

**Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,
Kingstowne, Virginia, on Sunday, November 5, 2017**

WHAT MAKES A CHURCH GREAT

Acts 1:1-8

The word “great” is a great word, don’t you think? It can be overused, like any other word, but when used properly, it can have great meaning. Or add great meaning to the word(s) around it. Part of its greatness can be seen in the fact that it can be used as a noun, adverb, or adjective. Here is an example of each:

Noun: Many of the Dodger greats, including Sandy Koufax and Tommy LaSorda, were in attendance at the World Series.

Adverb: I feel great today.

Adjective: We had a great time at the “Faith’s Got Talent” show last night. We’ve got some great talent in this church. And I mean great!

As an adjective, the word “great” basically refers to an amount, extent, size, intensity, ability, expertise, or quality considerably above the normal or average.

The New Testament word for “great” is the Greek word *mega*. It is used 194 times in the New Testament, including 81 in the Book of Revelation alone. In the NIV translation of the Bible, the word “great” occurs 702 times in the Old and New Testaments combined. The word “greater” is used 80 times, “greatest” 31 times, and “greatly” 73 times. I think it would be great to do a study of the contexts and ways the word “great” is used in the Bible, don’t you?

That, of course, is way beyond the scope of what we can do this morning. Here, though, is a sampling of how the word “great” is used in the Bible:

In Luke 2:9, when the angel of the Lord appeared to the shepherds on the night Jesus was born, the NIV says the shepherds were “terrified.” The King James Version, which Linus quotes in “A Charlie Brown Christmas,” says they were “sore afraid.” What it says in the original Greek is that the shepherds “were afraid with a great (*mega*) fear.”

The very next verse (Luke 2:10) records the angel’s announcement to the shepherds of “good news of great (*mega*) joy that will be for all the people.”

In other places, the Bible speaks of:

- A “great tempest” [NIV, “furious squall”] on the Sea of Galilee (Mark 4:37);
- The “great gulf” between the rich man and Lazarus (Luke 16:26);
- The “great [large] stone” that covered the entrance to Jesus’ tomb (Matthew 27:60);

- The “great [violent] earthquake” that occurred at the tomb of Jesus on Easter morning (Matthew 28:2);
- The “great power” with which the followers of Jesus testified to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus and the “great grace” that was upon them all (Acts 4:33);
- The “great persecution” that broke out against the church at Jerusalem (Acts 8:1);
- The “great sorrow” Paul carried in his heart because of the Jewish people’s rejection of the gospel (Romans 9:2);
- And the “great mystery” of the gospel revealed to us in the person and work of Jesus Christ (1 Timothy 3:16).

We could go on and on, but this is enough to give you a taste of how great – and important – the word “great” really is.

What I want to talk about this morning, as we celebrate 30 years of God’s blessings and faithfulness to us as a church family here at Faith, is “What Makes a Church Great.” We might come up with a variety of answers, from the effective use of technology and social media to having a beautiful building or an excellent music ministry – all of which can contribute to a church’s “greatness.” But, valuable as they may be, none of these is essential in making a church great. So, what makes a church great? Let me suggest several things:

A GREAT GOD

First, a great church worships and serves a great God. From beginning to end, the Bible declares the greatness of God. Moses reminds the people of Israel that “the LORD your God, who is among you, is a great and awesome God” (Deuteronomy 7:21). Again, Moses says: “The LORD your God is God of Gods and Lord of Lords, the great God, mighty and awesome” (10:21).

David speaks of the “great mercy” (Psalm 5:7), the “great love” (17:7; cf. 25:6; 57:10; 103:11), and the “great compassion” (51:1) of God.

In Lamentations 3, Jeremiah reminds himself and us that “because of the LORD’s great love we are not consumed, for His compassions never fail. They are new every morning; great is (His) faithfulness” (3:22-23). And: “Though He brings grief, He will show compassion, so great is His unfailing love” (3:32).

The prophet Nahum declares that “the LORD is slow to anger and great in power,” a power demonstrated not only “in the whirlwind and the storm” (Nahum 1:3) and in the parting of the Red Sea to rescue the people of Israel from the army of Pharaoh (Exodus 14), but also in the rescue of sinners who are helpless to save ourselves from the wrath and judgment of God we deserve.

The apostle Paul speaks of God’s “incomparably great power [in Christ] for us who believe” (Ephesians 1:19) and says that “because of His great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions – it is by grace (we) have been saved” (2:4-5).

