

We're Not Successful Unless...

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: 22 October 2023

Preacher: Anthony Parrott

[0 : 0 0] Good evening, everybody. My name is Anthony Parrott. I get to serve as one of the pastors here at the table, and it's my joy and honor to be here with you. I will tell you, it's been a long day. We launched a morning service this morning, and it was a chaotic success, all right? Yeah, yeah. It was really fun. There was tons of kids. There was tons of people. A lot of pizza was consumed, so all good things, and we are excited to figure out all the things that we got to figure out to make it an even smoother experience for everybody. So just so you know, we will have another morning service again in November, November 19th, and then again in December, December 17th, and Christmas Eve morning, and then weekly in January. So that's what's happening with morning services. I want to give my heartfelt thanks to the dozens of volunteers that made it all happen, some of which are also here serving again tonight. So my thanks to you.

I was not meant to preach today because Tanetta was supposed to launch us into a new series.

However, Tanetta found herself waking up with a sore throat, like she described it, throat on fire. So here I am instead. And, you know, a good preacher worth their salt always has a sermon in their back pocket. So here's my sort of back pocket sermon. I've been thinking quite a bit about what it means for the table to relaunch a morning location, to have another place in the city of D.C. that we are calling a home, a place for us to gather regularly as a community of folks who are either following Jesus or interested in Jesus or interested in Jesus, and, you know, sort of the questions around, like, is it a good idea, and what right do we have to do that? I have the very, and I cannot emphasize this enough, very dubious honor of gathering some followers on threads, the competitor to don't call it Twitter. And as I've gathered followers on threads, it's been mostly good. It's positive. People like connecting with a pastor online who maybe doesn't, like, fit their normal expectations of what, like, a Christian pastor might believe or, you know, foist upon them. And then, of course, there's also the folks who, like, you know, make it their business to go online and troll Christians and pastors in particular. And some of them are just, like, outright trolls who, you know, wishing ill upon me. And those are a simple block. And then some of them, it's not quite that simple because they've got honest, true stories about how the church or the Christian faith or religion in general has harmed them. And so their conclusion at the end of their, at least in the middle of their painful story, is all religion is bad. All religion is terrible. Therefore, you know, shut it all down. There should be no pastors. There should be no churches. Just turn it all off. And, you know, here we are as a community that's meeting right now, that just launched a new location this morning, that once has this belief that we should have communities of faith like ours that are accessible to more and more people. How do we sort of bring those two things together? Because any sort of honest assessment over history over time and geography and space is asked to be willing to admit, yes, people have done awful, terrible, like egregious things, not only in the name of religion in general, but in the name of

Christianity, in the name of Jesus. And those things have caused, like, real tangible harm, like if, you know, all the way up to death. So how do you face that honestly and also say, but we kind of want to keep doing this? Like, how do you bring those two things together? So that's what I want to explore tonight. And, you know, this is a back pocket sermon, so it may not be the most rhetorically flourished. It's really just as basic of a sermon as can be, which is a list of scriptures and a few comments on each one and hopefully some implications. And the title of the sermon, I don't often give my sermons titles, but the title of my sermon is, We're Not Successful Unless... And I've been thinking about this as we launch a morning location, but it's true for us as well, those who call the downtown space in our evening service home, what is it that defines our success? So that's what we're going to talk about. But if you would, would you just take a moment and pray with me? God, I'm grateful for your spirit in this place. I'm grateful for the fact that we didn't have to trick you into coming here. We didn't have to, we didn't have to make a sacrifice. We didn't have to say a certain magic spell. God, you've been here all along. You've been, you've been abiding in us, your people all along.

And so God, my prayer right now is that you would simply open our eyes, open our attention to your good and faithful presence. God, the scriptures say that if I make my bed in the heights or down in the depths of hell, there you are. If I go to the darkest forest or the deepest ocean, there you are.

[5 : 59] May I find solace and comfort in this God, knowing that you are a God who does not forsake, a God that does not give up, but a God who is here with us. Amen. Amen.

Amen. So if you want to join me along in scripture, the words are not on the screen. I didn't have time to make slides. So you can follow along in Matthew chapter 9, verse 35. Matthew chapter 9, verse 35. And the gospel of Matthew is broken up into five sections. Just a little bit of Bible nerdery for you. The gospel of Matthew is intentionally composed rhetorically to be a reflection of the Torah, which are the first five books of what we call the Old Testament, the Hebrew scriptures.

So Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy, five books of the Torah is then mirrored in the five sections of the gospel of Matthew. And at each sort of beginning and transition of these sections, Matthew will have a, or the author of the gospel of Matthew will have this transition statement.

And oftentimes it sounds something like this. This is Matthew 9, verse 35. Jesus traveled among all the cities and villages, and then listen to these action words, teaching in their synagogues, announcing the good news of the kingdom, and the healing every disease and every sickness. I'll read it again. Jesus traveled among all the cities and villages, teaching in their synagogues, announcing the good news of the kingdom, and healing every disease and every sickness. So the work of the church is to follow in the way of Jesus, to pay attention to what Jesus did, how Jesus lived, and to follow in Christ's footsteps. There is a sort of Christianity out there that is obsessed with Jesus's death, what a philosopher and scholar Dallas Willard called vampire Christianity, that we just want Jesus for his blood. Okay? And it skips Jesus's life.

Even in the creeds, and I'm a fan of like the Apostles' Creed, we say something like, I believe in God the Father Almighty, creator of heaven and earth, and Jesus Christ his only begotten Son, who was conceived by the power of the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary, crucified under Pontius Pilate.

[8 : 22] And there's a whole big section that we skipped there. That's the life of Jesus. And the life of Jesus isn't just like all leading up to just the crucifixion, resurrection, that's it. There are things in the life of Jesus to pay attention to. The way that the gospel writers seem to be presenting it is that in their imagination, they are waiting for the climax, the consummation of Israel's story.

And Israel's story is all about waiting for God to return as king of Israel. And so the question that the gospel writers are answering is, if God were to show up, what would it look like? And if you pay attention to the life of Jesus, it seems to look an awful lot like feeding people and healing people and setting people free. In the language of the gospel writers, they use the language of casting out demons and evil spirits. And we've talked about this in sermon series past when we're going through the gospel of Mark, where this language about demons and spirits is how the ancient world talked about the powers, those invisible forces which shape our physical reality. And we look back at the first century and we may think like, oh, those superstitious fools.

But we have similar language today. We don't often talk about demons and evil spirits, but we talk about corporate culture. We talk about oppressive systems. We talk about rhythms and routines of oppression. Okay? Same idea. Demons, evil spirits, corporate cultures, systems of oppression.

And so Jesus's work is not just being born to die, but rather Jesus's work is all these action words. Yes, he's teaching. Yes, he's proclaiming. And he's healing. And he's casting out. And he's setting people free. Now this announcing, this preaching that Jesus is doing, it's a word that's used of royal heralds. So you can imagine almost like a cartoonish image of a guy dressed in like green tights with a trumpet and a flag, blowing the trumpet, announcing the arrival of the king or the queen being a royalty. And that's a herald. And the herald announces the good news, the euangelion in the Greek, the good angel message that the king has arrived, that the king is victorious, has won the battle, and hooray, the empire has expanded. And the gospel writers take this empire language and they co-opt it for redemptive purposes. Jesus is heralding the euangelion, the good news, the good message, that yes, a kingdom is coming, but not a kingdom you might expect. Not a kingdom born on violence, not a kingdom born by the sword, but a kingdom born on healing, about setting people free. Not about making them slaves to the empire, but making them free in God's kingdom. So what Jesus is up to is he's traveling, he's teaching, he's announcing, and he's healing. Now this word healing, there's a couple different words for it in the original Greek. There's the idea of *therapeo*, which of course we get the word therapy, therapeutic. And there's also the word *sozo*. And so when you read about healing in scripture, it's *sozo*. And *sozo* is also translated salvation. Salvation, *sozo*, healing. All have the same sort of word domain of meaning. So, you know, churches often talk about salvation. Are you saved? And in Jesus's language, it's like, are you healed? Are you being healed from what has ailed you, from the thing that is making you sick inside? So Jesus is heralding of the good news. Jesus is announcing of the good news. Is announcing healing for every disease and every sickness and every system that opposes us. We'll go to a different passage. Matthew chapter 28. This is the very last chapter in the gospel of Matthew. Matthew chapter 28 verses 19 and 20. And this is after Jesus's resurrection, Jesus has gathered his disciples to him. And he's about to make this announcement, this commission to them. It's called the Great Commission. And there's a verse, I'm not going to read it right now, but it's just before this that says that as people are gathered to the resurrected Jesus, there are those, both those who believe and those who doubt. And I love that verse. I think it's an important verse because Jesus's Great Commission is not just to like, you know, the straight-A students. It's not just those who like sign the sign every thing put in front of them. It's also to those who are like, I'm not so sure about this. And I know, I know that there are a few of us in this room who are not so sure about this. And yet Jesus includes them as well. Jesus commissions them as well.

