him*, to love them to himself (Romans 5:8). Jonah tucked himself under the shade of a tree to protect and comfort himself. Jesus was hung on a tree *to protect and shelter us* from the judgment to come. Jonah stood outside the populated city to condemn it. Jesus was dragged outside the city *to be condemned* so we would never taste condemnation (Romans 8:1-2). Mission—being God's agents of healing and redemption in the world—is always costly. But we have a basis to love and serve people and the world. Jesus who loves and serves us utterly.

QUESTIONS TO HELP YOU PROCESS THIS TEACHING:

In what ways has today's teaching changed or sharpened your understanding? Encouraged you? Bothered you?

Read Acts 1:1-8 and "Defining *missional*" (above). Are you in any way unnerved by Jesus' inclusion of *you* and also *your church* among those who must prioritize "loving (and seeking the blessing of) people you don't like" and "restoring and blessing the earth"? Which of these most challenges your levels of comfort? Explain.

Read Jonah 4:1-11, along with "The heart behind mission," "If heaven ain't a lot like Dixie," and "Something to think about" (above). Do you fantasize about getting away from people? If so, do you attribute this to a personality trait or to a Jonah-like perspective (or both)? Explain.

Read Acts 2:47, along with "Lloyd-Jones on being missional" (above). In what practical ways do you as a Small Group, or your church as a whole, have potential to bless the world? What steps can (should?) you take to facilitate this to make it happen?

FOR FURTHER EXPLORATION:

GOOGLE IT: Timothy Keller, *The Missional Church*.