

Message: A New Focus*

“I was working when something hit me in the head.”

That’s what Andreas told his friends and family. “I was working near a railroad as part of a crew clearing fields. When I looked down, there was a small book at my feet. I picked it up and put it in my pocket.” Andreas didn’t want to draw any attention to himself. It wasn’t much of a job, but it paid the bills for his family.

Later that night, he opened the book and found that it was a Gideon new testament. He began to read it and, before he knew it, had fallen to his knees and given himself to the Lord. Praise God! But the story goes on....

Andreas not only gave himself to God that night, but felt a call on his heart. So he entered seminary, was ordained and became a pastor. Five years later he and his wife moved back to that town in eastern Bulgaria. To God be the praise and the glory! In the best tradition of Paul Harvey, “In a minute, we’ll hear the rest of the story.”

The story of Andreas is one I have shared before. It never loses its excitement because it’s a story of hope, preparation and waiting. It’s a story of love and fulfillment. It’s an amazing story of how God blesses us and calls us to follow Jesus. In a nutshell, it’s the story we read in the Bible. It’s the story of Jesus. And that’s a story I love to tell.

Seven years ago, I met Pachek Krikov through The Gideons International. He told me this story. In 1997, Pachek was living in eastern Bulgaria. One day, he was on his way home. Pachek had been visiting friends in the city and was settled in for a long ride on the train. He pulled out his personal copy of a new testament and was reading it when he was interrupted. The police were on the train and they were harassing people.

An officer came up to Pachek and asked him what he was reading. When Pachek told him it was a new testament, the officer grabbed it from him, said that it was “worthless” and threw it out the window. As you can imagine, Pachek was angry and discouraged, but he remained quiet, knowing it was best.

* Material drawn from Reggie McNeal, *Missional Renaissance*, Jossey-Bass, 2009

Pachek later became a Gideon and moved to eastern Bulgaria with his wife and family. While searching for a home, they came across a quiet neighborhood with a small local church. They met the pastor and he made them feel right at home. The pastor was “certain” God had a place for them in the congregation.

A few months later, the congregation was meeting and sharing stories. Pachek told the story of how the guard had thrown his new testament from the train. At that point, pastor Andreas stood up and said, “Yes, I know, just as I knew you had a place in this church. It was your book that hit me in the head that day when I was working by the tracks. You see, here it is, with your name in the back.”¹

God’s blessings can come in simple ways and God’s blessings can come in amazing ways. Several weeks ago, we talked about the blessing God promised to Abram and his family; that they would be a blessing to the peoples of all nations (Genesis 12:1-4). That’s the first aspect of the vision God is placing on my heart to share with you. We are to be a congregation of blessing.

The second aspect of the vision God is giving us is found in Matthew 4:19, when Jesus called his first disciples saying, “*Follow me, and I will make you fish for people*” We are called to follow Jesus with our whole being - our head, heart and body, and this verse reminds us of that. We are called to show others how to follow Jesus.

The third aspect of the vision God is giving us is found in the mission Jesus gave to the disciples. It’s called the Great Commission. We read the words of Matthew 28:18-20 together a few minutes ago. It’s very familiar. We all know the mission Jesus gave to his disciples. The mission statement of our denomination is based on it. It’s something we’re all called to live out in various ways. It’s how we change the world through words and deeds of grace.

I have a question: did you live out Jesus’ mission this week? Did you go, make disciples, baptize or teach others about Christ? Probably not. The mission’s a good one, but it’s a bit difficult to approach, isn’t it? That’s because we tend to think of the mission in terms of the Church

¹ Story heard from National Director of Bulgaria who worked for The Gideons International (www.gideons.org)

and it’s mission, rather than how we live our lives each day. We’ve all been raised with a particular view of the Church and it’s role in our society. But that role is changing and evolving as our culture is changing and evolving.

