

Mission Awareness
January 26, 2014
Grace Ev. Lutheran Church – Tucson, AZ
Sermon by Rev. Dan Koelpin
“FOCUS ON MISSION”

In Jesus' name dear friends and co-workers in God's kingdom. "Focused" is one of those fashionable “buzz” words that's been around for awhile. As a verb its primary and original function was to describe the activity that bends light rays so that they will converge on specific points and patterns to produce a clearly defined image as in a focused film or filmstrip. Yet in modern jargon the term "focused" is more frequently used to depict the concentration of attention and resources in order to accomplish specific objectives. A focused person is a person of purpose, someone who is not easily diverted, a person who knows what he or she wants to achieve and devotes an almost exclusive use of time, energy and talent and money in order to achieve it. Top notch athletes like Aaron Rodgers, Michael Phelps, and LaBron James have been described as “focused” in athletic competition. In today's world a focused business is one which has set forth a well considered and clearly articulated statement of mission or purpose and then brings every resource into compliance with it. A focused company is one in which everyone from the Chief Executive Officer to the custodial crew knows what the company is seeking to accomplish and what their part in it is.

Never before in the world's history has it been so important to be focused. Haven't you noticed with distractions and amusements on every hand people are losing sight of what is important – their relationships with family members and with God, their sense of meaning in their lives. That's because today the scourge of our times is purposeless living. It's not that people aren't busy. Their lives are a veritable blur of activity – eating at every restaurant in town, previewing every video at the video store, looking for every sale at the shopping centers, but much of this is “chasing after the wind” with no purpose or meaning to all of the activity. Having a purpose for one's life is one of the most important ingredients of living. How many people do you know in hospitals and old folks homes that don't die simply because they have no purpose for going on? How many do you know that haven't known for quite some time what they've wanted out of their marriage? out of their job? out of life itself? -- and you wonder if they ever will. So many youth are drifting into aimlessness, because they don't have a focus on what's important, a sense of purpose to their lives. Is it little wonder then that one of the biggest book sellers on the market not too long ago was a book entitled “The Purpose Driven Life”?

The key to being focused is first to determine what's worthwhile in life and then to give our time and attention to it. If there are only so many books you can read in a lifetime doesn't it make sense to read only the best? If you only have so much time, isn't it far more important to give it to worthwhile purposes than to squander and waste it on the non-consequential? You and I have only one life to invest - only so many resources, so many talents, only so many years and that's it --that's all. It would be a tragedy to spend them on anything less than the most supreme, the most worthwhile of causes. We need to either be convinced or continually reminded that the supreme values, those worth seeking and having, are those which meet our deepest needs. This rules out the hoarding of money. Money can buy comfort for the body, but not peace for the soul. It can purchase a house, but it can't turn it into a happy home. It can secure a hospital room and the finest of physicians, but it can't guarantee health or long life. The same holds true for the amassing of possessions. The minute a person buys into the premise that he needs things to make him happy, then it stands to reason that he needs more things to make him more happy and he is already on a treadmill that never stops. Many of us might not believe that if we

had two or three times as much as we have right now, we wouldn't be any happier, but the truth is we wouldn't. Whenever we make something outside of ourselves the source of our joy (our house, our possessions, even another person our spouse or children) we're setting ourselves up for a fall, because it can all (any person or thing) be taken from us— and then where is our happiness? Contentment is not found in that which is without but in that which is within. Do you want to ask yourself, "How much of your time is spent working for things, shopping for things, hauling things around, trading things, maintaining things?" And what's suffering in the meanwhile? – relationships, purpose.

Our greatest needs are not economic or material at all; they are spiritual. Our supreme needs are a quiet heart and inward peace, a freedom from guilt the steady courage that comes from faith and a life of fulfillment and meaning. Those are things only God can give us in Jesus Christ, but having them we can cope with everything else. We do find peace in the salvation he has provided and we do find fulfillment and meaning for our lives carrying out his plan and purpose for us.

In the word of God before us today the ruler of the universe sets forth that plan for us both as a church body and as individual Christians. It is the mission on which he has focused the entire church's attention. Unlike those who are always squandering their energies on the secondary, we Christians can know what is worth giving our time and attention to because Jesus tells us what it is. In his final directives to the disciples our Savior set forth in merely a few words the church's mission for all time when He said, **'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 everything I have commanded you.'** This mission was so all encompassing in scope, so universal in reach, so timeless in its application that it continues to stand to this day as the unifying focus of the church's activity to all who take God's word seriously. This evening we want to emphasize the importance of keeping our focus on the clearly defined mission set forth by Christ and the tragedy that occurs when we fail to do that as well as the blessing that happens when we do.