Both those who believe and those who doubt. And this is Jesus's commission. He says, therefore go. Some translations say, as you are going, make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, teaching them to, and translations translate this word differently, keep, follow, observe, protect everything that I've commanded you. Now this passage has been the bedrock of lots of Christian colonization, lots of Christian excuses to go dominate other cultures and nations and people groups and make them Christian. It's about proselytizing and converting.

[14:07] But conversion language is not actually happening here. The idea of making disciples is, a disciple is a learner, a student. And a student is not just about like passing tests, about like passing esoteric knowledge. A student was following in the way of their rabbi. So Jesus calls disciples, not just 12, but 70 or more disciples, not just men, but women, children as well. Jesus calls disciples and invites them to follow in the way, in his way, to imitate him. Not just pass a knowledge test, but to imitate the way of Jesus. And so to make disciples is not to go make converts, to go make sure that people can pass a certain theological test, but rather invite them into a way. And the very first Christians, we see this in the book of Acts, weren't called Christians, they were called followers of the way. The first Christians were not only, like not merely about orthodoxy, what you believe, they were about orthopraxy, what you practice, what you do. And so the invitation of Jesus then is to go make learners, make learners of a pathway. To baptize was an act of identification, saying, I want to be part of this community, this followers of a way. And all of this language is invitational language. It's not domination language.

It's been used as domination language, and that should be confessed and repented of. But as you are going, making disciples and baptizing them is the language of invitation. It's the language of inviting those who want to participate. And then to teach them to keep or follow or observe everything that Jesus has taught. This way of Jesus, this way of setting people free and healing and releasing people from bondage. Again, you look at these stories of the life of Jesus, where Jesus encounters someone. He encounters the woman at the well. He encounters those oppressed by demons on the other side of the Sea of Galilee. And he sets them free. He tells them the truth about their lives.

And then there's no like, do you believe A, B, C, D? No. Jesus sets them free. And then when they actually try to like, Jesus, take us with you. And Jesus is like, no, go back to your people. Tell them what happened to you. That's evangelizing. It's not like believing the certain set of propositional truths.

It's tell them what Jesus has done for you. That's the story. Pastor Josh Scott puts it this way. He says, by sharing the gospel, this is what we mean. We mean announcing the belovedness and inclusion of every human being in the love and embrace of God. No exceptions. He continues, by sharing the gospel, we mean engaging the practical work of announcing good news to the poor, proclaiming release to the prisoners and recovery of sight to the blind, liberation for the oppressed through concrete action in the world. Just this evangelism, however, won't be an invitation to believe some propositional truths or accept some points of doctrine. It involves verbs, action words, the doing of gospel work in the world. It also won't be about producing converts to a religious system, but about the cultivation of human flourishing, whatever a person's label might be. The gospel, according to Jesus, is an announcement that if we choose to see and enter the kingdom, the kingdom, the family of God, here and now, a world of justice and enoughness for everyone isn't just possible, it's closer than we dare to dream.

And so what we talked about as a congregation this morning, a DC bilingual, the Fort Totten neighborhood, northeastern community of DC, is, is the table church showing up good news to that neighborhood? If we stay there for a year or more, and then for some reason have to close our doors, would anyone care or notice? Not for our own sort of like renown's sake, like it's not about the table church register trademark. It's about are we making, announcing the kingdom in such a way, those tangible verbs, those actions of gospel work, that lives are visibly made of better? And I think those questions have to apply not just to like a 10 30 service and a five o'clock service and a morning location, downtown location. They have to apply to everywhere that any one of us who identify something with the story of Jesus, those questions have to apply to all of us as individuals scattered and as a community gathered. Next passage comes from the book of Acts chapter 8. So Matthew, Mark, Luke, John, number 5,

[19 : 04] Acts chapter 8, verses 4 through 8. And the church in Jerusalem is being persecuted thanks to a jerk named Saul, also named Paul. And as people's lives are being threatened, the church begins to get out of Jerusalem and go to all sorts of different neighboring areas. And a guy named Philip, one of the deacons, goes down to a city in Samaria and began to preach Christ to them. And I love the way that the author of Acts puts this, to preach Christ. That's the message of Philip, just to preach Jesus. And the crowds were united by what they heard Philip say and the signs they saw him perform. And they gave him their undivided attention. With loud shrieks, unclean spirits came out of many people and many who could not walk or stand were healed. And there was great rejoicing in the city. And so my main point here, the main thing I want to say is, if the way that we preach Christ does not bring healing, does not break people free from the powers that hold them in bondage, if the way that we preach Christ does not bring the city joy, we failed somewhere. We have failed somewhere. The response to the message of

