

## GOD'S MISSION<sup>1</sup>

Let's start today by thinking about how fascinated so many of us were with Paul Young's novel, The Shack. That was really a phenomenon. Suddenly, it was very important that our Wednesday night discussions about The Shack were recorded. Suddenly, we saw visitors who really wanted to hear what we had to say about The Shack. It was a big deal.

Why? What was going on back in January? Let me venture an answer. We were talking about the Trinity for the first time. Oh, we may have talked about the Trinity at some point. But those conversations were about the nature of the Trinity. Many of us have learned this stuff: the Father is co-equal and co-substantial with the son and Holy Spirit. But that is not what we were getting primarily in The Shack. What we were getting in the novel was a glimpse at how the Trinity worked. What was the interplay between Father, Son, and Spirit to heal a person's life? Many of you read the book and loved it. You thought, "This is great and inspiring, but there must be something wrong with it, because I've never heard of the Trinity being described like this. We really want the minister to tell us that it's okay to be moved and enlightened by this book.

Today, I'd like to pick up where we left off in our conversations about The Shack. I've learned something since

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<sup>1</sup>Douglas DeCelle preached this sermon on May 24, 2009 at the First Presbyterian Church in LaGrange, Ga.

those sessions. What I've learned is that the Trinity is enjoying resurgence in interest in many church traditions. We're going through a time when our fellow Christians are seeing, as if for the first time, the beauty of God's being as community. And we're especially interested in how the Trinity works to have impact on the world.

Our lesson today from John's Gospel is a prime example of the Trinity at work. Interestingly enough, I can't ever remember preaching or teaching on this lesson. I can't remember anyone else preaching or teaching or writing about this. It is momentous. And we've been missing it.

What do we learn from Jesus in this prayer which he is offering at the last supper? We learn that the Father has sent the Son into the world. We learn that the son has, in like manner, sent the church—us—into the world.

The church continues in the world after Jesus departs and continues to carry his mission. The world sees the church and through the church the world sees the Father.

I'm left with the impression that God's mission in the world is handed to Jesus who has handed it to the church. You and I, to put it with breathtaking starkness, are the mission of God in the world. Everything God is doing in this world that he loves he does through Jesus and Jesus sends us.

This prayer, which is called the High Priestly Prayer of Jesus, is offered to God by Jesus just before he leaves this world. In some ways, Jesus' words here remind me of one of his parables, the parable of the Talents. In that parable the master goes away leaving the property in the hands of the servants. Then the master returns and the servants must return the property with an accounting with what they've done with it. Jesus is behaving like one of the servants. He has been given the disciples and now as he prepares to leave the world, Jesus gives them back to the Father.

Now, if I'm correct about this, then we suddenly have a revolution in our understanding of mission. I remember as a 26 year old small church pastor sitting at the kitchen table of a hard-bitten old Pennsylvania Presbyterian who lectured me. "Young man, don't go talking about mission projects until we have taken care of the church's needs first, like fixing the roof and paying the organist. Doesn't that just make common sense?" Well, yes it does make a kind of sense. But it assumes that mission is an optional extra-curricular activity for the church, permissible if the important things are taken care of. What our lesson suggests is that the church is essentially missionary. God has the mission and God's mission has the

church. There really isn't anything the church does that is not an extension of what God is doing in his world.

Now, someone is wondering what the mission of the church looks like. Does it include such activities as mission trips or donations to scholarships in Malawi, or childcare programs? The answer—possibly. The best place to find the pattern of our mission is in the public career of Jesus himself. What Jesus did is a perfect example of God's mission, which you and I carry forward. What did he do? He made disciples. He exercised authority over the demonic realm. Jesus exposed children of light as opposed to children of darkness. Jesus suffered and died. He taught and served as an example.

The fact that the church's mission is identical with Jesus' mission opens up a fresh way of finding our work in the world. What if you and I got involved in precisely those places where we sense God to be at work?

I know of one church long-range planning method that gets all the members of a church talking about where in church they feel moved by a sense of God's presence. Where does God seem to be working? What that we do is God using? What do we sense God loves about our fellowship, our community? Once we have a sense of God's presence we need to invest ourselves there.

So Jesus brought his ministry to a close on the night before his crucifixion. Or did he? In so many ways he passes the Father's work on to the church. Wow! God's mission is our mission. That feels like a promotion. No wonder Jesus also told the disciples to wait until the third person of the Trinity, the Spirit, came to them. Because if our mission is God's mission we could never do it without God's help.