

February 1, 2015

The National Presbyterian Church

## **A Vision for God's Future: "Finding Your Mission"**

Romans 15:18-33

Dr. David Renwick

In our sermons this past January and now into early February, we're thinking together about some of the Biblical principles that provide the foundation for our congregation's new strategic plan (see <http://nationalpres.org/strategic-plan>; see appendix below). The particular theme I want to focus on this morning has to do with a sense of mission – a growing sense of mission, not only for our congregation as a whole (a unified sense of mission), but for our lives as individuals. So that when we talk about mission within the life of the church we no longer talk of it about “that sort of thing that those sorts of people like to do (but we don't!)” – but we think of all of us together having a common sense of purpose within the congregation and beyond the congregation, heading in the same direction, called by a God who sends us out into his world to serve him, in his name.

This sense of mission is something that Jesus wants us to have -- though sometimes this sense of mission is in tension with something else that each of us needs when we come to worship Sunday by Sunday. To be specific: there are many people who are drawn to church Sunday by Sunday (and this is true of me as it is I think of many of you, if not all of you), at times at least, to get away from the world, to withdraw from the world. Life is hectic and bruising out there. It's been a tough week. And we need to find a place of rest. We need a place of refuge. We need a place of refreshment. And so we come to church. We belong to a church to find that sense of escape or refuge from the rest of the world “out there.” And there is no question that what I want as pastor, is that when anyone comes to National, when we worship at National, we find precisely that: Jesus wants us to find that.

Jesus says to us in Matthew 11:28 – *“Come to me all you who labor and are heavy laden and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me for I am gentle and humble in heart and you will find, (DR: this is a great promise) – you will find, rest for your souls.”*

And for some of you that really is perhaps the only message you need to hear today – this great promise of Jesus, promising to provide us with “rest” in a turbulent world. So we come for this –and we ought to.

But – what we discover, even as we discover that Jesus promises us “rest,” is that this same Jesus also promises us a certain “restlessness”! The very same Jesus who gives us rest says, “Listen, I can't let you stop there. At least not stop there for long. I need to send you out on a mission in my name, on my behalf, to pursue my course, with my help, in my place, visibly in

the world that I love and to which I came.” So the rest will inevitably, at some time or another, if we’re truly following this Jesus, lead to this sense of restlessness and mission.

I cannot for example even begin to imagine what it was like for those first disciples when they began to understand this. They surely came to Jesus to begin with because of who he was – this strong, divine figure in their lives, giving them perhaps a sense of peace, a sense of awe and wonder, a sense of the holy in their lives, where they were. And then all of a sudden, very quickly it would seem (it would be within a year or two of their coming), he says he’s going to die (e.g., Matthew 16:21-28; John 14:1-7). He says he’s going to leave them. He says he’s no longer going to be close to them in the same way. Oh yes – close to them spiritually, with them always to the end of the age (Matthew 28:19-20), but visually, he’s gone. And they’re saying to themselves, “Wait a minute, this is not what we signed up for!” And then he says (John 20:21) “*As the Father sent me so send I you.*” You’re going to take over from me. You’re going to be the heart of my ministry, the hands and the feet of my ministry from this moment on.”

And those disciples were thrown into panic. They ran away to begin with. They didn’t want this mission to begin with. But . . . they pulled themselves together, and by the power of God’s presence with them by the Spirit, they picked up the pieces and bit by bit they embraced Jesus’ message and mission, from which at first they would rather have steered clear. The mission became powerful in their lives eventually; but it was not what they bargained for to begin with.

As the fledgling church grew others joined them, sharing with them in this sense of mission. And amongst those who embraced not just the *rest* that comes from Christ but this *restlessness*, this call to mission, perhaps above all, was a man by the name of Paul – the person who wrote our scripture reading today, his letter to the church in Rome, chapter 15.

When Paul met Jesus Christ his world was turned upside down. Some people speak about his conversion on the road to Damascus (see Acts 9); but actually it was more than that – it was also a call from God to join Christ’s mission! The risen Jesus he met that day, actually didn’t give him much peace at all (at least not at that moment!) but immediately summoned him to be sent on a mission, one that he embraced his lifelong. You can read much of Paul’s story in the Acts of the Apostles in the New Testament. He’s the one who wrote almost half of the documents in our Bible’s New Testament; and through him God established churches throughout (what we would now call) Turkey and Greece, all the way up the coast of the Adriatic Sea.