And Peter exclaims: “In His great mercy (God) has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead” (1 Peter 1:3).

All of this points to the greatness of the God we worship and serve. But the Bible speaks of God’s greatness and preeminence even more directly. In addition to Moses’ testimony in Deuteronomy, the sons of Korah declare in Psalm 47:2:

How awesome is the LORD most high,
the great King over all the earth!

The unnamed writer of Psalm 95 proclaims that:

The LORD is the great God,
the great King above all gods (95:3).

In Psalm 145, David joins in the chorus:

Great is the LORD and most worthy of praise;
His greatness no one can fathom.
The LORD is gracious and compassionate,
slow to anger and rich in love.
The LORD is good to all;
He has compassion on all He has made.
(His) kingdom is an everlasting kingdom,
and (His) dominion endures through all generations.
The LORD is faithful to all His promises.
(He) is righteous in all His ways
and loving toward all He has made.
(145:3, 8-9, 13, 17)

The writer of Psalm 150 urges us to “praise (the LORD) for His surpassing greatness” (150:2) and concludes with this universal call to worship: “Let everything that has breath praise the LORD” (150:6).

In Luke 9:43, after Jesus has come down from the Mount of Transfiguration and healed a demon-possessed boy, Luke says that the people who witnessed this miracle “were all amazed at the greatness of God.”

Paul writes in his letter to Titus of our “blessed hope,” which is “the glorious appearing of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ, who gave Himself for us” (Titus 2:13-14a).

And in Philippians 3:8, Paul speaks of “the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord.”

God and God alone is worthy of our worship and trust, our total surrender, our wholehearted allegiance and service. He alone is worthy. The Triune God – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit – is worthy.

No church can be great if it ever forgets the greatness and worthiness of the true and living God. It is first and foremost about God, about who He is and what He has done for us. Everything else in the church's life and ministry flows from the foundational fact of the greatness of the God we worship and love and serve.

THE GREAT COMMANDMENT

Second, what makes a church great is its commitment in both principle and practice, in word and action, to the Great Commandment. When an expert in the Jewish law asks Jesus to name the greatest commandment in the law, He answers with two commands from the Old Testament law, taken from Deuteronomy 6:5 and Leviticus 19:18. He says: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and soul and mind and strength. This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: Love your neighbor as yourself. There is no commandment greater than these" (Matthew 22:35-39; Mark 12:28-31).

What matters most, says Jesus, is love for God and love for others. And love for God must come before anything and anyone else. As one commentator has written: "God's wholehearted love" for us – the love demonstrated in a million different ways, but most clearly and powerfully in the person and work of His Son Jesus Christ, who willingly suffered and died on the cross for undeserving sinners like us – "must not be answered in a half-hearted way" (William Hendriksen, *Exposition of the Gospel According to Matthew* 809).

For a church to be great, God must be first in its life and in the lives of its people. Not second or third or fourth or fifteen or 50th (Douglas Sean O'Donnell, *Matthew: All Authority in Heaven and on Earth*, 656-658). First. So, you and I must ask ourselves:

- Is God first in my life?
- Do I truly love God more than anything or anyone else?
- Does my life – does our life together – reflect the preeminence of God and our love for Him?
- Is love for God (and gratitude to Him) the driving force in my life?
- In our life as a church family?

But love for God isn't the only thing that matters. Love for our neighbors matters, too. Love for others. And love for one another in the fellowship of Christ's followers. Remember the "new commandment" Jesus gave His disciples in the Upper Room on the night before His death? He said: "A new commandment I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another" (John 13:34).

Love for God and love for others are inextricably intertwined. Genuine love for God has to be expressed in genuine love for others. Listen to what John says in 1 John 4:20-21 from *The Message*: "If anyone boasts, 'I love God,' and goes right on hating his brother or sister,

thinking nothing of it, he is a liar. If (you) won't love the person (you) can see, how can (you) love the God (you) can't see? The command we have from Christ is blunt: Loving God includes loving people. You've got to love both."

What makes a church great is love for God – “with all your passion and prayers and intelligence and energy” (Mark 12:30, *MSG*) – *and* love for others, for one another and for our neighbors near and far who are loved by God.

Words matter. So do feelings. But our love for God and our love for others must be put into action. It is not enough to say that we love God or that we love people. Nor is it enough to feel love in our hearts. Love is an action word. It must be put into action in caring, practical, and even sacrificial ways, just as Jesus loved us and sacrificed His life for us.

