

“Who Are We and Why Are We Here?”

A sermon by the Rev. Jim Bell

Duke Memorial United Methodist Church
Durham, NC

10:55 a.m. Sunday, September 11, 2005

Text: Leviticus 19:13-18 Matthew 28:16-20 NRSV

Opening prayer: O gracious God, open our hearts and minds to receive your words of hope, love and invitation today. Amen.

Years ago the comedian Flip Wilson was going strong. In a comedy routine, someone asked Flip about his religion, and he answered, “I am a Jehovah’s Bystander.” His friend remarked, “A Jehovah’s Bystander? I never heard of a Jehovah’s Bystander.” Flip looked coy and responded, “Well, they asked me to be a witness, but I didn’t want to get involved.”

For those of us who want to get involved with our faith, what is the focus of the Christian faith? What is at the heart, at the center, of being a Christian? The answer is found in two of the most significant passages in the Bible.

In the first passage, a scribe comes up to Jesus and asks him pointblank, “Which commandment is the first of all?” The scribe was asking, “What is the most important teaching of the law?” Jesus combined a passage of the Law from Deuteronomy and one from Leviticus to present his answer. He replied, “The first is . . . ‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.’ The second is this, ‘You

shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ There is no other commandment greater than these.” (Mark 12:28-31) This passage is known as the Great Commandment.

The other significant passage comes at the end of Matthew’s gospel. These are Jesus’ last words to his disciples before he ascends into heaven. They are our marching orders. Jesus said, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore 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 that I have commanded you.” (Matthew 28:18-20). This command of Jesus has come to be known as the Great Commission.

This is at the heart of being a Christian – and of being a church. This is who we are and why we are here. We love God totally. We love other people, and we help others become disciples of Jesus Christ. This morning I am going to tell you how I have seen this happen.

Two weeks after we moved to Hampstead in 1996, Hurricane Bertha struck the coast within 20 miles of our home. Six weeks later, Hurricane Fran thundered ashore, practically in the same place. Hampstead and Topsail Island were “ground zero.” There was damage and destruction all around us. Everyone in our area suffered through the trauma and emotional stress of the aftermath of a major hurricane. Some of our members lost their homes. Others’ homes were so damaged that they had to evacuate them until they could be repaired. Yet through that terrible experience, we received love and we expressed love.

The response of the United Methodist Committee on Relief and other churches was heartwarming. UMCOR shipped us a dozen generators to loan to people who did not have water or electricity and desperately needed it. We delivered them to cancer patients, to a person to help operate a hospital bed, to people trying to care for infants in the heat. It was wonderful to provide people with running water and lights.

On Tuesday afternoon after the hurricane, Danny Clark drove into our parking lot with a truck. His church, Rockwood UMC in Canton, NC, west of Asheville, had received a special offering to buy supplies. Mr. Clark drove all the way across North Carolina and brought us bottled water, mops, brooms, paper goods, diapers, canned goods, peanut butter. When he drove up in that truck, it was like a gift from heaven.

On Friday after the hurricane, a tractor-trailer load of bottled water arrived from Lynchburg, Virginia. Heritage United Methodist Church in Lynchburg had paid for that water and its transportation. When I talked with their pastor, he said, "It is a gift from God. We pray that it can help you." What an incredible experience.

My family and I were passing out water and cleaning supplies a week after the hurricane. A woman whose house had been flooded told me with tears in her eyes, "You will never know how much this means." All that I handed her were a couple of gallons of water, some sponges and scouring pads. But that water and sponges represented love and hope. That is what was so important to that woman.

I have had the wonderful experience of serving as a spiritual director many times on the Walk to Emmaus, a short course in practical Christianity. I have witnessed people experience God's grace in their lives, when they are brought face-to-face with the love of God. I hope that more people in this congregation can experience God's love through the Walk to Emmaus.

We love God totally. We love other people, and we help others become disciples of Jesus Christ.

During the summer of 1999 my family and I had the opportunity to travel to England for six weeks where I served as the exchange pastor of Lymington United Reformed Church in Lymington, England. While we were in England, we visited Wesley's Chapel on City Road in London. This was one of the churches that John Wesley, the founder of the Methodist societies, started. In the museum in the basement of the church, I was reminded about Wesley's concern for nurture and evangelism. Wesley said that we show our love for God by loving people. Wesley was determined to take the gospel of Christ to the people who needed it: the poor, orphans, to the mines, to the prisons.

Every Saturday morning the town of Lymington had a street market that attracted hundreds of people. The church was located on High Street, which was the main street. The church would sponsor a coffee morning every Saturday. They would sell coffee, tea, cakes and cookies. On occasion, their fellowship hall would fill up with people, many who were on vacation and many who were from the community. This was a great outreach opportunity. My role was to drink coffee or tea and visit with people.

