

## Week 2: Your Relationship with the World

Church of the Spirit, Kingstowne September 24, 2006

**Reflection:** An amazing thing happens when you realize that you, you among all the other people in the world, you with your foibles and follies, with your gifts and your achievements, and even you with your sins and shortcomings, you matter to God. You are someone who matters to him very much. That doesn't make you better or worse than anyone else. It does make you different from who you were when you didn't know you mattered to God.

But just as I said last week, there's a flip side to this great revelation. When you finally get it that you matter to God so much he was willing to suffer and die for you, it opens your eyes to see that you are not the only one that matters to God. The person next to you matters to God. And the people who are not here this morning, and the people you meet everyday. As a famous author named CS Lewis once wrote, *"There are no ordinary people. You have never talked to a mere mortal. Nations, cultures, arts, civilizations—these are mortal ... But it is immortals whom we joke with, work with, marry, snub, and exploit ..."* Remember: if you matter to God, they will matter to God just as much. That's why with his last words of instruction to his followers Jesus gave them a mission. These words are known as the Great Commission. Here Jesus tells his followers that they are to share what they have heard and seen about God with everyone, absolutely everyone, they meet.

**From the Gospel of Matthew** (28:18-20 NLT)  
*Jesus came and told his disciples, "I have been given complete authority in heaven and on earth. Therefore, go and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Teach these new disciples to obey all the commands I have given you. And be sure of this: I am with you always, even to the end of the age."*

**Reflection:** Go make disciples of all nations. Now there's a tall order. Put yourself in their shoes. You are an uneducated fisherman. You have rarely travelled many miles from your home. You are now a known criminal for your participation in certain religious disputes about this same Jesus. And now your job description is to make disciples of all the world. OK. Go. The clock's ticking. We'll be looking for progress reports from you regularly. So ... what are you waiting for?

Yes, it must have seemed like an impossible task. But as with any task, impossible or not, it's best to start by taking small steps towards the goal. That's a good thing to remember. I started by asking you to try to put yourself in their shoes. Don't worry about trying too hard to imagine what that would be like. You're already there. If you are a Christ Follower, Jesus gives you the same job description. The same commission is just as much yours as it was theirs. So today we're going to talk about what steps you can take to follow where Christ calls you. Whatever steps you take, know this, they will take you out into a world full of people, each of whom you can recognize as a brother or a sister. For each of those people you meet every day matters to God. Together with them, we are all the people of God.

***"There are no ordinary people. You have never talked to a mere mortal. Nations, cultures, arts, civilizations—these are mortal ... But it is immortals whom we joke with, work with, marry, snub, and exploit ..."*** -- CS Lewis

### We are the Image of Our God

*words an music by Henry Fiske, Jr. for the House of Spirit Band*

*We are the image of our God, a beautiful array  
People from all around the world each color he has made  
We are the image of our God, the reason that he came  
Giving his life to save us all and now we bear his name  
No one he loves greater, no one he loves less  
In his loving kindness everyone is blessed  
He doesn't see the outside, he loves just who we are  
He looks beyond the surface to see within the heart  
We are the image of our God, a beautiful array  
People from all around the world each color he has made  
...  
He looks upon his children with tender loving care  
A love we can't be worthy of, no matter who we are  
Our God will not forsake us, no matter what we've done  
He offers us salvation through Jesus Christ his Son  
We are the image of our God, a beautiful array  
People from all around the world each color he has made  
...*

**Intro to message:** We started a couple of weeks ago with a definition ... DTR=Determine the Relationship. For some people *"doing a DTR"* is a good shorthand expression for when you have to decide whether you are dating or just friends. Sooner or later in any relationship, you'll wonder where your relationship is headed. Are you making a commitment? Are you just hanging out? Because, if you're not sure where you're headed, then you're not really heading anywhere at all. Now as we all know, some people (meaning men) need more help than others (meaning women) when it comes to understanding relationships. As a public service this morning I want to help you all (meaning the men) understand what it means when you do a DTR and you hear someone else say something like this:

(5) "I think we both need a bit more space." *That actually means: "If you plan on living in the same state, I'm moving."*

(4) "I'm not ready for a commitment right now." *Translated, this is something more like: "Your family and friends are total losers and I can't see myself spending any more time with them than necessary."*

(3) "Maybe we should try seeing other people." *Ouch. This means: "Total strangers would be more fun than seeing you again."*

(2) "It's not you, it's me." *Probably means: "No it's really you."*

(1) "Let's just stay friends." *Means: "No, it's still really you."*

It's good to be clear about these things. That's why when it comes to your most important relationships, we've learned that having a good relationship with God changes how you will relate to the other people around you. When you have God in your life, God's ways enters all your relationships. You'll see people differently, you'll treat them differently too. Your relationships will be more life-giving. Built on a foundation of God's ways each of your other relationships can be stronger. That's a whole lot better in the long run than trying to do relationships just on your own. Last week we talked about how communion with God will lead you to community with others. I showed you how you simply can't be a Christ Follower all by yourself. And while it will be hard to find a church that's perfect, because they are made up of imperfect leaders and imperfect people, still God continues to work through imperfect churches like this one to make a difference in people's lives. He's even promised that when two or three are gathered together in his name he'll be in the midst of us. That's one of the best promises he ever made.

