

“SPECIAL DELIVERY”

“I try to find common ground with everyone, doing everything I can to save some”
(1 Corinthians 9:22).
Matthew 9:35-38 ¹

By just about any measure, we live in unusual times. Not so very long ago, fax machines were “the cat’s meow” when it came to getting documents somewhere quickly. Then along came texts and email, making such transmissions both essential and fairly unremarkable.

Not so very long ago, one of the fastest ways to get a package across the country was to put it on a Greyhound bus. Then along came UPS, FedEx, DHL, and finally Amazon, making the idea of “special delivery” almost quaint, since we can get nearly anything in two days, and we can get many things in two hours.

When I want to have flowers delivered to Jill when she’s at work at the hospital, I can usually have them arrive in her office within about two hours after I make the call. It’s all pretty amazing.

Following this train of thought, it may not surprise you for me to point out that God has been in the “Special Delivery” business for a long, long time. Sometimes, those “special deliveries” really were miracle babies; more often, perhaps, those “special deliveries” came in the form of “a Word from the Lord.”

Those two types of “divine deliveries” were combined in the life of our Lord Jesus. His physical birth was the grandest “Special Delivery” of all; and when He began His public ministry, He gave the idea of “a Word from the Lord” a more robust and wondrous meaning than it ever had, before or since.

As Jesus’ earthly ministry came to an end, He gave “God’s Special Delivery” yet another meaning, and He made us who follow Him responsible for delivering it: *“All authority has been given to me in heaven and on earth. 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, teaching them to observe everything I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age”* (Matthew 28:18-20). It is this last kind of “special delivery” that claims our attention this morning.

A few years ago, as Jill and I ate dinner at a Mexican restaurant, she asked me, “What are you thinking so hard?” I responded, “I’m looking at all the people in this restaurant, for whom what we do in our sanctuaries is completely irrelevant. It does not touch their lives, or anything that they consider important. And that breaks my heart.”

While it’s important for us in the Church to do everything we can to communicate the Good News of Jesus to persons of every age, many studies have found that the probability of conversion declines enormously once children leave home. This means that our current pastoral search and ministry focus on the young people in our neighborhood and their families is both essential and strategic as we pursue Great Commission Ministries in our village.

You probably know that we live in a time in which adults of all ages are more likely to consider themselves “spiritual” than to think of themselves as “religious.” In a way, that’s good, because it’s awfully easy for religious activity to be mistaken for and to substitute for a passionate, growing, liberating, empowering, and transforming love relationship with God.

¹ A sermon by Dr. David C. Stancil, delivered at the Columbia Baptist Fellowship in Columbia, MD on June 3, 2018.

But the problem with “spirituality” is that people who call themselves “spiritual” are usually just infatuated with a vague, faintly religious sentiment that requires nothing of them and really offers nothing to them—except that they get to write the rules themselves.

Such “spirituality” offers no healing for guilt and no power for redemptive living. Such “spirituality” may give some sense of connection with a mysterious “life force,” but such connection is no more than a pale and powerless counterfeit of true redemptive relationship with the Living God.

The Truth is that Jesus, not Coca-Cola, and certainly not “spirituality,” is “The Real Thing,” and no imitation can satisfy our deepest yearnings and needs. **It is only in soul friendship with Jesus of Nazareth in the power of God’s Spirit that our heart hungers are satisfied.**

What the world calls “faith” cannot produce eternal life. Eternal life doesn’t come from faith in humankind, or faith in yourself, or faith in faith, or faith in America, but only from faith in Jesus Christ, born of a virgin, crucified in our place, raised to life by God’s power, reigning in majesty in heaven, and returning as the Lord Christ to claim His own.

To say this is not to stand in judgment, but simply to affirm what is actually the case. That’s why Jesus felt pity for the crowds who followed Him. They knew they were spiritually hungry. They knew their lives were going nowhere. But they didn’t know where to go for help. That’s why Jesus told His disciples, “*The harvest is abundant, but the workers are few. Therefore, pray to the Lord of the harvest to send out workers into his harvest*” (Matthew 9:37-38).