Jesus ought to be rejoicing. It should not put more people in bondage. It should not make more people suicidal. It should not make more people even hungrier. It should not make more people be, you know, engaged in violence. It should bring rejoicing. It should bring freedom. It should mean that more people have access to food and health care and families and love and well-being and the knowledge of knowing that no matter who they are, they are welcome in the family of God. If we can't preach that kind of gospel, we're not preaching the gospel. Last passage is the beginning of the gospel of Luke, Luke chapter 4, verses 16 through 21. And we've already alluded to this passage in an earlier quote. This is Jesus, Jesus' inaugural sermon in his hometown of Nazareth. And on the Sabbath, he goes to the synagogue as he normally did, and he stood up to read. And the synagogue assistant hands Jesus the scroll from the prophet Isaiah, and he unrolled the scroll and found a place where it was written. And so Jesus reads, the Spirit of the Lord is upon me because the Lord has anointed me. He has sent me to preach good news to the poor, to proclaim release to the prisoners and recovery of sight to the blind, to liberate the oppressed, and to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor. And so Jesus rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the synagogue assistant, and then sat down. And just so your mind's eye gets the right image, he sits down in like the teacher's seat. So he's still facing the congregation. So he sits down and begins to explain the passage to them. And his main point is this, he says, today this scripture has been fulfilled just as you heard it. So a way of summarizing Jesus's quote of Isaiah is if it's not good news to the poor, it's not good news. If it's not good news to the imprisoned, it is not good news. If it's not inviting healing and a reshaping of the world for all kinds of people and all kinds of bodies, it is not good news. If it does not set people free, it is not good news. The good news has to be good news not just to you, but to your neighbor, and not just to your neighbor, but to your enemy. And that may make us uncomfy, but if it is not good news to all, it is not good news. Now I'm going to push this a little bit further than I even did this morning. Jesus reads this passage. He says, the spirit of the Lord is upon me. The Lord has anointed me to preach, to proclaim, recovery, to liberate.

Now, Jesus also says this in one of his messages. He says to a congregation of people, he says, you are the light of the world. He says, you. Now Jesus says this of himself. At one point, he says, I am the light of the world. But he also says to his disciples, you are the light of the world. So when we read this Isaiah passage, the spirit of the Lord is upon me, it's because the Lord has anointed me. He has sent me to preach good news, to proclaim release, recovery, and liberation, and proclamation of the year of jubilee, of the year of the Lord's favor. We don't just put that on Jesus and say, good luck, Jesus. Hope you have a good time. That is Jesus's call for us as well. The year of the spirit of the Lord is upon us.

The spirit of God has anointed us. The spirit of God is sending us to preach good news to the poor, to proclaim release to the prisoners, and recovery of sight to the blind. That is the gospel invitation.

Whenever you read the word freedom in scripture, it is synonymous, it is the same as the word for liberation. So John chapter 8, Jesus says, you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free. You will know the truth, and the truth will liberate you. If it is not liberating you, it is not the truth.

[24 : 06] Galatians chapter 5, Paul says, it is for freedom that Christ has set us free. It is for liberation that Christ has liberated us. John 10, Jesus says, the thief enters only to steal and kill and destroy.

Jesus says, I came so that they could have life, and indeed life to the fullest. If it is stealing from your life, if it is killing, if it is destroying, it is not the way of Jesus. The way of life is the way of Jesus. So we are not successful unless we are not successful. If all we're doing is drawing a big crowd, starting extra services, we're putting out more chairs. Like maybe that could be a side effect of us being faithful to what God has called us to, but not every time. I've known congregations and churches that are five, ten people strong who are the ones who are the, who are most boldly taking action for the name of Jesus. Success is not more members or more baptisms. It's not more people signing on theological ascent. Success is, is the neighborhood better off? Is there more access to food and to healthcare and to education? Is there more access to reproductive care? Is there more access to transition for, for trans folks? Is there more access to, uh, to relationships for people of all kinds? Is there more access to spaces and buildings for disabled bodies? Success is the, knowing that there's a high number of immigrants in Fort Todd near DC bilingual, first and second generation families. It's a high number of people of color, both black and Latino. So what justice efforts are they already up to? Because they're already up to stuff. We don't have to go and be like saviors to them. They're already up to good in their neighborhoods.

