

# Together part 4

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John 5<sup>16-21</sup> 1 Corinthians 6<sup>1-8</sup>

Mission requires an outward facing view – a willingness to try new things, to experiment, to give things a go even if they don't work out. It's one of the reasons that New Zealand through the mid 20<sup>th</sup> century produced some of the finest missionaries in the world. We were willing as a culture to try things. And it's amazing what can happen when you got at things with this approach.

In the first half of 2009, news reports poured in of pirate vessels attacking vital shipping lanes along the coast of Somalia in southern Africa. Entire shiploads of cargo were held for ransom by pirates, delayed severely, or even lost at sea. Amid that chaos, Mark Wilson was learning the ropes for his new job as logistics coordinator for the U.S. headquarters of Africa Inland Mission (AIM)—a Christian missionary sending agency dedicated to reaching the peoples of Africa with the Good News of Jesus Christ. AIM uses the Somali shipping lanes to send supplies and equipment to missionaries working in the field. One day Mark received a phone call offering a supply of free Band-Aids for the missionaries in Africa. Mark gladly accepted, but he forgot to ask just how many Band-Aids would be coming his way. "I am always looking for ways to fill ocean containers," he said. "[But] I realized my mistake when the second UPS truck full of Band-aids arrived. " Storage is always at a premium and so finding places to store all these band Aids became an absolute headache. However, soon after, Mark was supervising the packing of an ocean container carrying valuable

equipment and other supplies intended for AIM's missionaries. When there was a little bit of room left over at the front of the container so he filled in the extra space with as many of the superfluous Band-Aids as could be squeezed in. Grateful to get rid of some of the Band Aids He thought nothing more about them after that—just a bit of filler material that could be useful for missionaries in need of medical supplies.

Soon after, however, as the ship entered into the shipping lanes of Somali coast Mark heard that the ship carrying AIM's ocean container had been hijacked by pirates—they even broke into the crate containing the valuable equipment meant for the missionaries. But when they saw nothing but piles of Band-Aids, the pirates moved on. The equipment was unnoticed, the pirates abandoned the ship as containing nothing of value and it all arrived safely in the hands of the people who needed it to continue advancing the kingdom of God.

**A little bit of innovation, a little bit of going beyond the ordinary, a little bit of risk and God was able to use this to great advantage to equip a very needy community somewhere else in Africa.**

Mission is vital for community. Without an outward facing view; without a willingness to go outside ourselves we risk losing connection not just with those outside our community but with reality itself just as Erik the Red's Norse community in Greenland lost a sense of reality when they refused to entertain the notion of eating fish and so starved to death in a country which could not support cattle raising. As I pointed out last week, mission isn't just an injunction to preach the Gospel, it's the whole way we live; it's the direction of our lives; it's the spirit of Christ within us.

Mission isn't first and foremost about us. Last week we saw that mission was about two things

1. God's mission – God's love for all Creation
2. The outward nature of God's love. The fact that God goes out to meet us – to find us, to seek us out.

So mission is **God's going out**. Our task is to take a ride on that love. To allow God's moving to take us along with God. So we need to become outward focused – open to all that the Spirit would lead us into. The question is, what does that look like?

Again, we might answer with some classic understandings about mission. It's sharing the Gospel with someone. It's challenging people to think about their eternal destiny. It's making connection with people in our community who are 'far from God.' You know none of those things are wrong in themselves but they miss out a vital component of mission which is a given for all descriptions of mission in the Bible. They miss out the fact that a key component of mission apart from which there can be no mission – is the community of Christ.

Our community is at once the most powerful tool we have in our mission bag **and** the greatest barrier to mission. If we do community badly we can almost never undo the damage that does to our witness. If we do community well mission will flow almost automatically because people are looking for a healing, gracious and godly community. An example...

True story from the US.

At the age of 36, Rosaria Champagne Butterfield was a recently tenured professor in the Centre for Women's Study at Syracuse

University. Rosaria and her lesbian partner were members of a Unitarian Universalist Church, where Rosaria was the coordinator of what is called the Welcoming Committee, the gay and lesbian advocacy group. Up to this point in her life, Rosaria said that the only Christians she knew were "intellectually impaired." They were the kind of "people who sent me hate mail; or people who carried signs at gay pride marches that read 'God Hates Fags.'" But her negative image of Christians would radically change when she met a local pastor named Ken and his wife Floy. Eventually that friendship led to her conversion to Christ, but here's how Rosaria described that first encounter with authentic Christians:

I remember being conscious of my butch haircut and the gay and pro-choice bumper stickers on my car .... I remember awkwardly greeting my hosts at the door and pulling out of my bag two gifts—a bottle of good red wine and a box of strong tea .... I wanted to get to know these people but not at the expense of compromising my moral standards. My lesbian identity and culture and its values mattered a lot to me. I came to my culture and its values through life experience but also through much research and deep thinking. I liked Ken and Floy immediately because they seemed sensitive to that ....

