

“Fruitfulness on the Frontline”

Introduction: At the end of Matthew’s gospel we hear Jesus, following his resurrection and just prior to his ascension, leave his followers with the following charge: “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 everything I have commanded you” (28:19-20). It is a challenging, and almost overwhelming charge when you consider its scope. Many Christians, and you may find yourselves among them, wonder just how this charge or great commission might apply to them. They don’t see how they could find the time, or the resources, or the training, to enter what they understand to be the mission field—some place out there, far away, in a strange land.

But what if the mission field is right here, everyday, under your nose? What if that strange land was your place of work, or your favorite pub or coffee shop, or the gym or dance studio, or even your home? What if where you are right now, even if it’s a place you don’t want to be, matters to God and his mission?

I want to introduce a place to you this morning called your “frontline.” Your frontline is any place you regularly find yourself among people who don’t know Jesus. And if we can open our eyes to these places and our presence within them, we might just be able to see how God can use us, in our everyday life, to accomplish his mission. A teenage girl, whose name we don’t know, who finds herself in a place she doesn’t want to be, among people she doesn’t want to be with, doing a job she’d rather not be doing, and facing a future she’d rather not have, can help lead the way as we think about this.

I. The Girl with No Name

A. This girl with no name was an Israelite. Somewhere around 850 B.C. the neighboring Arameans (modern day Syria) had sent a raiding party into Israel. They did what raiding parties do, including taking this young girl captive. They brought her back and gave her to the commander of their army, a man named Naaman, who in turn gave her to his wife to be her servant. Can you just imagine what that must have been like for her? Taken from her home, her family, and everything familiar, she was now forced to live among a strange people, in a strange land, doing a strange job. As for her future prospects? There were none! Where, oh where, she must have wondered, is God in all of this?

B. God, it turns out, was right with her, planning to work through her. It turns out that Naaman, her mistress’s husband, the great army commander, had leprosy. It was a crippling disease of the skin. It would eventually cause his body to puff up, his skin and bones to crack, and his appendages to fall off in stages. When the girl learned this, her response is fairly amazing for she very well could’ve rejoiced, seeing Naaman’s misfortune as a punishment from God for his idolatry. A long and painful death would serve him right, she could’ve thought. That’s what happens to those who mess with God’s people. But she didn’t go there. Instead, she said to her mistress: “If only my master would see the prophet who is in Samaria! He would cure him of his leprosy.” The girl knew that if anyone could help Naaman, it was the LORD.

C. The consequences of these two sentences are astounding. They put into motion the eventual healing of Naaman and his declaration that the one true God was that worshipped by the Israelites. Naaman’s whole household, the army which he commanded, the king of Aram whom he served, the entire nation really learned that the God of Israel could do what their gods could not. It came about because this girl was not looking to bring judgment on her boss but healing. She was not looking to punish her co-workers but to bless them. She was willing to try use her frontline—where she found herself among non-believers on a regular basis—to reveal as best as

she could the love and mercy and grace of the Lord. And the Lord took those two sentences that she uttered, probably with much fear and trembling, and used them to bear much fruit, used them as part of his plan to bring blessing to the nations.

II. A People with Tough Circumstances

A. As we think a bit more about how this applies to us, let's consider those for whom this account was first recorded. They were a people who found themselves in tough circumstances. Kings was written sometime after 550 B.C., or about 300 years after this event, when Israel found itself in exile in Babylon. Kings was written as a historical and theological summary and explanation of the exile—that because of Israel's great sinfulness, much of Jerusalem lay in ruins, including the Temple, but this was not because the gods of the invading Babylonians were stronger or more powerful than the LORD but that the LORD had given his people over to them as a result of their disobedience. Over and over again, Kings contrasts what happens to God's people when they are obedient, and when they are not. It's kind of like sending your child to his or her room for misbehaving and then a while later, sitting down with them to explain what had happened and why.

B. And yet Kings also reveals God's mercy. When we've wandered off the path of God's way, God remains ready to forgive those who are repentant. If we toss aside our pride, as Naaman was forced to do—neither his accomplishments, his wealth, or his relationships did him any good when he really needed a savior—and swim not where we want, in our own rivers, but where God directs us, ultimately in the blood of the Lamb, God stands ready to wash us clean and receive us back.

C. Secondly, reflecting on the story of Naaman was to give the Israelites encouragement that even in their captive situation, being where they did not want to be, they, like the servant girl with no name, had a ministry in their frontline. They could still be fruitful for the plans and mission of God, to bring healing and wholeness to the nations, as God had first promised Abraham that he would do.

III. A Church with a Big Challenge

A. As we fast forward to our day, exile is a pretty good image as we think about where we are and how to carry out the commission that Jesus has given us, the very mission of God. We live in the days sometimes called “post-Christendom.” Christendom is the label given to the 1700 year time period, beginning in the 4th c. when the Roman Emperor Constantine declared Christianity to be the official religion of the empire, when Christian thinking dominated Western society. It gave us the blue laws, prayer and the 10 Commandments in public schools, “under God” in our pledge of allegiance, towns designed with the church at the center, and daily Bible readings listed in newspapers as noteworthy as the *LA Times* as late as December, 1963.

B. But no more. Commandments and crèche scenes are out, Sundays have become about soccer and Starbucks, Christian groups have a hard time gaining recognition on college campuses, the “nones” (meaning no religious affiliation) is the fastest growing group in our population, just as many weddings and funerals take place outside churches as in, a Christian moral consensus seems hard if not impossible to arrive at, new mosques and temples seem to be outpacing churches, churches in Africa are sending missionaries to us, newcomers to a town like Essex who, 20 years ago, were curious about what went on in a building like ours, no longer even wonder. They're not sure if God exists and if he does, he seems irrelevant to their lives.

C. Depressing? It's tempting to go there! But I'm convinced Jesus has not given up on his mission or his church and in fact may even be refining us after having become too comfortable with the state and our culture. As G. K. Chesterton commented a number of years ago, “The coziness between church and state is good for the state and bad for the church.” The point is that the end of Christendom is not unlike the destruction of the Temple, the fall of Jerusalem, and the

exile of God's people to Babylon. The empire in which we live is no longer favorably disposed toward us, but we now have a tremendous opportunity to actually live and love the way Jesus lived is a mission field that is right under our noses. For the many who have never opened a Bible, or entered a church, our lives will be the holy book they read and our classrooms and offices, our cars and coffee shops, our locker rooms and living rooms, will be the first sanctuary many have entered. Can we be fruitful on these frontlines? Can we offer a word, or a deed, or an attitude that is in line with the mercy and grace of God that God can use in his mission to the world?

This fall, we'd like to offer you a resource to help you think about all of this. It's an eight week small group called "Fruitfulness of the Frontline," designed to help followers of Jesus make a difference right where they are. It's been put together by a group called the London Institute for Contemporary Christianity. They recognize that around 98% of Christians spend the vast majority of their awake time, around 95%, in non-church related activities. What if we could consider that time, and see those activities, in a missional way? What if God could use us, in our everyday life, to accomplish his mission?

PLAY PROMO

The series focuses on helping us to develop "6M's":

- Modeling Godly Character
- Making Good Work
- Ministering Grace and Love
- Moulding Culture
- Mouthpiece for Truth and Justice
- Messenger of the Gospel