But there's another promise like it. He's promised to be with us even to the end of the ages. When Jesus sent his disciples out on their new mission to tell the whole world about God's power and love, he gave them that promise. No matter where you go, I'll be with you. No matter how big the task you have, I will be with you. Even though you walk through the

valley of the shadow, you do not need to fear, for I will be with you.

With God's promises in hand and God's presence at hand, it's time to take the next step. This next step will take you out of these doors and away from the protection of the church, out into the world. It raises the big question: How will you as a Christian, behave out there in the world? How can you determine the relationship you should have as a Christian with a world that is decidedly non-Christian?

Rioting in Nigeria this week resulted in a few deaths and a lot of destruction as mobs of non-Christians torched churches and terrorized Christians. The government's security forces waited until the riots were over before arriving to take control of the area. It seemed to many a way of giving governmental approval to the anti-Christian terrorism. You and I live far from anything like this. It's almost too hard for us to imagine ... but others live on this edge. In much of the world, certainly in much of Africa, there is a growing struggle between the Christian minorities and Muslims. Closer to home the struggle is not an armed conflict. Ours is a struggle to find meaning in our lives. The bigger question for us is often whether we will turn to careers, addictions, shopping, casual sexual relationships, the pursuit of money, or some other diversion to keep us busy, or is there a place for God in our lives? And not just a place, but the central place ... The pressures to fit in, or achieve, are very heavy on us. How hard do you find it to live as a faithful Christian while you are at work? What about before you even get to work and you are sitting in traffic?

As you'll see from the article on the front page of the bulletin today, one of the bishops affected by the rioting in Nigeria has asked that his people, as well as Christians around the world, do three things: Pray for protection for the Christians being assaulted, share resources with those who have lost homes and food, and finally, come visit those who have been attacked. He explains that by giving the victims a show of support, those who attacked will be ashamed of what they have done. Notice the Bishop does not do the obvious. He does not ask for retribution, or even seek justice. He seeks to have Christians show what it means to be a Christ Follower, even in the face of attack. That's a very bold challenge; it sounds like a very Christ-like one to me too.

Jesus knew a good deal about bearing witness in an often hostile world. On many occasions there were those who tried to seize him or hurt him or kill him outright. Jesus had a knack for slipping away through the crowds. He patiently waited until it was high time to be lifted up on the cross. Talk about bearing witness instead of bearing arms ... Before he died, Jesus warned his followers about the dangers of losing their balance. He warned them not to be enticed by the things of the world that would not last, or by worldly power, or fame. There are so many things that can cloud your vision and make it harder to see God at work in your life. Jesus prayed that his followers be not *"of the world,"* even though they had to live *"in the world."* [see John Chapter 17] In the world but not of it. That can be a hard concept for some folk. Some think they are being faithful because they have cut all ties to the rest of

the world. They don't watch TV or celebrate Christmas or Halloween, they cut contact with relatives who are not Christian. I was asked by one such person why I bothered to read books *about* Christianity. Didn't I know the only book I needed was the Bible? Some Christians choose to employ only plumbers or electricians they know are Christians too. I think cutting yourself off from others is a bit odd. How will people who are not Christ followers learn what it means to be a Christ follower if the Christ followers go off and hide? And you know, those who are not Christ Followers watch those who are. They are quick to see if a Christ Follower says one thing and does another. Last year I taught at a national conference about starting new churches. It was held out in Phoenix at a hotel next to the airport. After a day and a half of being inside the Hotel, I wanted to see go somewhere and do something. I had not flown hundreds of miles to sit less than a mile from the airport. So I asked the concierge what I could find to do on my free evening. He looked at me, a single, almost middle aged guy, knew I was looking to go out on a Monday instead of watch football, and offered me a list of the remaining male options. There were some bars not too far away, there were casinos he could take me to, and there were some local clubs offering Men's Entertainment. I asked him instead for a restaurant that would give me a taste of the Southwest. The next day I was sitting alone with the same guy as he drove me back to the airport. He asked, "So were you with that church group?" I said I was. He said he had wondered when I turned down all the other things he offered the night before. And then he said he didn't really go to church but he had noticed I seemed to be the same person whether anyone knew I was a priest or not. He liked that. So did I. I could have chosen some other option, and simply reinforced for this guy how Christians say one thing but do something else.