And so we put ourselves in the position of a learner and say, what are you up to? And can we help? We ask, not just are, do we have more converts, but are more people beginning to practice the way of Jesus? Friends, there is this shocking thing that happens at the table I do not understand, where people will root, like, semi-routinely come up to me and they're like, I, I do not know if I believe in God or I actively do not believe in God. But I want to be up to what the table is up to. And that to me is, that's the work of the gospel. It's not about, like, do you believe in a higher building? Building? Being?

I don't know. Do you believe in a higher being? Do you, like, agree with the Nicene Creed? Like, you know, fine if you do. I'm glad if you do. But that's not the point. That's not the questions that Jesus asked of people. Jesus did not ask those kinds of questions of people. He asked, like, I need you to go and learn this. I desire mercy, not sacrifice. That's the kind of stuff that Jesus was asking people.

Not like what you think about transubstantiation and the Trinitarian Union. Like, it's good stuff. I can write you a paper about it. Go and learn what this means. I desire mercy, not sacrifice. If more people began to practice the way of Jesus. Successes do more folks know that about a God that loves them unconditionally. If the reputation of the church, capital C, the church, the table church, is like, oh yeah, I've heard of churches, they hate people like me. That means that we have more work to do. And I could make excuses and be like, oh, we're not that kind of church. Like, no, the fact is, like, we're all connected into this somehow. And we don't get to sort of shrug it off like it didn't happen.

[27 : 46] We have to listen to those stories. And I, as a pastor, any one of you who, like, now, you know, show up at a church, maybe give money, maybe serve, like, you're all tied up in that story together.

But I don't think the reaction is like, oh, never mind, disregard. I think the invitation is to lean in and say, yes, people have used the name of Jesus to commit heinous, heinous things.

And so my response to that is to work in whatever way I can to bring healing and freedom. Have we had actual confrontations with the forces in this world that steal and kill and destroy?

Have we had altercations with the forces that work against life? There ought to be some folks who don't like us because of the work of liberation that we're up to.

And if we're not having those sorts of altercations, then I think we need to get a little bit louder, and we need to get a little bit rowdier, and we need to make more of a ruckus on behalf of those who need liberation. If we don't have those confrontations, then we need to take an honest look at ourselves and say, why not? Why not? Are we willing to be bold for the gospel?

[29 : 02] Not bold for theological belief's sake, bold for the gospel, the gospel that proclaims liberation for the oppressed. To be able to say, as Paul said, I am not ashamed of the gospel of Jesus Christ, because in that gospel, I know that God loved me and gave himself for me. And in the same way, God is inviting us to give ourselves for the sake of others. We're not successful unless some of these things are true of our community. Success is not just about, hey, we've launched a morning location.

Yes, it was 20 months of searching. I am glad it's over. I am glad to celebrate that. But now the real work begins, and the real work continues here. And the real work continues in every community group, and affinity group, and small group, and dinner party, and coffee, and get together, and every time you chat together, the real work continues of caring for one another, of showing each other love, all of the values that we just talked about over the past five weeks of friendship, and curiosity, and justice, all of that, so that we can be gospel embodied people for the sake of this city, and this region. Would you pray with me?

Good and almighty God, for reasons I don't understand, you don't do things by yourself. Sometimes I wish you did, God. But it seems like every time that you want to perform a miracle, almost every time that you want to do something good in this world, you got people joining you as partners. New Testament says that we have co-energy with you, God. Synergy with the divine creator.

I don't understand why you do it this way. But knowing that you do, God, I pray that myself, and I pray that this community, this church, would be willing to partner with your spirit, willing to partner with your power, your power which abides in us, that resurrection power that lives in us, that we would be willing to partner with that power in order to proclaim and enact and enable the gospel, the good news that sets people free. God, may we not be drawn to the mirage of how so many organizations define success.

God, may we not be drawn to the mirage of how so many organizations that are going to be to the mirage of how so many organizations that are going to be able to partner with your spirit, it is a daily temptation for churches to focus on the external things that are easy to measure, but in the end will not matter. God, may we only be obsessed with the things that are harder to measure and will last eternity. God, may these things be so. We pray in your name. Amen.

[32 : 05] Amen.