One Saturday morning Tom Stevenson, a layman in the church, and I set up a table in the church yard next to the sidewalk along High Street. We had a display of scriptural brochures on a wide variety of relevant topics. We also had a bunch of colorful helium balloons that said, “Jesus loves you,” or “God is good,” or “Smile, God loves you.” We passed these out. Most importantly, we engaged people in conversation – about the weather, about the Lord, about the church. We did not wait until people came into the parish hall to talk with them.

I was inspired by an outreach event which the church hosted on a Sunday morning in July. They moved their worship service from the historic sanctuary to the grounds of a local elementary school. Talk about moving to where the people are! They realized that some people without a spiritual home would be more likely to attend worship at the familiar, neutral school site. During the informal service, we had a skit and songs by the children. Then we shared a picnic lunch. This was followed by a variety of games, face painting and ice cream. A number of unchurched children and adults joined us for this special day. That church was serious about making disciples of Christ.

In January of 2001, Hampstead United Methodist Church sponsored a mission work team to the John Wesley School for Handicapped Children and Adults in Santiago, Chile. Nine individuals and I spent two weeks at the school. We spackled. We sanded. We painted. We replaced light fixtures. We built mantles.

This school was the only educational institution in Santiago for students with what they called “multi-deficits,” – more than one handicap. One teacher

described to me a class of ten students. One student was blind. Another student was confined to a wheelchair. Yet another student couldn't control his bodily functions. Just imagine preparing a lesson plan for that group!

The school did so much with so little. One of the highlights of the trip for me was playing Loteria (picture bingo) with a couple of the adult students who were mentally handicapped. Because there were pictures of the items in the game, I was better able to communicate with them in Spanish. Adriana, Vinca and I had a wonderful time!

If you are a child in Santiago, you have less opportunity than an adult does. If you are handicapped, you have another challenge. If you live in poverty, that is another challenge. If you are unloved at home, that is another obstacle. Some of the students of the John Wesley School had such incredible needs. The ministry of the school was a very important way that God could love those children.

I was so blessed to serve on that team! To experience the gratitude of the parents of those handicapped students. To be an instrument of the Lord in expressing his love. For the honor of serving Jesus Christ.

Now I haven't shared in a comprehensive way all of the things that are involved in loving God and others, like prayer, Bible study, worship and stewardship. Some of that will come in next Sunday's sermon. The key point for today is that we love God totally. We love others, and we work to make disciples of Jesus Christ. This is at the heart of the Christian life.

Melanie Van Leuven was a wife and the mother of two young children: Laurie, 5, and Caroline, 2. Melanie was a kindergarten teacher at Williams Elementary School in Wilmington. She began attending our church one October. The Christian faith was like a whole new world to her. She attended our Christian discipleship class for prospective members. She told me that she felt like a spiritual kindergartner. She knew so little about the faith but was so eager to learn. She later told me that she had previously attended weddings and funerals but she had not attended a Christian worship service on a Sunday morning until that day in October.

She found a loving and welcoming place at Hampstead United Methodist Church. She jumped right in. She served in the nursery. She helped with the Christmas pageant. She signed up to become a children's Sunday School teacher and a Vacation Bible School leader. Through the class and her conversations with me, she professed her faith in Jesus Christ as her Savior and Lord. We scheduled her baptism on the Sunday before Christmas, so her parents and sisters could travel from out-of-town and witness it.

Ten days before her scheduled baptism, Melanie was driving to Williams Elementary School early one foggy morning. A car crossed the center line. There was a collision and a chain reaction. Melanie was killed. It was a terrible tragedy. I still remember walking up to the door of their home, to visit with her husband, Karl, after I heard the news. What a tragedy. But thank God that because of the ministry of that church, when we die and arrive in heaven,

Melanie will already be there. Praise the Lord! By loving people and reaching out to them, we can help people make decisions that affect them for eternity.

When people in a church love God totally, when people in a church love their neighbor, when people in a church work to help others become Jesus' disciples, this is what happens. The church becomes a community where people can experience love and encounter hope. This is what people yearn for today more than anything else: love, hope and community.

The church becomes a beacon of God's grace. It becomes a magnet for God. This is my vision and prayer for Duke Memorial United Methodist Church.

If this vision resonates with you, then I invite you to consider two things. I will be leading a class titled Christianity 101 on Sunday mornings, beginning October 9. We will be discussing what is at the heart of the Christian life. I invite you to join me.

The second invitation is a call to prayer – to pray daily for the ministry of our church and to pray today. In a few moments we will be singing a hymn. As we sing, I am going to be kneeling and praying at this chancel rail that God will continue to empower me to be a part of that mission, the greatest mission on earth. It may be that today you would like to commit or recommit your life to love God totally, to love people and to help people become disciples of Jesus. If that is the case, I invite you to come and pray. Frank and I will be kneeling and praying. If you would like us to pray with you, simply kneel or stand beside us as we are praying. Come and pray as God leads you.