This sense of mission that the apostle Paul had from the day he first met the Risen Christ continued for decades, and almost certainly to the very end of his life. It was simply enormous. It never seemed to fade. So, for example, towards the end of his life, or at least into his mid-50s, 20 years after the Damascus Road experience, he’s writing these words to the Christians in Rome (probably writing from somewhere in southern Greece). He says

“I will not venture to speak of anything except what Christ has accomplished through me to win obedience from the Gentiles so that from Jerusalem as far round as Illyricum [DR: Illyricum is approximately the location of modern day Croatia], I have fully proclaimed the good news of Christ. Thus I make it my

ambition to proclaim the good news, not where Christ is already named so that I do not build on someone else's foundation but as it is written, so that [quoting Isaiah 52:1] *"those who have never been told of him shall see and those who have never heard of him shall understand."*

But now, with no further place for me in these regions," [DR: he doesn't say 'I'm finished, I'm retiring', he says] I desire, as I have for many years, to come to you in Rome. And then go on to Spain." [DR: So he's in Greece and he wants to cross most of the Mediterranean Sea, east to west, in order to pursue this sense of mission for Jesus Christ. But he says, and I paraphrase] "First of all I've got to go back to Jerusalem. I need to bring an offering because there's famine in the land there and there are people who are physically hungry and I have to feed them through this offering. And then I will go on my way."

So there are these enormous plans he has – to pursue his mission for Jesus Christ on into old age and this despite so many setbacks along the way. Elsewhere in his writing (especially 2 Corinthians 11) he speaks about experiencing imprisonment and beatings and floods and storms and outlaws and hunger and thirst and more. But nothing, nothing seems to quench this passion to be restless for Jesus Christ. If he has to travel hundreds of miles or thousands of miles he will do it. There is no plane, there is no car, it's by rickety boat, or by foot, or on a donkey, and he will do it: nothing can quench this spirit. In every way I think the apostle Paul embodies the passion reflected in a wonderful piece of writing by George Bernard Shaw (Man and Superman, Preface), who speaks about a truly meaningful life in these terms. He says,

*"This is the true joy in life; the being used for a purpose, recognized by yourself as a mighty one.*

*The being a force of nature instead of complaining that the world will not devote itself*

*to making you happy. I am of the opinion that my life belongs to the whole community."* [DR: I suspect that Paul would add that our lives belong first to Jesus Christ and then to the community that Christ came to establish.] *"And as long as I live it as my privilege to do for it whatever I can. I want to be thoroughly used up when I die. Life is no brief candle to me. It is a sort of splendid torch which I have got hold of for a moment and I want to make it burn as brightly as possible before handing it on to future generations."*

A powerful statement! One that reflects the life of the Apostle Paul brilliantly – and reflects, too, the life that Jesus Christ wants to give to every single one of us. This is life as it should be, as a follower of Jesus. We come for refreshment and he gives us refreshment – but he does so that we would be strengthened to participate in his mission and to be made restless in his service and for his cause. It's a great picture.

But, as we think about ourselves, our own lives in this context, I suspect that all of us know that sometimes for us it's true (we have this passion) and sometimes it's not so true! Or to put it

another way: sometimes we start out with this enormous sense of passion and mission and ministry, and then it fades away and becomes small and relatively insignificant within our lives.

In his book How Will You Measure Your Life, (pp1-3), Clayton Christensen, a professor at Harvard Business School, begins with these rather sobering and challenging words:

“On the last day of the course that I teach at Harvard Business School I typically start by telling my students what I observed among my own business school classmates after we graduated. Just like every other school our reunions every five years provided a series of fascinating snapshots. . . The red carpet gets rolled out with an array of high profile speakers and events. At my own fifth reunion . . . everyone seemed so polished and prosperous . . . My classmates seemed to be doing extremely well. They had great jobs. Some were working in exotic locations and most had managed to marry spouses much better looking than they were. Their lives seemed destined to be fantastic on every level.

