

Mission: More Than a Check

(The following is the fourth in a series of messages called Shark Church: What the Church Can Learn From Sharks.)

Colossians 3:15-17

So today we continue our series called Shark Church. I've been making the case over these past few Sundays that the church can learn a lot from the way sharks live. We've seen how that works through Fellowship, Worship and Discipleship, and today we come to Mission.

Our text this morning comes from Paul's letter to the Colossians.

Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, since as members of one body you were called to peace. And be thankful. Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom, and as you sing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs with gratitude in your hearts to God. And whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.

Just to review, a shark is an amazing natural machine. A shark is basically a muscle with teeth—it rarely gets tired or takes any rest. In fact, a shark spends its entire life doing three things:

It swims, it eats, and it makes baby sharks.

A shark that is true to its nature simply swims, eats, and reproduces. We've also learned that a shark never stops growing during its entire life-cycle. That's an important part of what sharks can teach us.

Over the past three years, to start the year, we've talked about what it means to be the church. The church is built on a foundation of Jesus Christ, and expressed through fellowship, worship, discipleship and mission.

If you're going to memorize one sentence over the next four Sundays, make it this

one:

A faithful church is built on a foundation of Jesus Christ, and expressed through fellowship, worship, discipleship and mission.

As we think about what that means, we're adding this image of the Shark Church—about churches that learn from the way sharks live. Because a church that is true to its nature—a church that is faithful to its calling—is like a shark. It never stops moving. It seeks out nourishment. And it makes new disciples. A faithful church never stops growing during its lifetime—that's so important for us to wrestle with.

If a shark swims, eats and procreates, then as churches we're called to move forward without ever thinking we've arrived at some kind of church perfection. We're called to nourish ourselves through prayer and study and service and reflection. And that we're called to go out and make new disciples—to share the message of the gospel in a way that draws people into community and into faith. That's the point of being a Shark Church.

One of the great things about our text this morning is that it hits every one of the qualities of a faithful church that we've been talking about. A little background is in order.

Colossians was written to a community in what is now Turkey. It was a wealthy city, and also a place where there was some important debate happening about what it meant to be a follower of Christ. Paul writes some of the great defining language that we use to describe who Christ was and is, and also some powerful teaching for what it means to function as a church—as a community of faith.

In our text today you see all of the elements of church that we've been talking about.

Fellowship is there. 'Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, since as members of one body you were called to peace.' The idea of being one body—one unit called and set aside for a purpose. Paul challenges the Colossians to be ruled by Christ alone as they live out their faith together.

Worship and Discipleship make an appearance as a part of the same sentence. 'Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom, and as you sing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs with gratitude in your hearts to God.'

Notice how the word of Christ is supposed to dwell in us richly—literally to live in us and produce something new and effective and mature and wonderful. When we talk about studying the Scriptures it's not just out of simple habit or devotion. It's not so that we can check something off of our daily to-do list. We study the Scriptures to get a glimpse into the mind and heart and purposes of God, so we can be transformed into the people he made us to be in the first place. We challenge each other with the wisdom we absorb from our study.

And then there's Worship. Notice also how diverse the worship is that Paul is talking about. 'As you sing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs with gratitude in your hearts to God'. We said a few weeks ago that the means or forms of worship that we use aren't nearly as important as getting ourselves into a place where we're worshipping in spirit and in truth—where we're so drawn to Christ that we fall at his feet in praise and worship.

And so we come to Mission, but in a different way than we might be used to.

"And whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it in all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him." Our lives are meant to be lived in a constant state of gratitude to God for the ways he's loved us first.

Notice what this doesn't say.

He doesn't say to set aside a special time to be grateful for God's love.

He doesn't say to pick some gifted people to offer thanks to God on your behalf.

He doesn't say to devote part of your organization to sharing the gift of love you've received from God.

The text doesn't say any of that, because none of those get at the heart of the life

we're called to as Christians. Because the life we're called to as Christians is a life where every single part reflects our faith—reflects the fact that we've been purchased for a price—reflects the ways God calls us to be his hands and his voice to other people.

This is about more than a mission committee or a mission project or even a mission trip. This is about everything we do, both individually and as a community.

We've been spending some time here learning about the concept of a missional church. A lot is being written about that topic these days. The narrative goes something like this.

When Western civilization was largely Christian, there was a shared language that the culture understood and that made it easy—or easier—to communicate the message of the gospel. In that time churches had what people knew they needed, and so people went to church. But we live in a post-Christian age—the old Christendom no longer exists in the same way. Because that's true, people don't naturally gravitate to the church anymore, and so we have to change the way we function as the church of Jesus Christ.

If people aren't coming to us anymore, then the new way of doing church has to include going out into the world—taking the message and meaning of God's work through Jesus Christ out into the world.

