RADIUS

**The Sweep, Reach & Results of Christian Missions**

**To the Ends of the Earth (Part 1) | Text: Acts 1:1-8**

Among the many weird things about me that you probably don’t yet know is the fact that ***I love submarine movies***. Give me a rainy afternoon, a crackling fire, and a chance to watch, *The Hunt for Red October,* or the old classic, *Run Silent Run Deep*, and I am a happy man. My favorite part is when the person manning the sonar station suddenly says with excitement: *“Captain, I’ve picked up a contact, bearing mark three-zero-five.”* The camera inevitably zooms in on a screen something like this and you hear this ping… ping… ping-sound. It’s a thrilling moment because a contact out there could be a serious threat – maybe an incoming torpedo or a hostile sub; or it could be a target of opportunity -- an asset that could change the course of the battle.

Those of you who are video gamers have your own version of this too. Any one of our three boys used to crush me in *Halo* or *Call of Duty* because they had this well-trained habit of constantly scanning around them for threats and opportunities. It’s like they operated at the center of these concentric circles of awareness that made them engage their environment so much more effectively than I did. I’d get trashed for the tenth time in five minutes and my son would say: *“Um, Dad, are you using that little location screen? Are you tracking what’s going on around you?”*

I have this theory that each of us lives with a sort of personal sonar or radar. We have a certain radius of perception and engagement that varies depending on who we are and how we’ve been trained. Some people’s radius is very SHORT. The REACH of their detection doesn’t go out very far. Have you ever seen someone blocking an intersection who seems to have no clue about the massive traffic jam stacking up around him or her? Ever met someone talking loudly on their phone or walking glued to their screen, oblivious of the people they’re disturbing or about to bang into?

Some people’s radius is not so much short as very SLOW. There are people who are very good at seeing far out in one direction, but the sweep of their discernment moves at a crawl or hardly at all. Visionary leaders and creatives of various kinds can be like this: They can be great at seeing way out into the future and locking onto a vision or target; but they fail to sweep their gaze around them. They miss what’s happening with their own family members or their co-workers. How many of us wish we had a faster radar radius sweep when our kids were younger or our spouse was under such pressure? ***How would you assess your SWEEP & REACH today?***

When we study Jesus, it’s hard not to be impressed by both the SWEEP & REACH of his concern for people and how hard he worked to help his followers develop theirs. Jesus invested intense time over three years trying to help twelve particular people think beyond their personal interests and embrace a gospel bigger than their preferences or politics. The Book of Acts tells us that following his resurrection – which one would think would be pretty life re-orienting for the disciples, in itself -- **Jesus appeared to them over a period of forty days and spoke about the kingdom of God** **(Acts 1:3)** – which is to say, God’s desires for everybody.

Finally, there was a LAST physical conversation between the disciples and Jesus. In about five minutes, Jesus is going to return to his Father in heaven and leave his mission in the disciples’ hands. Yet here is what they ask him: **“Lord**, **are** **you** **at** **this** **time** **going** **to** **restore** **the** **kingdom** **to** **Israel?” (Acts 1:8)**. In other words: *“Are you going to make Israel great again, Jesus? Are you going to make things better for our tribe? Will you make it easier for US, Jesus?”* These are common curiosities, to be sure, but in light of the very expansive vision Jesus had tried to impart to them, it is the sign of a very SHORT & SLOW MOVING RADIUS.

I’d have wanted to kick these guys off the submarine or out of the video game. But Jesus doesn’t. Instead, he makes a promise – one of the most dramatic in history: **You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you; and you will be my WITNESSES… in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth. (Acts 1:8)**

Let me try to break this one verse down and translate it for us into contemporary terms, because what Jesus is providing here is something so immensely important. Christ is giving us a picture of both the SWEEP and REACH of what came to be known as CHRISTIAN MISSIONS. We’re taking a break from our study of the BOOK OF KINGS to think about this topic because many of our church’s domestic and global mission partners are visiting with us this week; but the practice of Christian Missions is so CORE to the heart and work of Christ Church every week that it begs our attention.

Jesus starts out here by saying that when the Holy Spirit lives in you, your whole life will become a WITNESS – as in a powerful influence for – me and my kingdom. ***Do you feel that you ARE that sort of powerful influence?*** If not, then ask the Holy Spirit today to fill you afresh and start to make you such a witness. I’ve written a book about this, but in the simplest terms, a Christian witness is someone who lives out the TWO MAJOR MANDATES of Jesus – the two things he told us to do.