Christian faith has an important role in our culture today. Adam Hamilton, Reggie McNeal and many pastors and authors make a strong case for that statement. I believe it, as do many of you. But we have to shift our thinking to make our faith accessible to the generations who are shaping our world. Three significant cultural phenomena are driving the need for collaboration and creativity in the faith community:

- ***The emergence of the altruism economy*** – in almost every part of our society, people want to see an end to poverty, disease, illiteracy and other social illnesses. They want to make a difference with their time, money and lives. That means people are going to ask questions about what’s being accomplished. At the same time, they aren’t going to be very supportive of groups who do charitable service just to gain influence and relevance.
- ***The search for personal growth*** – people today want to achieve their full, human potential. They want to develop, learn and become all they can be. They want their lives to matter. It’s no accident that Rick Warren’s book The Purpose-Driven Life was a national best seller. Also, information is empowering. The internet gives us new ways of learning and accessing vast sources of information. We all want to have a say in the way we learn. And we want to invest in ways to give other people the opportunity to learn and grow equally.
- ***The hunger for spiritual vitality*** – despite the promises of technology and progress, a majority of the human race still struggles to live. The problems of disease, hunger, war and injustice persist. No matter how high we build our walls, the possibility of nuclear annihilation, terrorist attack or a pandemic outbreak make all of us vulnerable. This is one of the reasons modern day versions of comic book heroes and heroines are so popular in the movies and on TV. Institutions and systems are no longer trusted because they’re inadequate to deal with the complexities of our planet’s dilemmas.

The result: people are turning to beliefs that transcend the physical world to help them make sense of the world and its challenges. In other words, God is back, big time! And God is breaking out of the box that we’ve tried to put him in over the past hundreds of years. People are searching for God in all sorts of places. Many of them are looking outside the church, in our streets, gatherings and groups.

According to the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, the fastest growing portion of the religious population is those who are unaffiliated with any denomination or faith group, the “Nones.” People are moving into this category three times faster than any other and it spans all age ranges. One key fact: only one-quarter of the “Nones” profess to be atheist or agnostic. Half of the group believes faith is important or very important in their lives. The move away from affiliation is not a move away from God, but it is a signal that we need to shift our thinking and approach if we’re going to have an impact on the spiritual lives of our neighbors and their families.

We need to shift our perspective to follow Jesus’ path. There are three ways we need to change our perspective. First, we need to change from a Church-focus to a Kingdom-focus. It means that the building, grounds, budget and systems aren’t the priority. People are the priority. Wherever we gather together in Jesus’ name, God’s Spirit is present. That’s church! Jesus drew parallels between spiritual growth and the budding of fruit trees saying, “...when you see these things taking place, you know that the kingdom of God is near” (Luke 21:31). Our acts of sacrificial love on the behalf of other people inspire them to learn and grow spiritually. We need to change from an internal, Church focus to an external, “how can we serve our community” focus.

Second, we need to shift from a program focus to developing people. One of the myths of the Church is that if you come and participate in all of the right activities with all of the right people, you’ll be better off. But we know that’s not true. Active church members typically don’t have a different set of values or fewer problems than people outside the church. You may have asked the question, “Where’s the more abundant life promised if we participated more?” Often, the only guarantee is that

the church will keep you busy. We need to ask “why?” before we ask “how?” more often. Developing people takes precedence over things.

We’re not saying “don’t participate.” We are saying that, as a missional church, we need to take far more seriously the challenge to help people shape their path for personal and spiritual development. We need to reconsider what it means to be a disciple, shifting our emphasis from studying Jesus and spiritual things in an environment isolated from the world, to following Jesus into the world and joining him in the healing and redemption of the world.

We see Jesus’ heart and ministry on display in Matthew 9:35-38, *“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. When he saw the crowds, he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. Then he said to his disciples, ‘The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; therefore ask the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest.’”* Jesus traveled up and down the country living out his mission and he took the disciples with him, teaching them on the way.

Jesus blessed people by giving them good news - words of hope and encouragement when they were feeling oppressed. He taught them about spiritual life using stories that nominally religious people would understand. Jesus healed broken people, those who were physically, emotionally and spiritually wounded. That’s what we’re called to do today. That’s how we can be relevant to a world that’s hurting and looking for meaning in life. That’s how we can bless others.