In John 4:35, Jesus told His disciples to “*Open your eyes and look at the fields, because they are ready for harvest.*” The King James Version renders this as “*white unto harvest,*” and a preacher once asked a Midwestern farmer what “*white unto harvest*” meant. The farmer replied, “That means that it’s almost too late. The best time for harvest has passed, and the crop is almost lost.”

When Jesus made this statement, He was pointing to all the people streaming out of the town of Sychar toward Him because of the testimony of the “woman at the well.” And as with a crop in the fields, the harvest of souls in each generation must be gathered or it will be lost. Yes, there will be other crops, but this one will be lost, and lost forever. That’s what I was thinking about in the restaurant.

I’m mixing metaphors, but the idea of “spiritual harvesting” and the idea of “special delivery” as I’m using it this morning, are both referring to our sharing of the Good News as Jesus commissioned us to do in every generation until He returns. So how are we to go about such harvesting? I’m not usually one for alliterative outlines, but this one simply jumped out at me. You might want to write this down.

God calls us to harvest through **Visual Example, Verbal Witness, Vibrant Community,** and **Vital Service**. Let’s look at each of these briefly.

Visual Example. Michael Green told a story about some missionary candidates who were in their first day of language training prior to going to their fields of service. On that first day, their teacher walked in the room and, without saying a word, walked up and down every row of students and then walked out of the room again. Then she came back in and asked, “Did you notice anything special about me as I walked through the room?”

Nobody could think of anything, but finally one student timidly raised her hand. “I noticed that you are wearing a very lovely perfume,” she said. Everyone else chuckled, but the teacher

said, “That was exactly the point. It will be a long time before you will be able to speak Chinese well enough to share the Gospel with anyone in China. But long before you are able to do that, you can share the sweet fragrance of Christ with these dear people by the quality of your lives.”²

Paul told us that God “*uses us to spread the knowledge of Christ everywhere, like a sweet perfume. Our lives are a Christ-like fragrance rising up to God*” (2 Corinthians 2:14-15, NLT).

Now in order for your life and my life to have “a Christ-like fragrance,” we must first of all know the Lord Jesus ourselves. We must be people who have ourselves repented, who have committed ourselves fully and completely to the Way of Jesus, and who live lives that, while less than perfect, are examples of what God-transformed lives look like. We must be growing in our love for and our obedience to Jesus and His Way. That’s the essential starting point, and there is no other.

Visual Example has to do with the silent testimony—the fragrance, the aroma—of our lives. Many people know that you and I are Christians, and some of them are watching closely to see whether we live Monday through Saturday what we profess to be on Sunday. What kind of story do people read when they watch your life? Do others see Jesus in you?

Verbal Witness. Yet as important as example is, we make a significant mistake if we attempt nothing more than living a Christlike life, without verbal witness where God gives opportunity. Jesus Himself, God in human flesh, at whose word the sea was stilled and the demons fled, knew that actions alone—even miraculous ones—are insufficient. Jesus continually explained what His actions meant and Who it was to whom they pointed.

Further, simply living a good life without giving verbal witness to our faith presumes that other people will correctly guess the source of our power. Lorne Sanny told a poignant story that highlights this danger:

“Years ago, when I was with the Billy Graham team in a crusade, a businessman came forward one night and received Christ as his Savior. The next Sunday he went to a church he sometimes attended.

“After the service, he walked up to one of the leading elders in this church and said, ‘I was at the Billy Graham meeting last week out at the ball park. I went forward and received Christ.’

“I heard about it,’ the elder replied, ‘and I am delighted!’

“Then the businessman said, ‘How long have you and I been associated in business?’

“‘About 23 years, I think,’ the elder answered.