First, Jesus said we are to live out what he called the **GREATEST COMMANDMENT.** Jesus said: **“Love the Lord your God with all that you are and love your neighbor as yourself.”**2 **“As I have loved you, so you must love one another.”**3 In his inaugural address at the Nazareth synagogue,4 in his famous Parable of the Good Samaritan,5 and in his Parable of the Sheep and the Goats,6 Jesus called his followers to express uncommon, self-giving love to those under the effects of their own or someone else’s sin or enduring the suffering of a fallen world.7

Jesus (and the prophets who preceded him) tell us that, as God’s witnesses, we are to enter every environment with humility and a spirit of servanthood.8 We’re called to provide practical aid to “the least,” as if we are caring for Jesus and his family. We are supposed to practice mercy and work for justice in the affairs of society.9 We’re called to seek the welfare of the cities we inhabit.10 We’re told to bring glory to God and favor to the Church by our good works.11 You and I are to proclaim and exhibit the in-breaking of a kingdom that offers hope and help like no earthly empire can. ***In what ways do you feel like you are living out the Greatest Commandment?***

Before he ascended to heaven, Jesus also left his disciples with these instructions we have come to call the **GREAT COMMISSION**: **“All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore, go 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 all I have commanded you.”**12

In his most famous story -- the Parable of the Prodigal Son – and many other teachings,13 Christ makes clear his great passion to bring home to his heavenly Father anyone who has been separated from him. In one of the several ways he defined his mission, Jesus said: **“The Son of Man, came to seek and save the lost.”** 14 For this reason, the New Testament teaches that, as Christ’s witnesses, you and I are to be like salt – providing spiritual seasoning and preserving that which is vital against decay.15 We’re supposed to be like light -- bringing spiritual insight to individuals, households and communities.16 Fulfilling the Great Commission means that we’ll proclaim the forgiveness and eternal salvation made possible through the cross of Christ. We’ll be regularly extending invitations to others to enter the circle of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Like Jesus, our passion will be to seek out and bring home to God’s family those who have forgotten their true identity and place. And, as Dr. Greg Ogden will say more next Sunday, we are to make devoted learners of all that Jesus has taught us.

It’s a big order, but this is the SWEEP of our concern as Christians always living on mission. We’re trying to love others – not as the world defines love – but as Jesus defines it by his own example and teaching. We’re seeking to bring everyone we can home to their Heavenly Father and to teach them the ways of his family. ***Christian witness is about BOTH showing compassion AND seeking conversion***. Practical compassion paves the way for spiritual conversion and that in turn leads to more life-changing love. Helping people to find life abundant here AND life eternal above aren’t a tension; they are a flywheel that gains speed and power.

The question is: ***Are you aware of and engaging people each week with this sort of concern and hope for them?*** Jesus is very eager to see us do that. This is why his last words to his disciples were not just a general call to be witnesses, but a very specific charge as to WHERE he wants his followers to exercise that mission.

First of all, I want you to be my witness right here **in Jerusalem** – which is to say immediately around you. Think about the way you love and speak to the people here at church, in your home, in your neighborhood or at school. Survey your immediate environment. Ask the Holy Spirit to make your radar PING on someone you can lift up in the name of Jesus. Who will that be for you today or this week?

If you are my witnesses, said Jesus, then your radius will reach out further to **Judea**. Judea was the region around Jerusalem. Jesus was telling his disciples: *“I want you to bring good news to the people of your region.”* As you’ve seen ME do, I want you to be radically FOR the people in your area who have spiritual, relational and material needs with which you could be helpful. Jesus might say to us today: *“I want you to be FOR Chicagoland*.” Be such a blessing in the communities and city near you that people see your good works and praise your Father in heaven (Matt 5:14-16).

