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“Living in a Mission Field”

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At my former church in New York I worked for a number of years with a pastor named Jukka Kaariainen. Jukka is 100% Finnish; but his parents were Lutheran missionaries in Taiwan, and that’s where Jukka was born. He grew up in Taiwan, speaks fluent Mandarin, and feels very much at home in the Chinese culture. My friend Jukka used to joke, “I have a tag on my neck that says, ‘Made in China.’”

Pastor Jukka grew up as a child of missionary parents. But now he and his wife are now raising their own children in a mission field. They live in Taiwan now, where he teaches and trains missionaries to help spread the Good News of Jesus among the Chinese people there.

I know a few other pastors who live in a mission field, too. Here they are. And me, too. Turns out you don’t have to live overseas to be in a mission field anymore. We live in a mission field! Our church is right in the middle of a mission field! Our community is a mission field!

Our Bible reading for today is talking about this very thing. Jesus, on Easter Sunday, makes a startling appearance in the middle of his disciples. He offers them proof that he’s alive, and back from the dead. Then, without wasting any time, the Lord gives his disciples a mission task. In Luke 24 it says, *“He opened their minds to understand the Scriptures, and said to them, ‘Thus it is written, that the Christ should suffer and on the third day rise from the dead, and that **repentance and forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things.**”*

What a tough assignment! So what if you're a tiny little group of disciples? So what if you're uneducated, lacking resources, and facing persecution from the authorities? So what if travel is hard, and you're trying to spread a brand-new religion? Jesus gave his disciples that day a tough assignment. "This is what being a disciple is all about," he was telling them. Jesus wanted them to see the whole world as their mission field.

You know what's an even tougher assignment, in my view? The mission task we face. Jesus wants for every person in our community to hear his Gospel, to come to faith, to be saved from their sins. Jesus is saying to you and me, to his church today, "You are witnesses of these things."

And I say, that's an extremely tough assignment. We're living in a day and age when the culture around us is shifting and changing rapidly. Look at these realities.

1. Surveys reveal that over the past few decades literally millions of people in our nation who previously were members of churches have walked away.
2. Even in "churched" communities, the percentage of "church-goers" actually attending worship on any given Sunday hovers between 18-22%.
3. The number of Americans who say they have no religious affiliation has hit an all-time high.
4. Confidence in organized religion has hit an all-time low.
5. Less than 10% of adults under 30 regularly participate in the life of a local congregation. In overwhelming numbers, young adults perceive the organized church to be unnecessary to their spiritual journey.

In a remarkably short amount of time, the U.S. has become one of the largest mission fields in the world. Today there are nearly as many Lutherans in Ethiopia as there are in the

U.S. There are now more Baptists in Nagaland (an eastern state in India) than there are in any of the southern states of our country. There were more Christians worshipping in China last Sunday than there were here in the U.S. or in all of Europe. The reality is, friends, that we are living in a mission field every day.

So what does that make us? Missionaries. You don't have to be sent off to places like Africa and China to be a missionary. Today, the Lord Jesus is sending you and me out to the mission fields of our own subdivisions, developments, neighborhoods, and apartment complexes. I think Jesus is calling you and me today to be "neighborhood missionaries." And the Lord is out there paving the way for us to carry out our mission.

Think about this with me. Our American culture is remarkably unchurched, but it's also longing for some things that we have. There are people in our community out there who many not be looking for a church to join; but, without even knowing it, they are uniquely ready for biblical Christianity. They are looking for what Jesus has already called his followers to be.

Here's what I mean.

- People today notice when someone is willing to sacrifice themselves for the good of others.
- People appreciate the opportunity to sort through their spiritual questions honestly without manipulation.
- People are intrigued by someone who exhibits both grace and wisdom.
- People are looking for those who exhibit authentic love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, and self-control.
- They cheer redemptive action.
- They wish to discover what it true.

- They long for authentic community with people they can trust.
- They are wondering if an encounter with a loving God is possible.

Now, I've met people like this right here in Wake Forest, and I believe that you have, too – people looking for these things. And guess what? All this is what we have in Christ! All this is what the Spirit provides us, when he calls us to faith and brings us to Jesus! All this is in our wheelhouse, isn't it? All this is what Jesus-followers like us are able to bring to our friends, to our neighborhoods, to our schools and our workplaces.

You don't have to preach at anybody, to be a "neighborhood missionary." You don't have to take any special classes. All we have to do is to "live missionally." As Christians, we gather in worship around Jesus, through his Word and Sacraments. Then we go forth, and watch with missional eyes. We listen with missional ears. We respond to the people around us with missional responses. We do all those things because we are on Jesus' mission with him.

A Christian author named Greg Finke puts it this way: "This is the ancient rhythm of God's people, gathering and going, coming together for worship and going back out for mission, coming to church on Sunday and *being* the church on Monday." That's who we are. Living in a mission field, that's what we do. Living in this mission field, let's join Christ in his mission.

Please join me in a word of prayer.