



THIS WEEK'S SCRIPTURES

Isaiah 1:13-17, ACTS 1:8, Deuteronomy 10:18-19,
Psalm 68:6, Jeremiah 29:7

DAY 1

This week's message was a call for the church community to "REFOCUS" on our priorities and mission for the year. Pastor Bob made a case that there are some important things the church should make a priority and one thing he emphasized was being able to look outside our walls.

The characteristics of a church striving to live out the life of Jesus Christ are:

- They are inwardly strong and outwardly focused
- They integrate good deeds and good works into the life of the church
- They value impact in the community more than attendance
- They seek to be salt, light, and leaven in the community
- They see themselves as the "soul" of the community
- They would be greatly missed by the community if they left

As a church, we should constantly be evaluating what really matters, and we also must maintain proper focus on what is most important. The looming questions we should be asking are, "How are we, the people of the church, changing the relationship between the church and our community? How are we getting our skeptical society to hear our message of hope?"

- As you ponder these questions, what responses would you give?
- Why is it so important to know our community?
- How might the church go about deepening its relationship with others who live nearby?
- Lastly, look at the list of characteristics of a church striving to live out the life of Jesus Christ. Assess your church home. What are you doing/not doing? Why? Why not?

DAY 2

Our success as a witness to the power of Jesus Christ depends on getting more involved in our community, creating authentic relationships, and being truly useful. As we demonstrate that kind of heart as a church, people will be more and more willing to listen to the message we are here to tell, which is about the grace and forgiveness of our Lord Jesus Christ and his never-ending love for people.

James Lemler writes, *"Congregations that are alive are congregations that can embrace change, help people in the midst of changes of their lives, and offer experiences of transformation."* Like Isaiah reminded us, we need to be more externally focused.

- Reflect on this statement: "People don't care how much you know until they know how much you care." What does this mean to you? Give an example of how this has applied to you (as either you being the care giver or being the care-receiver)
- Why do you think congregations are more alive when they are involved with helping others have experiences of transformation?
- Our roots as United Methodists are tied to being people who are actively involved in the local community. Much of John Wesley's work was done through understanding the needs of his fellow man. What are some ways you think our church could creatively reach out into the community to better understand the needs?

DAY 3

Read Isaiah 1:13-17. The condensed version of the scripture below emphasizes Isaiah's message.

"Stop bringing meaningless offerings! Your incense is detestable to me [...] I cannot bear your evil assemblies [...] They have become a burden to me; I am weary of bearing them. When you spread out your hands in prayer, I will hide my eyes from you; even if you offer many prayers, I will not listen [...] Stop doing wrong, learn to do right! Seek justice, encourage the oppressed. Defend the cause of the fatherless, plead the case of the widow."

- The prophet Isaiah is making a point that you cannot worship God or even honor God if you aren't willing to love your neighbor or provide them help in their time of need. What do you think about this statement?
- Why do you think it is so important for God to connect worship and works?
- Share how you have had the opportunity this week to engage in a need that surfaced in your community. What happened? How did you respond?

DAY 4

Read ACTS 1:8. ***"[By power of the Holy Spirit in you]...you (the people of the church) will be my witnesses from Jerusalem to Judea and Samaria to the remotest part of the earth."*** (emphasis added)

Jesus makes it clear there is a large mission ahead. He points out that reaching out to people begins in your own neighborhood/community. This doesn't mean that national or international missions aren't important, it means before you can go "away" to do God's work it is important to "stay" and do God's work.

St. Paul UMC is involved in several missions and outreach projects and ministries to bring the love of God to our local community. As you assess the ways we do this, answer the following questions:

- Whose lives are different because of this church?
- What tangible ways are we seeing God's work being done in our community versus inside the walls of our church?
- How are people becoming more trusting in our message of hope because our actions display what we believe?

DAY 5

Read Matthew 28:18-20i. *"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 everything I have commanded you..."*

At the end of 2016, our Church Council adopted two strategic initiatives for us to focus on over the next five years. These initiatives are larger than life, and at times might make us feel as though we cannot achieve them. To achieve them we must truly believe that with God, all things are possible.

Strategic Initiative #1 - Introduce Jesus to 20,000 persons in a 5-mile radius of our church, so that they experience and share him.

Reaching people for Jesus can seem a daunting task. Reaching 20,000 people in 5 years seems even bigger.

- What are some of the ideas you have as to how we might reach out to 20,000 people in our surrounding neighborhoods and introduce them to Jesus?
- How will you respond to this initiative?

DAY 6

In addition to sharing the good news with others and helping them to claim God's promises, we are also called to minister to those who are in need. God has a special place in his heart for those on the margins of society. God's heart yearns to bind up the wounds of those who are hurting and brokenhearted.

Strategic Initiative #2 - Follow Jesus' lead to reach out to those experiencing poverty and strive to reverse its effects on our community.

Why is this so important? There are nearly four hundred passages in the Bible that demonstrate God's love and concern for orphans, widows, prisoners, aliens, the homeless, the hungry, the sick, the disabled. These passages reach out to the everyday person who feels they are losing all hope.

Read Deuteronomy 10:18-19. "[God] defends the cause of the fatherless and the widow, and loves the alien, giving him food and clothing. And you are to love those who are aliens, for you yourselves were aliens in Egypt."

The questions that keep us awake at night should be:

- Are there people in our community who need an extra dose of mercy?
- Is there any hurting, broken people who long to be noticed and cared for?

Psalm 68:6 says, "**God sets the lonely in families.**"

- How are you willing to offer community to those who have no community? How will you be family to those who have no families?

Jeremiah 29:7 says, "**Also, seek the peace and prosperity of the city in which I have carried you into exile. Pray to the Lord for it, because if it prospers,**

you too will prosper." The Scripture says our role is to not be put off by the troubles in our communities, but instead to graciously look for ways we can rebuild/restore our community into prosperity.

- How are you praying for the prosperity of your community?
- In what ways can you become more involved in bringing positive outcomes to negative situations in your neighborhood and area?

How will God lead us? He will do this through those He has called to be leaders within our local congregation. On Sunday we commissioned our leaders for 2017. These are men and women in our congregation who have stepped forward to answer the call to be a leader.

Spend time this week praying for your church leaders. Ask God to show you how you can offer them support.

DAY 7

Today is your "Sabbath" and a time for reflection. How has God been speaking to you over the week? Use what the Lord has said to you to remold and reshape your life. If you are having trouble hearing God's voice, slow down or even stop what you are doing so that the busyness of life's demands do not squelch the whispers of God's language of love upon your heart.

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