

**Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,
Kingstowne, Virginia, on Sunday, May 10, 2015**

**THE ESSENTIALS OF OUR FAITH:
THE GREAT COMMISSION AND US**

2 Corinthians 5:14-21

Eugene Peterson, best known as the author of *The Message* paraphrase of the Bible, tells this story from his childhood in the 1930s growing up in the small town of Kalispell, Montana. In his memoir, *The Pastor*, he writes: “I grew up in a Christian home with good parents. I was told the story of Jesus and instructed in the Jesus way. I was loved and treated well. Childhood in my memory was a fair approximation of the garden of Eden – a good and wonderful life.

“But there was also the neighborhood. It was a neighborhood with plenty of playmates, none of whom went to church. But their unbaptized condition never seemed to make any difference in that preschool life of games and imagination. There were trees to climb and a creek to swim in. A meadow in which cows grazed bordered our backyard. We used the dried cow flop for bases in our ball games.

“And then I went off to school and discovered what the Gospel of John named “the world” – those people who do not regard God with either reverence or obedience. This knowledge entered my life in the person of Garrison Johns, the school bully. I had never seen Garrison close up, only at a distance. He wore a red flannel shirt, summer and winter, and walked with something of a swagger that I admired and tried to imitate. Being a year older than I and living just far enough away, he was beyond the orbit of my neighborhood games and friendships. I knew of his reputation for meanness, but I wasn’t prepared for what was to come.

“About the third day after entering first grade, Garrison discovered me and took me on as his project for the year. He gave me a working knowledge of what 25 years later Richard Niebuhr would give me a more sophisticated understanding of – the tension between *Christ* and *Culture*. I had been taught in Sunday school not to fight and so had never learned to use my fists. I had been prepared for the wider world of neighborhood and school by memorizing ‘Bless those who persecute you’ and ‘Turn the other cheek.’ I don’t know how Garrison Johns knew about me – some sixth sense that bullies have, I suppose – but he picked me for his sport. Most afternoons after school he would catch me and beat me up. He also found out that I was a Christian and taunted me with ‘Jesus sissy.’

“I tried finding alternate ways home by making detours through alleys, but he stalked me and always found me. I arrived home most afternoons bruised and humiliated. My mother told me that this had always been the way of Christians in the world and that I had better get used to it. I was also supposed to pray for him. The Bible verses I had memorized (‘Bless those who persecute you’ and ‘Turn the other cheek’) began to get tiresome.

“I loved going to school. But after the dismissal bell each day I had to face Garrison Johns and get my daily beating that I was supposed to assimilate as my blessing.

“March came. I remember it was March by the weather. The winter snow was melting, but there were still patches of it here and there. The days were getting longer – I was no longer walking home in the late afternoon dark. And then something unexpected happened. I was with my neighborhood friends on this day, seven or eight of them, when Garrison caught up with us and started in on me, jabbing and taunting, working himself up to the main event. He had an audience, and that helped. He always did better with an audience.

“That’s when it happened. Totally uncalculated. Totally out of character. Something snapped within me. For just a moment the Bible verses disappeared from my consciousness and I grabbed Garrison. To my surprise, and his, I realized that I was stronger than he was. I wrestled him to the ground, sat on his chest, and pinned his arms to the ground with my knees. I couldn’t believe it – he was helpless under me. At my mercy. It was too good to be true. I hit him in the face with my fists. It felt good, and I hit him again – blood spurted from his nose, a lovely crimson on the snow. By this time all the other children were cheering, egging me on.

“I said to Garrison, ‘Say “Uncle.”’ He wouldn’t say it. I hit him again. More cheering. And then my Christian training reasserted itself. I said, ‘Say, “I believe in Jesus Christ as my Lord and Savior.”’ He wouldn’t say it. I hit him again. I tried again, ‘Say “I believe in Jesus Christ as my Lord and Savior.”’

“And he said it. Garrison Johns,” writes Peterson, “was my first Christian convert.” (*The Pastor*, 46-48)

I tell you this story not to make light of what is a serious problem. Bullying is not a laughing matter. It wasn’t then and it isn’t now. Nor am I endorsing retaliation by means of physical violence as the proper way to deal with a bully. Jesus had something to say in the Sermon on the Mount about retaliation and about loving our enemies. You can read it for yourself in Matthew 5:38-48.