“‘Have you known Christ as your Savior all that time?’ the businessman asked.

“‘Yes, I have,’ he answered.

“‘Well, I don’t remember you ever speaking to me about Christ during all those years,’ the businessman said. *‘I have thought highly of you. In fact, I thought so highly of you that I felt if anyone could be as fine a man as you and not be a Christian, then I didn’t have to be a Christian either.’*”³

That’s pretty sobering, isn’t it? And here’s the deal: Do you have a hard time talking to other people about your favorite ball team? Your favorite hobby? Your favorite recipe? Your

² Michael Green in *Stories for a Faithful Heart*, ed. Alice Gray (Multnomah, 2004), p. 95.

³ Lorne Sanny, “The Key to World Evangelism,” *Discipleship Journal* (Jan/Feb 1982).

grandchildren? Of course you don't! If your life in Christ *really is* the wonderful, transforming, purpose-giving, fear-eliminating, deeply joyful experience that we say it is on Sunday mornings, then it shouldn't be hard to talk about.

And so the second essential task of the harvest, after *Visual Example*, is *Verbal Witness*. My friend, if someone asked you what the Good News is, or how to become a Christian, could you tell them?

Could you tell someone how to be Born Again if they gave you that opportunity?

There are many resources available to help in such efforts, and the basic outline of a sufficient answer has only four points, as you can see on the handout in your worship order: *God's Purpose; Our Problem; God's Provision; Our Decision*.

God's Purpose is that every person receives the gift of eternal life, purchased on Calvary's Cross (John 3:16); but **Our Problem** is that Sin prevents our receiving this gift (Romans 6:23). **God's Provision** is the sacrificial death of His Son to remove our Sin (Romans 5:8); and Eternal Life awaits **Our Decision** to acknowledge our need and to ask for God's transforming forgiveness (Romans 10:9-10).

God's Purpose; Our Problem; God's Provision; Our Decision. That's not complicated, is it? You already know plenty of passwords and phone numbers that are more complicated than this.

Explaining these things is called "giving witness" or "giving testimony" to what God has done for us. Witnessing is not preaching or "button-holing." Witnessing is simply telling others what has happened to us in an attitude of prayerful respect and care: "*Once I was blind, but now I can see!*" (John 9:25; 1 Peter 3:15-16). If you and I have truly been again, born from above, and if our redeemed lives demonstrate God's presence, then we ourselves are powerful arguments for the truth of the Gospel.

My friends, we who know Jesus have the Greatest News in the world, and sharing it is the greatest kindness we can show to anyone. Every person has a right to hear the Good News effectively presented at least once in their lives. This is the gift of God, sent by Special Delivery! (Ephesians 2:8).

It's not our job to press for a decision or to convict others of their need for Jesus. That is the work of God's Spirit (John 16:7-8). We who follow Jesus just tell others what we have experienced and what has happened to us. We introduce others to Jesus and invite them closer to Him. The process of sharing isn't hard. The key is to have a vital relationship with Jesus ourselves, and to talk about that relationship as God gives us opportunity.

Vibrant Community. Yet while God does indeed love us beyond all measure as unique individuals, God doesn't save us for ourselves alone. God's ultimate purpose is to create a *Vibrant Community*, a matrix of redeemed relationships unlike any other. This community—Jesus called it the Kingdom of God, made visible in the Church—can be created only by God's own action, and God has designed this community in such a way that it will not be created without our willing cooperation. This is the final harvest God desires.

This is not "Mission Impossible." This is "Mission Inevitable." This has been God's plan even before Creation began, *and it's going to happen*. The amazing thing, the wonderful thing, the truly *exciting* thing about this plan is that God has given us—to you and me!—the task and the opportunity of completing it.

Vital Service. And so we have *Visual Example; Verbal Witness; Vibrant Community*; and finally, *Vital Service*. “*The harvest is abundant,*” Jesus says, “*but the workers are few. Therefore, pray to the Lord of the harvest to send out workers into his harvest*” (Matthew 9:37-38).