But by our tenth reunion things that we had never expected became increasingly common. A number of my classmates didn’t come back and I had no idea why. Gradually . . . I put the pieces together. Among my classmates were executives at renowned consulting and finance firms . . . others were on their way to top spots in Fortune 500 companies; some were already successful entrepreneurs and a few were earning enormous life-changing amounts of money.

Despite such professional accomplishments however many of them were very clearly unhappy.

Behind the façade of professional success there were many who did not enjoy what they were doing for a living. There also numerous stories of divorces or unhappy marriages. I remember one classmate who hadn’t talked to his children in years who was now living on the opposite coast from them. Another was on her third marriage since we graduated.

My classmates were not only some of the brightest people I’ve known but some of the most decent people too. [DR. And here’s the part which is especially memorable or important to keep in mind]. At graduation they had plans and visions for what they would accomplish [DR: as they started out], not just in their careers but in their personal lives as well. Yet something had gone wrong for some of them along the way. Their personal relationships had begun to deteriorate even as their professional prospects blossomed. I sensed that they felt embarrassed to explain to their friends the contrast in the trajectories in their personal and professional lives.

At the time I assumed it was a blip, a kind of mid-life crisis. But at the 25 and 35 year reunions the problems were worse.”

Which means that as we think about our mission as followers of Jesus Christ, the mission that God wants to give to us as followers of Jesus Christ, the sense of restlessness that follows the rest that Jesus wants to give to us as followers of Jesus Christ, we not only have to find our

mission but we surely have to find a mission that will last not just for the short haul but for the long haul. That will not come like a flash in the pan and disappear but will somehow weave its way into our lives in such a way that our whole lives become integrated for Jesus Christ and that sense of mission will not destroy our lives but will lead to a sense of fulfillment and energy as with Paul all our life long.

So here's the thought, really the one thought, that I want to leave with you this morning. The thought is this – that by and large, if you want to find your mission for Jesus Christ (and as his followers I trust that you all do), if you want to find your mission for Jesus Christ, a mission that is sustained for the long haul, is sustained, sustainable and sustaining, you will find it NOT usually in *the new job* or the *specific task* or the *big project* or the *great adventure* (though sometimes you will indeed find it there); but you will not find it normally or usually in the “Mission Impossible moment” where you receive the tape or memory stick which has your mission encoded in it – this “big project mission” that you must do that will change your life forever. But rather, if you want to find that mission which comes from Jesus Christ that will be sustained, is sustainable for a long time, and that is sustaining – integrated into your broader life – THEN, more often than not, it will come to you in the present and in the ordinary – *in the transformation of the present and the transformation of the ordinary by the constant call of Jesus Christ.*

Let me say it again: If you want to find your mission it will not always and not usually come through the big event that looks so clearly like the mission that needs to be embraced though sometimes that is the case but more often than not it will come through the transformation of the everyday, of the now, of the present and the ordinary, *by the constant call, the constant word of Jesus Christ, invading who you are and where you are right now.*

Let me say this one more time in a different way. When we turn to the pages of scripture there are marvelous stories about people who live here and who move there, and they find a specific activity that they are to do, which is their mission for God. And God certainly works in this way and some of you in fact need to be thinking about what God is doing in these terms.

- So we've got Joseph for example in the Old Testament (Genesis 37-50) who is an obnoxious child, sold into slavery by his brothers, and ends up in prison. Life seems to be going nowhere. Set free from prison, however, he becomes the economic guru for all of ancient Egypt, saving them from social and economic disaster. He has a mission for God. It's very clear and it's wonderful.
- Or you've got Esther who is an orphan in a foreign land in the land of Persia. Esther is there and she becomes the queen, out of nowhere she becomes the queen, and when she discovers that there may be genocide, her people are going to be destroyed – in a great moment, she sums up the courage to speak truth to power, and saves the day for all her people. This is a great mission. A God-given mission which she embraces and her life is changed and infused with meaning. There is no doubt about it.

