

Mission and the Creation of Systems of Life

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 05 May 2024

Preacher: Anthony Parrott

[0 : 00] Good morning, everybody. It's good to see you. My name is Anthony, and I'm one of the, hey, Topher. It's Topher's birthday tomorrow. It's Jessica's birthday today. Happy birthday.

Today's a funny day. I was not meant to preach. Pastor Trudetta was meant to conclude our Deuteronomy and Mission series, but she is sick. And so here I am, and what we're going to do is I'm going to give us some brief meditation and concluding thoughts on our Deuteronomy and Mission series.

And then, you know, when the preacher's sick, then you just turn it over to the congregation for congregational discussion, which I know is your all's favorite thing. So we actually have some planned discussion questions. We'll get into that in a little bit.

I do want to just reiterate what Jessica said about Pride. This is our third year doing it. First year, we had, like, mostly the LGBTQ affinity group and a few, like, straight allies.

Last year, we had more, like, straight allies and families and kids and all of that. This year, I want to make sure that, like, the whole congregation, queer, gay, lesbian, straight, old, young, everybody, make sure that you participate in this because it is a—we're going to talk about mission and evangelism a little bit today.

[1 : 21] And this is, like, one of those clear examples of, like, showing up and being a church that makes it clear that we are for all is a powerful, powerful witness.

And every year when we do this, we get emails and phone calls and texts and forms on the web. So they're like, oh, I didn't know that an expression of Christianity, of Jesus following like this existed. So you can help spread that knowledge. So let's catch our breath. Help me catch my breath. Let's pray, and we'll get into it.

We'll be right back, and we'll be right back, and we'll be right back, and we'll be right back.

We didn't have to light a sacrifice. We didn't need to pray a special prayer, dance a special dance, put on a special tie.

[2 : 36] You're already present. There is no atom or molecule in creation that is absent of your presence.

So awaken and reawaken our senses and our souls to your transcendence and your eminence. Your glory and your intimacy. We pray these things in Christ's name. Amen. All right.

When in doubt, Apple Notes. Here we go. So I think we've been talking about Deuteronomy. We've been talking about mission. The reason that we sort of conceptualized this series after Easter was that there can be the sense of Jesus is risen.

Now what? So what? What do we do with this knowledge? And we've talked about Deuteronomy because Deuteronomy is this sort of like paradox of a book where you have language around sacrifice and lighting goats on fire and taking over land and possession.

[3 : 52] As well as a book that has these beautiful moments of sharing a meal with a stranger and with the orphan and the fatherless and the widow and alien.

You have these moments of violence and gore as well as these moments of the divine presence drawing close to God's people. And I think that paradox can also seem true where the word Christian, the name Jesus, can conjure up images of violence and conquest.

And the way that Christian can be used on a cable news channel can push people away or move people closer. And so you have this paradox of that as well as a church that shows up to pride.

A people who claim the name Jesus and open up a food pantry or rake a neighbor's yard. So we wanted to sort of lean into that paradox.

And today we wanted to get kind of practical and we'll get into our discussion questions around why we, I, you, individuals, us, why we tend to avoid evangelism and mission.

[5 : 09] And I think there are two big reasons. There's sort of the big historical reasons. And I say historical, but I think it still happens today. And oftentimes mission, this idea of the church, Christians, Jesus people take on this idea that we need to go take the city for Christ, take the country for Christ, take the world for Christ.

And that can be, remind us of genocide and coercion and violence. And that's a big step back from that.

Like, I don't want to be associated with that. No, thank you. And then there's, so that's like, that's the big historical reason. And then there's also the more sort of personal reasons. I don't want to be associated with that.

I just sort of want to let people live. And I, you know, maybe don't want to talk to my coworker or my neighbor or the person on the bus about like these kind of interesting, weird, personal, spiritual things.

I also think a lot of evangelism can be associated with conversion and fire insurance. Do you know what I mean by fire insurance?

[6 : 39] Turn or burn. That's right. Turn to Jesus or do you know where you're going to go if you die? Okay. When I was in college some time ago, there was this video that was popular by Gillette Penn.

You know Penn and Teller, the like magician comedy duo? So like 15 years ago, Gillette Penn had this video. And Penn is like an avowed atheist. He's pretty anti-religion.