During our meal I remember holding my breath and waiting to be punched in the stomach with something grossly offensive. I believed at this time that God was dead and that if he ever was alive, the fact of poverty, violence, racism, sexism, homophobia, and war was proof that he didn't care about his creation. I believed that religion was, as Marx wrote, the opiate of the masses .... But Ken's God seemed alive, three-dimensional and wise, if firm. And Ken and Floy were anything but intellectually impaired. Ken and Floy did something at the meal that

has a long Christian history .... [They] invited the stranger in—not to scapegoat me, but to listen and to learn and to dialogue .... We didn't debate worldview .... They were willing to walk the long journey to me in Christian compassion. During our meal, they did not share the gospel with me. After our meal, they did not invite me to church. Because of these glaring omissions to the Christian script as I had come to know it, when the evening ended and Pastor Ken said he wanted to stay in touch, I knew that it was truly safe to accept his open hand.

Since this beginning, the journey on which the Lord has taken me has been a great adventure, and this simple meal in a pastor's home ... was the first leg of this journey. Before I ever stepped foot in a church, I spent two years meeting with Ken and Floy and on and off "studying" scripture and my heart .... [Ken] knew at the time that I couldn't come to church—it would have been too threatening, too weird, too much. **So, Ken was willing to bring the church to me.**

Note that last line – what did Ken bring to her? A threatening message about eternal damnation? A doctrine to be either believed or rejected? An argument? A proposition? No. What he brought to her was the **community of Christ** – a community of grace and mercy, a community unthreatened by her militant homosexuality, a community willing to engage freely and without judgement, a community... of love.

There is no mission without this community. This is precisely what Jesus testifies to in that same reading from John 5 today. In that reading Jesus says these words...

**<sup>19</sup>Jesus said to them, “Very truly, I tell you, the Son can do nothing on his own, but on what he sees the Father doing; for whatever the Father does, the Son does likewise.**

**(John 5)**

What is confessed here? This is what Jesus says. The only begotten of the Father, the One through whom and by whom all things are created and sustained; the One who has died and risen again; the One who has been given all things by God – this One who is above all others and, indeed, all else, this One **can do nothing apart from His community with the Father.** He can do nothing **on His own! He is nothing apart from the Father.**

Do we realise what a momentous statement this is? Do we realise how significant this is for us. Jesus can do nothing apart from community and if Jesus can do nothing apart from community where does that leave us? Well it leaves us in at least the same place as Jesus. And let's not believe that this means that we can forget about the community we have here on earth. Let's not imagine that this means that we as individuals can be in mission so long as we are in relationship with God.

Jesus didn't leave the Church to be a wallflower in singles competition for souls. This is not about having only the choice of being a hero or a zero for God. Jesus created the Church for mission. The community which is the Church is vital for mission and so how we relate to church is also vital for mission.

Here at Leith our goal is to build community – we live to 'Grow Great Community' but we do it because we know that the quality of that work is directly related to our effectiveness in mission. Almost everything we do 'for God' will be undermined by a community that is dysfunctional, lacking compassion, internally haemorrhaging and relationally challenged. And this doesn't mean we have to be perfect and that we cannot make mistakes. That's not what community's

about. Community is about raising up a banner of love and doing everything humanly possible to live under it. It's about seeking Jesus even when all else seems lost. It's about knowing we are sinners but still believing in the love God has for us and, indeed, expressing that love for those around us who are similarly challenged. As G K Chesterton so wisely said...

**“The Christian ideal has not been tried and found wanting; it has been found difficult and left untried.”**

Paul so clearly sees this in our reading from Corinthians today when he openly grieves over the church there falling into open conflict and going to the secular courts to settle grievances against one another. He is heart-broken over this happening and at the end he say these words...

**<sup>7</sup>In fact, to have lawsuits at all with one another is already a defeat for you. Why not rather be wronged? Why not rather be defrauded? <sup>8</sup>But you yourselves wrong and defraud—and believers at that. (1 Cor 6)**

Better to be wronged, to be defrauded, to be ridiculed than to destroy community.

There is no mission without community. I have no doubt that most of you are committed to mission – to reaching out with the Gospel to others and to seeing lost people come to know the love of Christ. But how committed are you to the community of that Gospel? How committed are you to seeing Leith work as a community?

What makes it work Richard? Here's what makes it work...

It works when the load is spread – when we all take turns at doing some children’s work; when we all take turns at helping with youth; when we all take turns at leading a small group. It works when we all decide to say hello to someone we don’t know at church and get to know them a little. It works when we all volunteer to help with something like setup or set down or care of the church grounds. It works when we actually offer to do something before we’re asked. It works when we refuse to be put off by someone who appears a little odd or a little challenged socially or by an apparent snub. It works when we choose to forgive someone who has wronged us. It works when we are prepared to be honest about our feelings with those we know and trust. It works when we are really prepared to put work into understanding people and their behaviours when they seem odd or wrong to us instead of just righting them off. It works when we make the decision week in and week out just to **be with each other**, it works when we realise we have more in common than we ever have in difference.

It works when we set ourselves to pray regularly for the church; it works when we give more than we get and it works when we can look past our individual needs to the needs of others.

In short, community works when we are determined to make it work. Are we determined to make it work here at Leith? I know I am.

We will never get evangelism right until we’ve made community a priority because in the end our community is the fruit of what we preach when we evangelise and also because community constitutes a major part of our evangelistic message.

And this is why Jesus added only one commandment to all the commandments of the OT. It was simply this...

**“Love one another as I have loved you.”**

This is not just a standard of behaviour friends. This is an evangelistic strategy which will provide the foundation for the most compelling and effective outreach ever. Come and be loved – as Jesus loves you. Come and discover your worth. Come and meet the love of the God who created you. Could anyone resist that?