As you have probably realized, this morning we’re completing our journey “around the bases” of our church ministry structure: WORSHIP; CONNECT; GROW; SERVE; and GO; and today’s focus is on MISSION, or “GO!” This dimension of our congregational life focuses on creating avenues for communication of the Good News of Jesus with the world. Sometimes we create such channels through meeting human needs in Jesus’ Name, such as at Route One or the Coalition for Compassion.

Sometimes we create such channels through outreach activities such as Backyard Bible Clubs or youth camps in Jamaica or wells in Africa. But the *central and overarching purpose* of our personal and corporate MISSION is to share the Good News of Jesus and lead others toward faith in Him.

Such sharing is often called “evangelism,” which is nothing more than the Greek word for “good news”; and “evangelists” are persons who *bring* good news. Being an evangelist doesn’t involve more meetings at church. Evangelism has to do with Boy Scouts, Girl Scouts, quilting clubs, bridge clubs, bike clubs, bowling leagues, soccer teams, motorboats and kayaks—all kinds of fun stuff.

The important thing in order to be “on mission” is to spend time with people who aren’t already Christians, building intentional bridges of friendship and service across which the message of Jesus can eventually travel. It’s important to remember that people come to church for many reasons, but they only stay for one: FRIENDS.

It’s our job to *make* friends, *serve* friends, and *love* friends to Jesus. As my friend, Bob Robinson, often put it, “*If we serve others, they will come; and if we love them, they will stay.*”

Nearly 200 years ago two brothers were born in Blantyre, Scotland. Their names were John and David. John set his mind on making money and on becoming wealthy, and he did. David, on the other hand, resolved that “I will place no value on anything I have or possess unless it is in relationship to the Kingdom of God.”

David eventually made his way to southern Africa, where he preached the Good News for three decades. He was the first European to discover Lake Malawi, where I was privileged to win souls in 2006, and the largest city in Malawi, Blantyre, is named for the city of David’s birth.

On his 59th birthday, David wrote, “My Jesus, my King, my Life, my All; I again dedicate my whole self to Thee.” He died of malaria the next spring. David’s heart was buried in Zambia, and his body was carried back to London, where he is buried in Westminster Abbey under the epitaph, “For thirty years his life was spent in an unwearied effort to evangelize.”

Old editions of the *Encyclopedia Britannica* list David’s wealthy brother, John, simply as “the brother of David Livingstone.” John’s life apparently followed the mantra of “Get all you can, can all you get, and sit on the can.” Which legacy would you rather leave behind?⁴

“*The harvest is abundant,*” Jesus said, “*but the workers are few. Therefore, pray to the Lord of the harvest to send out workers into his harvest*” (Matthew 9:37-38). God asked Isaiah, “*Whom shall I send?*” (Isaiah 6:8); but the real answer to that question is that **God has already sent**

⁴ Billy Graham, “Breakfast with Billy Graham,” *Christianity Today*, vol. 41, no. 6.

YOU. There are persons in this world who only you will be able to reach, because of where you live, because of who you are—because of who God has made you to be. Begin right now to ask the Holy Spirit to make you aware of who these persons are.

Hark, the voice of Jesus calling, “Who will go and work today?
Fields are white, and harvests waiting, who will bear the sheaves away?”
Loud and long the Master calls us, rich reward he offers free;
Who will answer, gladly saying, “Here am I, send me, send me”?

If you cannot cross the ocean, and the distant lands explore
You can find the lost around you, you can help them at your door;
If you cannot give your thousands, you can give the widow’s mite;
What you truly give for Jesus will be precious in his sight.

Let none hear you idly saying, “There is nothing I can do,”
While the lost of earth are dying, and the Master calls for you;
Take the task he gives you gladly; let his work your pleasure be;
Answer quickly when he calls you, “Here am I, send me, send me!”