- Or, in the New Testament, in the time of Jesus, we think of Simon Peter, one of Jesus' closest friends, if not his best friend, who, to begin with, is an entrepreneur. Before Jesus meets him, he's a fisherman down by the Sea of Galilee. He's a small businessman: it looks from the scripture as if there are people who are working for him. He's not just by himself. And he leaves his day job, eventually becoming "The Senior Pastor of First Church, Jerusalem" and then "First Church, Rome." That is, he moves from where and what he is to be some-where and become some-one else – now in the city not by the sea, becoming a great leader, a pastor, preacher and prophet on behalf of the church. And this is his mission.

SO, there is no doubt that God works in that way. And some of you may need to be seeking that change, those changes within your life.

BUT, having said that, for the most part, for most of us, the mission that we will find that God has for our lives, and has for *every single one* of our lives, does not usually come in that way, but comes more frequently *through the ordinary every-day events of life infused with the word of Christ, transformed in and of themselves by the word of Christ* – almost like the bread and the wine on our communion table – which remain bread and wine, but Christ has promised to be especially present at the table, so these simple things become the chosen vehicles of Christ's presence within our lives.

Some years ago I spoke to a friend who was a mentor. One of his tasks was to interview candidates for overseas mission work, people who wanted to serve Christ overseas. He said to me that over the years, many of the people he interviewed came to him saying that they felt God was calling them overseas because they have never quite been able to get things together here at home. And he said he couldn't accept them for mission service – because what the mission agency had discovered was that those who had not made it at home rarely made it in a different place and culture. Make it at home first he implied, and then move out.

It is where we are, in and through what we do, which may seem to be absolutely inconsequential at times, that God first wants to give to us a sustaining and integrating sense of mission and purpose.

C.S. Lewis writing in World War II puts it like this (in *Learning in War Time*, in *The Weight of Glory*, p.61). He says,

"Never commit your virtue or your happiness to the future. Happy work is best done by the man or by the person who takes his or her long term plan somewhat lightly and works from moment to moment as to the Lord. Works from moment to the moment as to the Lord. It is only our daily bread that we are encouraged to ask for. The present is the only time in which any duty can be done or any grace received."

So here is this two-sided picture of Jesus coming to you and me (1) sometimes saying “Move here, move there. Do this in my name or that in my name. Take on the big project.” But more often than not he’s saying something else: (2) “Listen to what I have to say where you are. Don’t change a thing, but allow my word to transform where you are.”

But what kinds of things, exactly, does he say we are to do or be, right where we are? Not some of us, but all of us who claim to be his followers? Well, start with this:

He says in Matthew 5:13-16: “*You are the salt of the earth. You are the light of the world*” ... precisely where you are! So we need to ask are we fulfilling our mission?

*You are the salt of the earth!* Are we adding taste to people’s lives? Are we preserving people’s lives rather than let them deteriorate? Do it where you are. That is your mission.

*You are the light of the world!* There is a lot of darkness around. Are you a source of light and life to others, a source of brightness and warmth when things are dark and cold? Right where you are fulfill your mission!

And Jesus says in Acts 1:8: “You are my witnesses!” I’ve not called you to force your faith on others. But if in fact you have known me, then be ready to share me in word or deed – “Be my witnesses,” the scripture says, “in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria to the ends of the earth!” As a congregation we go to the ends of the earth, and some of you as individuals do too. There is no question about it. But we have also been called to be right here. This is our “Jerusalem” right here where we are to be witnesses for Jesus Christ.

And Jesus says to us in Matthew 28:19-20: “Go and make disciples of all nations.” “All nations” surely focuses out attention again on “the ends of the earth”! It’s the big picture mission. BUT, “all nations,” are also, are they not, on our own doorstep, in one city? “All nations” have come to us! All Nations, begins here, wherever there are people different from us, and wherever there are people who need to know Jesus and become his disciples – including our children: right here at home, we have been called to make disciples of the children entrusted to our care.

One of the great tragedies of main line churches is that when it comes to Confirmation (and our young people are about to begin Confirmation Class, so keep them in your prayers), surveys in the last 20-30 years show that in mainline churches, instead of being the moment of explicit commitment to Jesus Christ in the church (the way IN the door), confirmation has become more like graduation – (the way OUT the door). The end of church going rather than the beginning. But we’ve been called to “make disciples” in our church, beginning right here, with our children! This is a mission entrusted to all of us and not just to a few.