But he had this video that was going as viral as things could go 15 years ago about how he felt about Christians who didn't evangelize. And Penn's perspective was like, hey, Christians have this belief that if you don't turn to Jesus, that you're going to suffer endlessly in hell forever.

And so Penn made this point of like, how much do you have to hate me to not bother trying to warn me about that? And so he actually respected Christians more who tried to evangelize to him because that meant they at least took their beliefs seriously.

Now, Jesus doesn't actually talk that much about the afterlife. If you look at the book of Acts, which is the first century church after Jesus' life, death, and resurrection, you can make sort of a survey of all the sermons that Peter and Paul and Stephen and Philip and everyone preaches in the book of Acts.

[8 : 07] And I know you can make this survey because I had to do it for a class once. So you can make a survey, you can make a spreadsheet of all these different sermons that the first century church preaches to people. And there is not a single reference to heaven or hell as a reason to follow Jesus.

It doesn't come up. You have Jesus himself who talks about things like hell, but probably have more to do with a first century reality of the impending Roman takeover of Jerusalem.

And as a Christian universalist myself, I believe that all will one day willingly reconcile with God and their neighbor and their enemy. No torture necessary.

Which means I don't personally have a lot of anxiety about the afterlife. And when I look at the first century church, I don't see them expressing a lot of anxiety about the afterlife either.

I know that God is loving and just and will care for it well. But I do see my neighbor suffering today. And therefore I wonder, I think, I propose that evangelizing, telling the gospel, the good news, is less about conversion, converting people so they don't go to hell.

[9 : 31] It's about helping us undo the hells we're already in or help create. When I take a look at Jesus, Gospel of Matthew chapter 4, John the Baptist sort of passes the baton on to Jesus.

Jesus sort of bursts onto the scene after his baptism and the temptation in the desert. And Jesus begins to make a proclamation, the kingdom of God has arrived.

Repent, change your mind, and believe the good news. And so Jesus declares this. It's an announcement. It's not good advice. It's good news. He makes this announcement.

The kingdom has arrived. And then he goes from town to town, teaching, making declaration, healing, and freeing people. Jesus seems very uninterested in, like, make a decision.

Rather, Jesus is just acting on the news that he believes to be true, that the place where God's will and desires come true have arrived, has arrived.

[10 : 34] Jesus seems very uninterested in saving souls, but rather helping bodies. When he sees hungry people, he feeds them.

When he sees sick people, he heals them. When he sees oppressed people, he sets them free. And the instructions that Jesus gives about evangelization is not, hey, if they disagree, use violence to coerce them.

Get a super soaker and, like, you know, baptize them without their permission. Rather, Jesus' advice is, if you go into someone's home and you offer them your peace and they reject that peace, shake the dust off your feet and walk away.

Again, a very sort of non-anxious response. If we believe that the kingdom of God has arrived, that the place where God's will and desires are coming true is here, then I make that announcement, and if people want to join along, great.

And if not, keep walking. Now, this all gets sort of distilled down into the Table Church's vision and mission where we, Pastor Tanetta and I, our elders, our directors, are all grappling with this over the course of a couple of years.

[11 : 50] And we distilled it down to these phrases that you hear in our announcements each week. Our vision is to embody a more beautiful gospel. We chose that word embody very intentionally. It's with our bodies that proclamation is made, that announces collective liberation and the renewal of all things.

Again, announcement. It's news. It's that something has happened in Jesus. It's not good advice. It's not seven easy steps to fix your life. It's rather Jesus has done something.

So we announce that collective liberation and that renewal. And our mission is the cultivation.

Again, attentionally, an agricultural word. It's not corporations. It's not factories.

It's fields cultivating communities of authentic belonging that follow in the prophetic and thoughtful and radical way of Jesus. Evangelization is less about, well, not just less.

It's not at all about coercion. It's not at all about advice. It's not at all about trying to save souls from some torture chamber. It's rather the announcement that there's a better way.

[13 : 00] There's a better life. There's a way to undo the hells that are already here. Now, when I think about the book of Deuteronomy, there's this passage that comes to mind.

It comes from Deuteronomy 26. And again, you get this sort of paradox next to each other. It shall be when you enter the land that the Lord is giving you, and you take possession of it and live in it. You should take some of the first of all the produce of the ground which you bring in from your land that the Lord has given you, and you shall put it in a basket and go to the place where the Lord has established their name.