For a church to be great, it must remember and never forsake its “first love” (Revelation 2:4) for God, and its calling to love one another and our neighbors in Jesus’ name.

Love for God, for the gospel, and for people is one litmus test of a church’s greatness.

THE GREAT COMMISSION

But that is not all. In addition to the Great Commandment, Jesus has also given us a Great Commission – 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). Along with this commission comes the great promise of Jesus’ continuing presence with us: “I am with you always, to the very end of the age” (28:20b).

If the Lord is not with us, and if He is not for us, there is no possible way to fulfill the Great Commission. But He is with us. And He is for us, as Paul says in Romans 8:31. It is only by His grace and power that the church can carry out our Great Commission.

The primary mission of the church in the world is “to make disciples of all nations.” Not merely converts who profess faith in Jesus Christ, but followers of the Lord Jesus Christ who hear, believe, understand, and obey the Lord Jesus and willingly submit to His sovereign and gracious rule in their lives. In *our* lives.

For a church to be great, its people must commit themselves, or recommit themselves, to living life as disciples of the Lord Jesus and to the task of making disciples of all nations – in our case, so that the gospel may take root and bear fruit in our own community (right here in Kingstowne and Franconia and Rose Hill and Springfield and Alexandria and Lorton and Fairfax Station and beyond) and to the ends of the earth. In order to make disciples, it is necessary for us to *go* in the name of Jesus. *Going* requires movement. We can't sit in our pews and expect unbelievers to come to us. We have to move out in the name of Jesus to take the gospel to people who are spiritually lost without Him. This going is the reason the church exists. It is the reason we are here in Kingstowne. It is an essential part of God's vision for our church.

The Great Commission is our commission. Jesus expressed it another way, in Acts 1:8, just before His ascension into heaven. He told His followers: “You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you, and you will be my witnesses.” The great promise of Jesus is not only His presence with us, as He promises in Matthew 28:20. Here He promises the gift of the Holy Spirit, through whom He is with us at every moment and in all the circumstances of life, along with His power – the power of God the Holy Spirit – to enable us to be His witnesses, starting right where we are, in our own neighborhood, in our own community, and then expanding in ever-widening circles, to the far corners of the earth.

Leslie Newbigin, one of the great mission leaders of the 20th century, wrote: “The Church is the pilgrim people of God. It is on the move – hastening to the ends of the earth to beseech all (people) to be reconciled to God, and hastening to the end of time to meet its Lord who will gather all [His people] into one” (Newbigin, *The Household of God*, 25).

You and I are to be Christ’s witnesses – in the power of the Holy Spirit – “to the ends of the earth” (Acts 1:8) and “to the end of the age” (Matthew 28:20). That is one heckuva Great Commission, if you don’t mind me putting it that way. We must be committed in both principle and practice to the spread of the gospel and the making of disciples both to the ends of the earth *and* in our church’s backyard, in our own community where more than one-third of our neighbors have no faith involvement.

Jesus came, He said, “to seek and to save the lost” (Luke 19:10). He also said, when He appeared to His disciples behind closed doors on the evening after His resurrection: “As the Father sent me, so I am sending you” (John 20:21). This sending to seek and to save the lost continues to this day, and will continue until the day Jesus returns. His sending includes me. His sending includes you. His sending includes us. All of us. He continues to send His church, to send us out in His name and in the power of His Spirit, to make disciples of all nations. This is our mission from God.

In *The Purpose-Driven Church*, Rick Warren says that “a great commitment to the Great Commandment and the Great Commission will grow a great church” (102).

I think he is right. To be great, a church must have and exhibit a great commitment to the Great Commandment and the Great Commission. Not just in words but in action. We can be comforted in knowing that we have the great promise of Jesus’ presence and power through the Holy Spirit. We’re not in it alone.

FINALLY

I love this church. I hope you know that. I am so grateful for this church and for the privilege of serving as your pastor for 20 of the 30 years Faith has been in existence. I am so grateful for the grace of God in my life and for the grace of God in your lives. I am grateful for the impact this church has had in many lives over the last 30 years. And I look forward to what God is going to do in and through this church in the next 30 years and beyond, as we worship and serve a great God, as we seek to love God above all else and to love each other and our neighbors in Jesus’ name, and as we carry out our mission from God to be Christ’s witnesses

and to make disciples of people from every race and language and nation, to the glory and praise of God, from whom and through whom and to whom all glory belongs, now and forever (Romans 11:36).

Lord, let it be so. Amen.