I know many of your hearts. What I’m describing is exactly why you’re here. We feel inspired, excited and fulfilled when we participate in this way. It’s exactly why we come to church: to be inspired by God’s Word, to experience God in prayer, music and communion, and to share how God is present in our lives each week. But we have to learn and change. People development isn’t easy. It’s not the same as running projects, with deadlines, milestones and budgets. Many of us may have never experienced what it means to be part of an intentional discipleship process. We can do it, but we have to learn together.

That leads to the third shift: lead by example. Being a blessing to others is a good first step. We have to do more, though. We have to be willing to go out and engage others in spiritual ways where they live, work and play. We need to raise up leaders who understand the challenges of culture and are willing to build relationships in our community. These leaders will focus outside the church building and organization with a willingness to serve in non-traditional ways. Rather than seeing the facilities and structures of the church as the goal, we need to see people as the goal with the resources of the church available to help us reach and develop people in Jesus’ name.

Some of you are nodding your heads. You get it. You’re ready and willing to engage. The mission of the church is to make disciples, people “who get it and who live it” in all aspects of life. That part of the mission of the church hasn’t changed. Making disciples who make disciples is really all about helping people find their identity as followers of Jesus Christ, ready to share their hope and lives with others.

Some of us are shaking our heads, wondering what it means. You hear the message of today’s culture as a condemnation and challenge to the church. The idea of focusing on people and service outside the church, rather than fixing the problems and systems we have doesn’t make sense. I have good news: we aren’t doing away with church. We’ll meet here each week, study God’s Word, pray and sing praises to God. You’re invited join those of us who want to change and grow, following the Holy Spirit out into the world, where there is a rich field to harvest. Take a chance: I think you’ll be blessed when you do.

God promised Abraham his spiritual descendents would be a blessing to the world (Genesis 12:1-4). I invite you to be a blessing everywhere you go. A month ago, we prayed for each other, asking for God to bless us. I know some of us had encounters with other people and blessings were given in Jesus’ name. I also know the idea of asking someone “can we pray for you?” is daunting. Remember God gives us a spirit of courage, not timidity. Jesus will give you the opportunity to share God’s love. The Holy Spirit will give you the words. If you aren’t comfortable speaking to others in public, I invite you to speak with your family. They love you and it’s a safe place to start.

To help us find the courage and initiative, I invite you now to turn to the person seated next to you and ask them this question:

“How can you bless someone this week?”

Please pray for God to give them the courage to act
(silently or out loud, your choice)

Claim this blessing from God. Make it part of your spiritual practice this week. Remember, God made us to be a blessing to others and it gets easier with time. You will receive blessings in return, because God is present. When we bless others, we begin to look forward to the ways God’s Spirit will work in and through us. That’s a blessing, as it gives us hope. I can’t think of a better way to show our love of God, love our neighbors and help heal the world. Join us as we shift our focus to others and share God’s love in a life-giving way.

Let us pray:

Lord, thank you for loving us, your children, without bounds. Give us the boldness to speak in your name, to offer your love to a world that is lonely and in need of hope. Help us to follow you as disciples and be transformed by your love so we may bless others with that same love. Bless us with generous spirits, without fear, but with courage. We devote our lives to you in faith and in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Joshua 24:1, 14-18 (NRSV)

Then Joshua gathered all the tribes of Israel to Shechem, and summoned the elders, the heads, the judges, and the officers of Israel; and they presented themselves before God.

“Now therefore revere the LORD, and serve him in sincerity and in faithfulness; put away the gods that your ancestors served beyond the River and in Egypt, and serve the LORD. Now if you are unwilling to serve the LORD, choose this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your ancestors served in the region beyond the River or the gods of the Amorites in whose land you are living; but as for me and my household, we will serve the LORD.”

Then the people answered, “Far be it from us that we should forsake the LORD to serve other gods; for it is the LORD our God who brought us and our ancestors up from the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery, and who did those great signs in our sight. He protected us along all the way that we went, and among all the peoples through whom we passed; and the LORD drove out before us all the peoples, the Amorites who lived in the land. Therefore we also will serve the LORD, for he is our God.”

Matthew 28:18-20 (NRSV)

And Jesus came and said to them, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.”