Tim Keller, the pastor of Redeemer Presbyterian Church in New York, introduces some new ways to think about how we 'do' church.

He talks about learning to speak in the language of the culture instead of in church-speak. That makes sense if the people we're trying to reach don't know what we're talking about when we roll out the jargon of the life-long churchgoer.

He talks about entering into the culture's stories in history and the arts—in film and in music—and connecting them with the gospel. There are all kinds of stories of redemption and reconciliation in movies and books that give us open doors to telling the story of Jesus and his saving work.

Keller talks about training people in our churches not just for service in churches but also for service in whatever they do when they're not in church. We don't just want to make good elders and committee members and Sunday School teachers and youth leaders. We want to be a place that intentionally helps bankers, teachers, builders, cleaners—and even the occasional minister—we want to help everyone do what they do Christianly, in a way that reflects who they are and whose they are.

Keller talks about living in such a way that the model and message of Christ are visible and tangible in our lives, that people we come into contact with have an experience of Christ's message because we live it every hour of every day.

All of those together begin to get at what it means to be a missional church.

That means that the church isn't really as complicated a place as we've made it over the years. When it's firing on all cylinders—when it's being true to its shark-like nature—when the church is fully functioning then every part of it is somehow contributing to the overall mission of the church.

That mission, simply put, is to go out into the world as ambassadors of Jesus Christ and as reflections of his redeeming work. To allow our encounter with the risen Christ to transform every area of our lives, and to live differently because of that.

It's not a committee—it's a reason for being.

It's not a trip—it's a way of life.

It's not an annual focus—it's a daily way of focusing our time and energy and money and service toward the goal of knowing Christ and making Christ known in every part of his kingdom.

My friend Neil Uchitel wrote an essay a few years back where used the analogy of military recruitment to describe two different models for the work of the church. For those of us who grew up in the States, we remember the ads for the Army. They showed strong men and women, with the tag-line: 'Be All That You Can Be'. A few years later it became: 'An Army of One'.

Both of those say something about Army culture. The ads point to what a soldier will get from their time of service—the focus is on the benefit to the recruit—what the recruit will receive by joining the Army.

Contrast that with the Marines. You may have seen their ads, the ones that ask the reader if they think they can be one of the ‘Few, the Proud, the Marines’. That ad represents an entirely different way of thinking. It’s not an invitation to come and take something away from your time of service. It’s a challenge to be transformed into something—someone—different. Marine culture highlights what you become, not what you receive.

There is a therapeutic model of doing church that has gotten popular over the past 20 years or so. It focuses more on meeting needs than it does on transforming lives.

Some people resist the therapeutic model of doing church because they think it’s intrusive or meddling in their personal lives. Bad news—the problem isn’t that the needs-based, therapeutic model churches are too intrusive, it’s that they’re not intrusive enough. The Christian faith, and the way we live out that faith in church—none of that is supposed to be a smorgasbord where you come and pick and choose what you want and leave the rest.

The faith, and the way we express that faith in community, is supposed to reach in and transform every part of our lives—it’s meant to remake us into the men and women we were made to be in the first place—in the end we leave this place as changed people, with a call on our lives and a new mission to accomplish: the mission of living the gospel of Jesus Christ in everything we do—every relationship we have—every plan that we make. Christ reaches into us, and we respond by reaching out to share his love and grace and reconciliation with the world.

Next week I’ll be taking a ministry class at Fuller Seminary. Alan Roxburgh, the professor who will be teaching that class, describes what the church is called to be:

“God is about a big purpose in and for the whole of creation. The church has been

called into life to be both the means of this mission and a foretaste of where God is inviting all creation to go. Just as its Lord is a mission-shaped God, so the community of God's people exists, not for themselves but for the sake of the work.

Mission is therefore not a program or project some people in the church do from time to time; the church's very nature is to be God's missionary people. We use the word missional to mark this big difference. Mission is not about a project or a budget, or a one-off event somewhere; it's not even about sending missionaries.

A missional church is a community of God's people who live into the imagination that they are, by their very nature, God's missionary people living as a demonstration of what God plans to do in and for all of creation in Jesus Christ."

What this means for us in this church is that we're going to start thinking about all the things we do—all the ministries and giving and service and worship—everything we do is focused on accomplishing the mission of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Some things won't look all that different, and some things might need to be changed in radical ways—some things may need to be rethought and rebuilt from the ground up.

The key is that we're called to notice that the rest of our culture doesn't always speak our language anymore. We're called to see that gap, and to change the way we do our business in order to cross it. The call on us is to go out into the world and learn the language of the culture, and to create new ways of sharing Christ's message.

What we're called to do is offer our lives back to God in a way that honors what he's already done for us. That's what it will mean for us to grow into being a missional church. Buckle up.

Amen.