As Christians we too are involved in a mission, a rescue mission. The mission of God did not begin with these words of the Great Commission. They began in the councils of eternity when God saw lost mankind and prepared a plan to save him. His love reached out to the world in the person of his son Jesus who came to show us God's love in human form and to provide salvation for us and all mankind through his suffering and death. He came to live the life we could not live and to pay the price for sins that we could not pay. Yet the rescue mission did not end when Jesus laid the foundation of it. Many still had not heard that they had been saved. So he sent his spirit and moved his apostles and evangelists to go from region to region, from country to country, from century to century. God's grace was further shown to us in that he sent his holy spirit to bring us to faith in Jesus as their Savior of our sin. We could think about it for an eternity and never figure out why it was that God chose us to have that truth. We could've been born in places like India or Indonesia where people are steeped in superstition and poverty, where the children fight with the animals over the scraps of food in the garbage dumps. By comparison we are about 8% of the world's populace, we consume 35% of its energy and material goods. We don't have to feel guilty about having God's blessings, but it might occur to us that the Lord has blessed us for reasons other than using our blessings to enhance our own life. But our greatest blessings are not material, there are spiritual to be able to go to bed and have the peace of forgiveness and the assurance that all things will work together for our good. There is nothing in us that deserved us such grace. We'll never know **why** we received such grace, but we do know one of the reasons **for which** we received such grace and truth. We received it that we might pass it on to others. Outside of the strengthening of our own faith one of the foremost reasons why we exist to spread the truth we know to others as Jesus directs us here in his commission.

A clearly defined focus is important. Much confusion has been caused in Christendom because leaders and church members have often been focused on different goals than the ones set forth by Jesus. There are those who believe that the primary focus of the church should be to provide fellowship opportunities where they can meet friends. There are others who feel that the church should be primarily focused on providing works of charity, building hospitals, orphanages, and shelters for the homeless. There are others still who are convinced that the church should be principally committed to effecting change in the political arena, but does it matter what everybody else thinks? Who has the right to set the agenda for the church's business? Is it not the one who has all authority in heaven and in earth? And his goal is the discipline of every person on earth?

Even among us who know and agree with the real intent of our Savior's instruction to reach the lost, there is often an unintentional loss of focus. Because the oceans of spiritually dying humanity are far removed from us, it's easy to forget them and the work of the world and home missionaries who are trying to reach them. On the other hand, because our personal needs and our local congregational needs loom large in front of us, those tend to be taken care of first, at times in Cadillac style, while multitudes which might be reached with a little more concentrated effort slip into a Christ-less eternity. We establish Christian schools to disciple our youth, but if we are not careful we make them havens where we can gather our kind of people, places where we celebrate our own academic and athletic talents rather than institutions where we train people to reach others. We can with the best of intentions concentrate on producing inspiring worship services and understanding the word of God properly and then fail to do what the Word has instructed us to do, namely to get on with the work of permeating the unbelieving world with the saving truth we know. We don't only learn to know, we learn to go.

There are those who believe that throughout history Christ's followers have managed to do just about everything else but complete the basic task the Lord has given to them. Down the ages the church has fought Crusades, built huge cathedrals, conducted elaborate ceremonies, erected hospitals and established prestigious institutions of learning, but it has not yet completed the main task Christ has given to it. We have to ask ourselves some basic questions. How firmly are we convinced of Jesus' words, **"I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the father except through me"**. (Jn. 14:6) or when he says **"whoever does not believe stands condemned already because he has not believed in the name of God's one and only son."** (Jn.3:18) They together with his directive of the Great Commission indicate we cannot assume people are going to go to heaven apart from Christ. We don't want to be guilty of "functional universalism" in which we say we believe that people who don't know Christ are lost and then function as though they're somehow all going to get to heaven on their own without any attempt on our part to make sure they have the gospel.