Nor, as tempting as it may be, am I endorsing the evangelistic method young Eugene Peterson used with Garrison Johns. All of that said, maybe this story is a good starting point for thinking together about the Great Commission Jesus has given the church and how it applies to us.

THE GREAT COMMISSION

Actually, the term “Great Commission” is not found in the Bible. Most commonly, though, we use it in connection with the charge Jesus gave His disciples in Matthew 28 to “go 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 all that I have commanded you” (Matthew 28:19-20a). This great, global, God-given commission is accompanied by an equally great promise: “And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age” (28:20b). It is the promise of

the abiding, unfailing presence of the Lord Jesus with His people. With His followers. With His messengers. With His ambassadors. With us.

The New Testament contains several different versions of the Great Commission in addition to Matthew 28. It is stated this way, for example, in Mark 16:15: “Go into all the world and preach the gospel to the whole creation.”

Another version is found in John 20:21, when Jesus appeared to His disciples after His resurrection. He pronounced the benediction of God’s peace on them and said: “As the Father has sent me, so I am sending you.” God the Father sent God the Son on a mission into the world. Into *our* world. The mission? To accomplish our salvation through His vicarious, atoning death on the cross and His resurrection from the dead. And now the Son, having completed His mission, sends His followers into the world on a mission. He sends us into the world with the message of the gospel – the message of God’s amazing grace and redeeming love, the message of forgiveness and peace and healing and hope, all of which are found through faith in Jesus and His saving work for us. “As the Father has sent me (into the world), so I am sending you (into the world).”

Yet another version of the Great Commission is found in Acts 1:8, in the last words Jesus spoke to His disciples before He ascended into heaven: “You will receive power,” Jesus said, “when the Holy Spirit comes upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.” The charge Jesus gave His disciples then is the same charge He gives His followers today: “To be His witnesses. To get the word out about His kingdom and His kingship. To tell others about Jesus and His saving love. Starting where we live and work right here in northern Virginia and the greater Washington area (our Jerusalem), and spreading throughout every region of these United States (our Judea and Samaria), and to every continent, every island, every nation and people-group everywhere in the world – to the ends of the earth. It is truly a “great commission.”

AMBASSADORS FOR CHRIST

There is one more statement of the Great Commission in the New Testament that I want to bring to your attention today. It is found in these verses we read from 2 Corinthians 5, where Paul speaks of “the ministry of reconciliation” (5:18) and “the message of reconciliation” (5:19) God has entrusted to His church, so that we are in fact “ambassadors for Christ” with God making His appeal to unbelieving hearts through us (5:20).

You know that in the world of international relations, governments of nations establish and maintain diplomatic relations with one another through ambassadors who are authorized to speak and act on behalf of the government or crown or administration they represent. So, for example, our Ambassador to Japan represent the U. S. government in our relationship with the government of Japan, just as the Japanese Ambassador to the U. S. represents Japan in its diplomatic relationship with our country.

It is a big deal and a great honor to represent your country’s government and, by extension, your country itself as an ambassador. It is an even bigger deal, though, to be appointed and

commissioned as “ambassadors for Christ” whose mission is to take the message and ministry of reconciliation with God to a world estranged from God. To say it again, this is truly a “great commission.”

WHAT GOD DID

This ministry of reconciliation is not something we thought up. The message of reconciliation did not originate with us. Paul is perfectly clear on this. He says in verse 18: “All this is from God.” It is all God’s doing, not ours. What exactly did God do? Two things: First, He “reconciled us to Himself.” *He reconciled us to Himself. How? Through Christ.* By means of the atoning death of Jesus on the cross, in which, because of His love for us, He willingly suffered and died in our place, taking upon Himself the punishment we justly deserve for our sin. As one Bible scholar (Philip Edgecombe Hughes) has put it, the rebellion of humankind, both individually and collectively, against God is “met and matched by the love of God in Christ Jesus. God’s holy and loving work of reconciliation has been accomplished once and for all” in Christ. *He reconciled us to Himself through Christ.*

Second, God “gave us the ministry of reconciliation” and “the message of reconciliation.” Central to this ministry and message of reconciliation is the decision of God to not count our sins against us (5:19), which is to say that to be reconciled to God necessarily involves having our sins forgiven. Reconciliation with God requires the forgiveness of sin. This is so, because it is our sin – our sinfulness and our actual sins – that disrupts our relationship to God and causes our estrangement from Him. If the barrier that separates us from loving fellowship with God is to be removed and we are to be restored to a relationship of peace (*shalom*) with God, the forgiveness of our sins is absolutely essential. Through the atoning death of Christ for us, God has done exactly this. He has removed the barrier. He has reconciled us to Himself. He has declared the punishment for *my* sin, the punishment for *your* sin, and the punishment for the sin of anyone and everyone who believes the gospel and trusts in the Lord Jesus Christ paid in full. *Paid in full!*

Isn’t this good news? Of course it is! And this is the message – literally, the word (*logos*) – of reconciliation God has committed to His church – to us – and commissioned us to communicate to our world as ambassadors for Christ.

