

**“WHY DOESN'T THE CHURCH MAKE GREATER IMPACT?”**

A sermon by Dale Rosenberger, Senior Minister  
The First Congregational Church, UCC, Darien, Connecticut

Even with the church's falling fortunes as America becomes more secular, did you know that three times as many people attend worship as watch football on TV on a typical Sunday? The most watching NFL football on a typical Sunday is 31 million. Gallup says 39% of America--125 million people—attends worship. But in case more people *claim* to go to church than actually do, let's shave that figure 1/4 to 93.7 million. Still, that's three times as much. Fairly shocking, isn't it?

I mean, does the NFL or the church get more air time around the water cooler at work? No contest. I'm not whining for more attention for the church in the media. The world's done doing us those favors. But I do ask with all of our many millions at worship on Sundays, why isn't Christ's church making a greater impact in the world; why we don't we better capture the world's imagination of what's possible?

All of my life, people talk about the church as a sleeping giant ready to wake up, flex its muscles, and strut its stuff. But that hasn't happened and looks unlikely. Why are we so easily muted, shut down, and shunted off to society's sidelines? Why don't we make a bigger difference for social justice and against corruption? I have my own theory on this. And I have the sneaking suspicion you will hear it.

It goes like this. Rather than us giving the world the soul of the church, making the world a better place, giving hope and chasing despair, facing and resolving deep problems, instead the church goes out and takes on the soul of the world. We do that by importing its petty tribalisms of left vs right, liberal vs conservative into our life as churches. And we all know how divisively that tribalism plays out. We come to church to escape that shrill, pointless grade-school recess level of discourse, "It's their fault...No, it's theirs." Guess what? These tribalisms are no less divisive in church, where evangelical and mainline Christians often despise one another. The Evil One must emit a belly laugh to divide the church so deeply.

You know what I mean: evangelical Christians who act like the Republican Party at prayer and mainline Christians who act like the Democratic Party at prayer. Evangelical Christians who made sure President Clinton was impeached but now freely give President Trump a "mulligan". Liberal Christians who rightfully assail the morals of our current President but who summarily ignored and waved off the peccadillos of Clinton. Ho hum, says the world. We have heard all of this before. Do you bring anything new to the table? Is that all you've got? Our witness has no credibility and no impact as we get coopted by and captive to worldly ways.

It sets my teeth on edge because it is even worse than this. Liberal churches are fundamentalists about the public morality of the environment, immigration, wealth inequality and then loosey-goosey about personal morality. Evangelical churches

are fundamentalists about private morality and the loosey-goosey about climate, demonstrable racism, and growing stratification of wealth within our country. And the church churns in place generating the useless heat of friction without any of the light that could help show the way forward in what we all agree is a dark time.

Many will say the real issue is taking politics out of religion without realizing how impossible that is. The real issue isn't *whether* we bring God into politics but *how*. This is not a new idea, but a truth is as old as Moses Mather, our first minister, throwing off the tyranny of a foreign crown. Let's face it, we worship a God who takes sides, the Israel slaves over Pharaoh, the Rabbi Jesus over Pontius Pilate.

How can we get over our partisan, petty tribalisms to offer a powerful alternative? How can our message transcend the dreary predictability of the opinion pages of the NY Times and National Review? How can we be a dynamic counterculture whose purpose is to transform individual lives and to reshape our wider society?

For it to have power we need to stop hearing part of the gospel--the part already agreeing with us--and instead hear the whole gospel. Today's two gospel lessons are respectively called the Great Compassion and the Great Commission. Liberal and conservative churches often emphasize one at the expense of the other.

The first lesson, Matthew 25, has been a deeply formative for mainline churches. Much like the parable of the Good Samaritan, this Parable of the Last Judgment reminds us that whenever we look on the face of someone in need, we actually look upon the face of Jesus. Whenever we would do for the hungry or the thirsty, the naked or the imprisoned, we actually do for Jesus. It reminds us that the kingdom of God comes not from top down, the Herods and the Pilates; but from bottom up by attending to the broken, the lost, the forgotten, and the abandoned.

The Great Compassion insists no one is expendable or disposable along the way. It reminds us that God's good news isn't just for the world's well-positioned. It claims the fate of our eternal souls hinges on how well we hear and respond to the mandate to elevate the least among us whom the world ignores and neglects.

The second lesson, Matthew 28, has been the source of impetus for much of the ministry of the evangelical churches. It hears Jesus' parting words as a mandate, not a suggestion, to share the same good news in Christ that has given us life. "Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations, baptizing in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit." Here Jesus is not just another teacher, like Gandhi, Socrates, or Emerson. He is the long-sought one whom generations have anticipated. Here the gospel is not just one more idea among other ideas. It is the decisive moment in history around which the sun, the moon, and the stars all orbit.

The Great Commission speaks with urgency in the imperative, announcing God's new reign ushered into this world through Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection. Go, teach, baptize, and make disciples, it demands. Not much room for hesita-

ting there. Share this gospel by inviting others, not shaming, forcing, or coercing. Sadly, to the great loss of the church, and to the detriment of its witness in the world both liberal and conservative churches have emphasized a different charge at the expense of the other. We have behaved like pursuing both is not an option.

Why that is, I don't know. Because when I see Christ's church at its best, I notice it embraces both. Take last Sunday, what with the emotion present and people coming forward for a blessing, it might have looked like an evangelical altar call. But did you notice how the power of that personal blessing was set up by the politics of treating each person as a beloved child of God rather than someone less?

Going to New York on a Midnight Run to share food, clothing, and toiletries with street people might look like activism or social action. When you do it on Good Friday, it becomes evangelical good news, a profound act of identifying with Jesus and casting our lot with the forgotten for whom he offered his life and died.

Instead of being a partisan liberal with only the Great Compassion as my spiritual charter or a partisan evangelical with only the Great Commission as my mandate, I want everything I do as Jesus' follower to move back and forth between the two.

In his book, the *Once and Future Church*, Loren Mead describes a spiritual life that thrives accountable to both and finds empowerment in the tension between them. Is it about "conversion of the world or serving the world? Both terms are drawn directly from Jesus' ministry. He called the disciples to go to the ends of the earth to convert, but he also sent his disciples to be servants even as he had served them...Conversion, at its best, leads to bringing the stranger into life-giving relationship with the Gospel and to a nurturing community. It has always been an imperative laid on those who follow Jesus...It has been the natural response of the believer, reaching out to share the source of his or her own full life."

"Servanthood, at the other pole of mission, reflects the way Jesus lived as a servant among others. Millions have followed his example, giving their lives for others. (Many) have given skill and insight into improving life for others. The fruits of this servanthood are impressive—school systems, health systems, social systems, and a growing worldwide consensus about the well-being of the individual."

Mead concludes, "The local religious community of the future will move beyond the simplistic either/or we experience today. Servanthood vs. conversion is not a choice to be made; it is a polarity that must be built into the church's structures."

So what do you think? Do you long for the impact that the church might make in this squabbling, divided world? Then we can't import the world's petty divisions. Can the church effectively walk and chew gum at the same time? God help us and our children if we cannot. Today we lift up our mission in Jesus Christ that it would drive and not trail our ministry. Today we celebrate the fullness of both Great Compassion and Great Commission without a hint of contradiction. Amen.