And then we find a word from Christ in these words of 1<sup>st</sup> John 3:17: “*How does God’s love abide in anyone who has the world’s goods and sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses to help?*”

If you've been reading the paper you know that in our own city homelessness is growing. One of our missions as Christians, whether it's one by one or whether its attacking the big problem, is surely to care for people in need, beginning with those on our doorstep. I suspect if we put all our heads together and our hearts together and our prayers together within our own congregation, we would have the means to develop some ways of attacking this huge problem in our own city. There's a mission, the big one. But the small one is there always in the way we care for those in need one by one . . .

Find your mission says Jesus. Come to me for rest. I will refresh you. But then allow me to make you restless so that you will serve me with your life and continue my mission on earth in my name. And seek it – Sometimes in the big, but more often in the small; Sometimes in the future but more often in the present. Allow my word, these words of mine in Scripture, to infuse everything you do and you will find a sustaining mission that does not pull your life apart but integrates it and that will make it whole and filled with energy from now and like the apostle Paul all the way through life to the end.

One final word. In his little book called Called: The Crisis and Promise of Following Jesus Today, (p.76), Mark Labberton tells the story of a man he knows called John. He says this.

John knows what lurks in his heart and life. He has a keen awareness of the issues within some of which have nearly swamped him. His professional life involves endless aggressive negotiations. But now the grace of God has called him to follow Jesus and the difference can be seen. In all honesty and candor before God John is in the process of dealing with his underlying issues. Things have gradually turned in his life because of his sense of call [DR: He does not leave his old job behind. He is exactly where he was before]. This means he now consciously embraces the opponent in a negotiation to be the one God is most calling him to engage and love in the coming year. [DR: That is, John has chosen to be “salt and light” to the one who might at first seem to be his opponent, his enemy]. As this has been happening it is showing up in dramatically changed relationships and business dealings . . . John's is a story of what's happening inside and out.

It's a story of life seen as mission. The big, the small, everything in between, infused with the ongoing word and call of Christ.

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#### APPENDIX:

#### From the NPC Strategic Plan (October, 2014) . . .

#### **Goal 3: PROCLAIM AND EMBODY THE GOSPEL TOGETHER**

Spread Christ's love and good news in God's world – in our neighborhood and beyond.

**3.1: Increase each member's participation in missions and outreach; be “*salt and light*,” sharing the good news of Jesus Christ in words, deeds, or both. Christ has called each of**



**us to go and make disciples.** We believe NPC should be a place that helps equip its congregants to fulfill Christ's calling to spread His message and love. Over half of our congregation expressed an interest in serving, and we want to make it easier for people to say, *"Here am I. Send me!"*

**3.2: . . . increase congregational awareness of NPC's missions and outreach priorities and investments.** When someone asks what NPC is all about, missions should be among the first things that come to mind.

**3.3: Live out our commitment to proclaim and embody the Gospel by incrementally increasing our missions budget each year, with the goal of allocating 20% of NPC's tithes and offerings to external missions within 5 years.**

Check out NPC Website for Mission details: <http://nationalpres.org/international>;  
<http://nationalpres.org/local>

#### **Goal 4: DEMONSTRATE GOD'S LOVE TOGETHER**

**4.3: Enhance relationships and hospitality between NPC and its surrounding neighborhoods, city, and region.** We must enhance and deepen our relationships with our surrounding community to draw those in near proximity into closer relationship with us and, more importantly, into closer relationship with God.

**4.4: Expand and sustain the NPC community by pursuing, supporting, and adapting to a younger and more diverse membership.** To do this, we must be able to meet the needs and support the spiritual growth of students, young families, and young adults from a variety of backgrounds.

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Clayton M. Christensen: *How Will You Measure Your Life*, 2012

Mark Labberton: *Called: The Crisis and Promise of Following Jesus Today*, 2014.

Kathleen Norris: *The Quotidian Mysteries*, 1998

Brother Lawrence: *The Practice of the Presence of God*, 1600's.

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