The need for getting out the Gospel is as great as it has ever been. Never, to anyone's knowledge, has the world had such a vast mission field. The world's population is 7 billion is screaming for mission attention. It took from the time of Christ to the beginning of the 20th century to reach 1.6 billion in population. In just 100 years, and in spite of two world wars, over 4.5 billion people have been added to the planet. No longer are we under the illusion that we can reach the world's millions with American missionaries. We send teams of 5 – 7 missionaries over to a country and set up a bible institute and seminary and train the nationals to reach their own countrymen and that seems to be working very well.

God will not allow us to forget those of other nations and other cultures even if we are inclined to do so, in recent decades he has brought the nations of the earth into our own neighborhoods, laying them like Lazaruses at our gate. Our own nation also cries out for mission activity. Living as we are in a

country whose values have been eroded by aggressive forces promoting humanism, materialism and hedonism, the church can no longer afford to sit back and be reactive to events around it. The time in the world's history may be later than we think, the cause is urgent. Our Synod so privileged, so blessed by God, is being called upon to use its God-given resources of a pure Word, well-trained ministers and teachers, lay talents and monetary wealth for the soul-saving purposes for which they were given. There is a growing awareness in our church body that at the core of the mission of the church is the work of missions. The closer we get to the heart of Jesus, the more we will want to share in his mission of seeking and saving the lost.

We have to be careful that we don't only think of mission work as something that's being done by missionaries for us. God wants us all to be in tune with His mission. Life's highway is littered with the wounded. There are those who are economically wounded, those who are physically wounded, those who are emotionally wounded, those who have wounded themselves by making the wrong choices in life. Above all there are the spiritually wounded filled with guilt, afraid of death, unsure of what life is all about. Some of them exist right under our noses in our own families, some are among those who enter and exit our lives in the course of our day-to-day work, some wait in the shadows hoping that we will notice them and help them. Some we hear about second hand. Some are across town, some are across the country and then some are across the ocean on the other side of the world. Without the message of Jesus we have no reason to assume they have hope or the certainty of life eternal.

If we take an honest look at the overwhelming mission of the church, which is to disciple every nation, every person on earth, the sheer enormity of the task might cause many to throw up their hands and despair. Yet the Lord doesn't expect us to do it all by tomorrow, only to do our best each day. He gives us life on the installment plan, a day, a week, a month at a time and as we commit ourselves faithfully each day to the task he has before us we get much more done than we think. Yet too many of God's people have forgotten who they are-how special they are, how needed they are to be different, to be shining lights in this dark world. People will take note if you don't use profanities, if you have a good work ethic, if you are honest in your dealings, if you mention the Lord as the source of your blessings. They are particularly impressed when this becomes the pattern of our lives over months and years. To such people others in crisis will turn in their times of trouble. How can I relate to all of you that the pulpits from which you proclaim the Gospel are every bit as important and the ones from which it is proclaimed in church. We know what it means to have the peace of forgiveness, the certainty of heaven, the love of God in Christ, a sense of purpose for our lives, but others may not know if we aren't concerned about having them know. If we are concerned it will make a difference in our lives. The encouragements to holy living in the New Testament are not meant to show us the way to earn heaven, but they are encouraged so that we might show others the God who loved us.

Now certainly you and I may have not been called in the same way as the 12 Apostles to leave our jobs for full-time service in the public ministry. Still, as Christian disciples, we have been called to be not merely mechanics, but mechanics who have a soul-winning purpose. Not only teachers and nurses, but men and women who have been placed in a unique position to touch lives and lead them, even if it be ever so indirectly, in the direction of Jesus. You're not merely fathers and mothers bringing home the bacon and putting the meals on the table, you're people who are in a position to shape the mindset of future generations and show them how they can be part of the great mission too. You're not only employers, managers and supervisors, you're men and women who have it within your power to help people grow. You are not merely church members, but rather important soldiers in the vast army known as the Christian church. Your efforts combined with those of other Christians in our synod's 1200 churches can accomplish together what we cannot do individually, namely to support the work of

over 37 overseas missionaries and scores of missionaries in the U.S. God hasn't asked us to die for others; his son has already done that. We don't even have to go in person to tell everyone on distant shores they have a savior; we have missionaries to do that for us. Yet we can go through our purse, our offerings that support their important work.

Yes, we are all part of the mission. We even know what it is. Our challenge is to keep focused on it right where God has placed us so that every day and in every way we continue to see our important part in the great mission of God and function effectively in it. May God enable us to do so and thus further his rescue mission and be a vital part in helping his Kingdom to come. Amen.