You shall go to the priest who's in office at the time, and you shall say, I declare to the Lord, my God, that I have entered the land which the Lord swore to our ancestors. The priest shall take the basket, set it before the altar, and you shall respond and say before the Lord your God, my father was a wandering Aramean.

And he went down to Egypt and resided there, few in number, but there became great, mighty, and populous. And the Egyptians treated us badly and oppressed us and imposed hard labor on us. And then we cried out to God, and God heard our voice and saw our wretched condition, our trouble, and our oppression.

[14 : 24] And the Lord brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm with signs and wonders. God has brought us to this place and has given us this land, a land flowing with milk and honey.

And now, behold, I have brought the first of the produce to the ground which you, God, have given me. And then you shall set up before the Lord your God and worship the Lord your God. And you and the priest and the stranger shall rejoice in all the good that God has given you.

And when you are finished paying the tithe of your produce, then you shall give it to the priest and to the alien and to the orphan and to the widow so that they may eat it in your towns and be entirely satisfied.

I think evangelization, mission, telling the gospel, good news story has something to do with an honesty about our narrative, our story.

My father was a wandering Aramean. I don't even know my ancestors. But they came down and they were oppressed and they were hurt and then God has moved and taken action to bring me out of that oppression and now I'm going to gather my resources.

[15 : 37] I'm going to bring them to the center of town and then I'm going to share them with the priest and the orphan and the widow and the stranger.

So what if the gospel is less about coercion and violence and force and rather about story and sharing with those around us?

So with that, I want to invite us into some conversation. I know, if you're anything like me, this is the part of the service that I get most angsty about.

So again, non-coercion. If you don't feel like talking to a neighbor or two or three, I do invite you to sort of focus your attention on these questions. You can use a journal, you can use your phone to talk about them, you can wander, you can get up and move around.

That is normal and fine and not weird. And if you want to talk to two or three neighbors around you about these questions, that is welcome as well. Okay? So question number one, I'm going to go through the four of them and then we'll give you a few minutes on each one as you talk.

[16 : 46] So the four questions. To what extent have you, this is Tanetta's phrase, come out as a Christian to your non-Christian friends? Do you see that as part of your spiritual practice or unimportant and why?

And do you see that kind of coming out as part of mission? So that's question one. Have you come out? Is it important? Question two. Next one. Can evangelism be non-coercive?

If so, how? If not, why not? Next. Should Christian mission be abandoned altogether? If so, why? If not, what are the essentials to engage in non-coercive mission?

And finally, how are you a reimagining mission personally? What do you do or do you think about doing that feels like God's love hitting the cosmic fan?

And that's been a phrase that we've been using throughout this series, that mission evangelism, this idea of like, not the, you know, blank, hitting the fan, but rather love hitting the fan.

[17 : 50] Okay? All right. So go back to question one. Gather in groups of two or three or wander around on your own. We'll give you a couple of minutes for each question and we'll gather back.

Thank you. Thank you. Thank you.

Thank you.

Thank you.

Thank you.

[20 : 25] Thank you.

Thank you. Thank you.

Thank you. Thank you.

Thank you. Thank you.

Thank you. Thank you.

[24 : 55] Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you.

As always, I trust that you have solved all these theological issues in eight minutes or less.

I want to conclude with just a brief reminder from St. Paul in 2 Corinthians 5. Paul says this.

He says, From now on, therefore, we regard no one from merely a human point of view. If anyone, I want you to follow the logic of Paul's writing here.

If anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation. So the logic is, all it takes is for one person to be in Christ, which is sort of Paul's mystical language for following the way of Jesus, being reconciled to Messiah.

[27 : 07] If anyone is in Christ, therefore, there is a new creation. Which is this huge relief for me, who grew up in a denomination literally called the Missionary Church, where we were raised week in and week out with this sense of like, it's up to you, Anthony, to get people saved.

And when I hear like, no, no, no, no. If I'm saved, if I know Jesus, then I can rest in confidence that there is a new creation.

The work is finished. It is not dependent on me. I don't have to pick up my sword and force anybody to convert. I don't have to have the best rhetoric in the world or the slickest production or anything. Jesus says the work is done. So I can live in that freedom. And I can invite people to join me if I want. And if they don't want to, it's okay.

So with that, let's turn our attention to another table that reformats and reimagines what's happening in Deuteronomy, where we gather what God has given us and we share it.