And then Jesus stretched his disciples’ personal radius even further. I also want you to be my witnesses in **Samaria**. With that, I’m pretty sure the disciples winced and looked sideways at each other. To ordinary Jews, Samaria was code for “THOSE PEOPLE.” The Samaritans held religious beliefs and practiced cultural customs and expressed political viewpoints and even displayed racial differences that the average Jew despised. Some of the disciples undoubtedly felt, not them, Lord.But Jesus said: “I want you to lengthen the reach of your heart. Be my witnesses with those people who are not like you.” ***Who are those people for you?***

And then Jesus said something REALLY crazy. ”Take your witness about me and my kingdom **to the ends of the earth**.”From the vantage point of people like you and me today, that might not seem so wild. We get live telecasts from around the planet on our phones. Given sufficient money, we can travel by jet in a matter of hours to almost any place. But to say, as Jesus did, to just twelve first century peasants,*“You will take my gospel to the ends of the earth,”* was outrageous. I doubt any of them had been outside Israel. There were few good roads, no faster transport than a horse or sailboat, and a planet so vast that only the tiniest portion had even been mapped. But Jesus said, in effect: You will be my witnesses beyond your horizons. Yet you and I are sitting here today because He was right – his witnesses would eventually carry his gospel across the entire world.

Over the last several weeks, we’ve been studying the story of the prophet Elijah’s battle with the ancient religious cults of Baal and Asherah and we’ll resume that two weeks from now. What marked every pagan religion of ancient times is that their gods were tribal ones. The typical god cared mainly for this locality or that ethnic group or such-and-such specific nation. But not the God that Elijah worshipped and Jesus showed us. One of the most consistent messages of the Bible is that God sees and cares about people all the way **to the ends of the earth.**

The prophet Job declared: **God views the ends of the earth and sees everything under the heavens. (Job 28:24).**  Reiterating the final words of Jesus to his disciples, the Apostle Paul said in Antioch, where the followers of Christ were first called, “Christians”: **I have made you a light for the Gentiles, that you may bring salvation to the ends of the earth’ (Acts 13:47).** This is a charge we must still live out toward the coming day when, **All the ends of the earth will remember and turn to the Lord, and all the families of the nations will bow down before him (Psalm 22:27).**

The Christian Church needs to extend the reach of its radius even further today. Around the world, there are still over 3.2 billion people living among some 7,000 people groups where Christ is largely unknown. What Church there is in these places isn’t resourceful enough to make Christ known to its broader population without outside help. This why our giving to the cause of global missions still matters so much.

I know I’ve given you too much to fully absorb today. You might find it helpful to go to our website and read again the manuscript of this message we’ll post there. Let me close today with a story. Some years ago, Amy and I visited a community in rural India where one of our church’s mission partners, India Gospel League, had sent a worker to build relationships with the Hindu people who lived there. The worker eventually started a Bible study. When it grew to 20 people or so, IGL sent in a crew to build a cinder block building they called a Life Center. The new believers started to hold prayer meetings and worship services in that space. In time, the building was expanded. It became a school and a community center during the week. Eventually, it became the site of a micro-finance program that helped dozens of people develop small businesses. With IGL’s help, the Christian community there dug clean water wells and helped local farmers improve the productivity of their crops. Over time, life in that community was utterly transformed and began to look more like the kingdom of God.

Amy and I observed people being joyfully baptized into the Christian faith. We heard how on a weekly basis Hindu folks from the surrounding region were coming to the church and saying: *“Please come to our village and establish a Life Center among us.”*  What I want you to understand is that because of the support of churches like ours, India Gospel League has not done this just once. They have done it 70,000 times. IGL’s Life Centers have almost a million children involved in their programs. This may beyond our horizons but it is not beyond God’s.

This is the power of Christian missions. This is the SWEEP, REACH and RESULT that inspires our life as a church. We are constantly being told by our society that the PINGS of people out there are threats that might torpedo our lives. What if we viewed them instead as opportunities for engagement that could change the world for good? For Jesus said to his disciples: **As the Father sent me, so I send you** (John 20:21). Continue my work of redemption. Be my witnesses in your Jerusalem, in your Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.

1 John 20:21

2 Matthew 22:34-40

3 John 13:34

4 Luke 4:16-21

5 Luke 10:25-37

6 Matthew 25:31-46

7 John 16:33

8 Mark 9:35

9 Micah 6:8

10 Jeremiah 29:7

11 Matthew 5:16; Acts 2:42-47

12 Matthew 28:19-20

13 Luke 15; Luke 14:15-24

14 Luke 19:10

15 Matthew 5:13

16 Matthew 5:14-15