This is our “great commission.” If we are to be faithful followers of the Lord Jesus Christ and serve His purposes in our generation, being committed to the Great Commission is not optional. It is an essential of our faith.

THE PROBLEM WITH THE GREAT COMMISSION

But there is a problem with the Great Commission. Actually, the problem is not with the Great Commission. The problem is with us. I think all of us, as sincere followers of Christ, would say that we believe in the Great Commission. I think we would all say that we are committed to the Great Commission. We understand that we are called to be ambassadors for Christ.

We recognize the enormous, pressing need for reconciliation in the world today. The need for racial reconciliation, to overcome the racial divisions that persist among us, remains great right here in America. The need for reconciliation between warring nations or groups is as great today as ever. In many marriages and families, reconciliation is desperately needed. The gospel has something to say, and the power to bring about real change, real transformation, real reconciliation, in all these situations. It is our duty as Christians to pray and work for reconciliation in every sphere of life in this world. But we must also recognize that the primary, supreme, overriding need in the world is for sinful men and women, girls and boys to be reconciled to God in and through the saving work of Jesus Christ. We believe the gospel *is* the message of reconciliation by which sinners can be reconciled to God.

The problem is not that we don't believe in the Great Commission. The problem is not that we don't believe in the gospel as the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes (Romans 1:16). The problem is not that we don't want unbelievers near and far to come to faith in Christ. Of course we do!

But here is the problem: The problem is that most of the time, most churches here in America and most Christians (including me) fail to carry out our commission as ambassadors for Christ to whom the ministry and message of reconciliation have been entrusted. To say it another way, we *believe* in the Great Commission but we often fail to *live* the Great Commission in our daily life. I know I'm speaking in broad generalities, and what I'm saying may not apply to each and every one of us. But I fear that it does apply to many churches. Including ours.

Praying for unbelievers to come to saving faith in Christ is part of the Great Commission. Praying for missionaries and supporting them financially is part of the Great Commission. Going on short-term mission trips – to places such as Haiti, France, Mexico, Kentucky, Brooklyn, and elsewhere – or giving to support these missions is also part of the Great Commission. As a church family, we are involved in helping to fulfill the Great Commission in one or more of these ways. As are many of you personally. I give thanks to God for your heart for missions, and the time and energy so many of you devote to various missions. I think it is not overstating it to say that, as a church, we excel in these things. We actively support missionaries who serve as ambassadors for Christ all over the world. We encourage all who are able to do so to go on short-term mission trips and to consider whether God may be calling you to become a longer-term missionary somewhere in the world.

All these things matter. All these things are part of our Great Commission calling to be ambassadors for Christ (2 Corinthians 5:20), to be Christ's witnesses in the world (Acts 1:8), and to go and make disciples of all nations (Matthew 28:19). For many of us, though, the disconnect with the Great Commission comes in our day-to-day life, in our relationships and interactions with others who do not yet know Jesus as Lord and Savior in their lives or who may believe in Him but are not following Him as true disciples.

THE BURNING QUESTIONS

The burning question for us as a church, I think, is this: How do we carry out the Great Commission as ambassadors for Christ in our mission field right here in Kingstowne, in

northern Virginia and Metro D. C.? How do we effectively communicate the gospel message of reconciliation and carry out the ministry of reconciliation in ways that will make a difference right here?

And, for each of us personally: How can I be an ambassador for Christ and share the gospel message of reconciliation with others in my everyday life?

The evangelistic method used by Eugene Peterson with Garrison Johns is not the answer. But the questions remain. We're not finished yet. We need to come back to this and talk further about the Great Commission and how it applies to us. I will be away next Sunday, so we will do so, God willing, two weeks from today.

In the end, may our commitment in principle to the Great Commission be matched by our words and actions as ambassadors for Christ in our daily life. Lord, let it be so in us, to the glory of Your name. Amen.