It's not that we are supposed to hide from the world, but to walk through it lightly, so it does not destroy our hearts or souls. John wrote this in the Bible:

*Do not love the world or the things in the world. The love of the Father is not in those who love the world; for all that is in the world--the desire of the flesh, the desire of the eyes, the pride in riches--comes not from the Father but from the world. And the world and its desire are passing away, but those who do the will of God live forever.*

[1 John 2:15-17 NRSV]

I want to leave you with an image of how to do this. The details of how you will live as a Christ Follower in a non-Christian workplace or among non-Christian neighbors I will have to leave to you. Here at least is the image the Bible uses that helps me makes the most sense of my choices. Earlier in the Bible, John had told us about Jesus and his mission in the world. The first line of this reading is familiar. The rest of the reading, though, is just as important:

*Jesus taught them, "This is how much God loved the world: He gave his Son, his one and only Son. And this is why: so that no one need be destroyed; by believing in him, anyone can have a whole and lasting life. God didn't go to all the trouble of sending his Son merely to*

*point an accusing finger, telling the world how bad it was. He came to help, to put the world right again ...*

[John 3:16-18]

God so loved the world he gave his only son, not to condemn the world, but to save it. As I said earlier, the world matters to God. Each soul is precious to him, each person's destiny matters to him. God could have come to accuse and point his finger. Instead he came to reach out his hand. John continues:

*This is the crisis we're in: God's light streamed into the world, but men and women everywhere ran for the darkness. They went for the darkness because they were not really interested in pleasing God. Everyone who makes a practice of doing evil, addicted to denial and illusion, hates God's light and won't come near it, fearing a painful exposure. But anyone working and living in truth and reality welcomes the light of God so their work can be seen for what it is: God's work.*

[John 3:19-21]

There's darkness in the world. Into that darkness, God shines a light. As he does, those who wish to be rescued come to the light. Others scuttle away so their deeds won't come to light. Darkness and light, good and bad. And yet, nothing in the world is as clear as that. Inside of each of us there's another struggle. You struggle with things you prefer to keep hidden away, things you don't want the kids to know, things you don't want the neighbors to know. You worry if people knew the truth they would think differently about you. So you keep some of those deepest feelings buried as deeply as you can. You can try to keep some of those things you have done in your life from ever being talked about. You can keep secrets, but it gets harder the longer you keep them. And even so, there is someone who knows what you did last summer, and the summer before that. It's not like you can keep secrets from God. You can pretend God does not see what you do when no one else is looking. Only you may still worry about being wrong, and even if you pretend otherwise, there may really be a God and he sees and he knows and you wonder what he will do about it all. Here it's good to remember we worship a God who did not come into the world to condemn it but to save it.

Here in the presence of God this morning, you have a quiet moment to ask yourself what you are trying to keep in the dark corners of your life. What are you afraid that others will discover about you? Can you be honest about these things before God, if no one else? In a moment when you come forward to receive communion, or to ask for God's anointing, can you confess to God how much you need him to shine a light into your life?

That's part of the wonderful promise God gives you. God promises to bring light into the dark places of your life ... to show you there is a way out of the darkness. At the very start of his Gospel, John tells us Jesus is the light of the world: "*The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world ... And to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God ... and from his full-*

*ness we have all received, grace upon grace.”* [John 1:9,12,16 NRSV] With God’s help you can kick the habits that take you away from God. Otherwise you may find yourself back in the darkness. Jesus warned his followers, *“Make sure that the light you think you have is not really darkness. If you are filled with light, with no dark corners, then your whole life will be radiant, as though a floodlight is shining on you.”* [Luke 11:35-36 NLT] As I told you at the start of the service, your job is to share in the work of Jesus. Just as he was the light of the world, you are to shine in the midst of the darkness too. There’s a famous verse of scripture that says: *“Let your light so shine before men that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in Heaven.”* [Matthew 5:16] Jesus is telling you it’s OK to show off for God so long as you’re doing it for him, not to make yourself look better. As you act as Jesus would act, you show others the true power that comes from God. I like the newer translation of this same passage. It tells me to: *“Shine! Keep open house; be generous with your lives. By opening up to others, you’ll prompt people to open up with God, this generous Father in heaven.”* See there ... by opening up to others you may prompt them to open themselves up to God.

And that’s what living in the world but not of the world does. But you’re still wondering, “So what’s up with all this talk about light and dark? Roger, give it to me plainly.” Well, here you are. Sometimes actions simply speak louder. That’s what God wants to see from you ... your actions speaking for you. But I’ve got a little action for you here to help you remember his promise. When God first created the world, the first thing he

did was create order out of chaos. According to the account in chapter 1 of Genesis, God said, *“Let there be light.”* Light is a real thing. Scientists can’t decide what light is, whether it is a particle or a wave, but we all know when you push the button the light comes on. Even a child can make light happen at the flick of a switch. You can’t say the same for darkness. Go ahead and make darkness. You can’t. Darkness is the absence of light. Like when you make shadows on the wall. All you are doing is stopping the light from shining somewhere. You can get in the way of the light, but you can’t make darkness.

The same thing happens with God. Tomorrow when you walk into work, you can stand in the way of God or you can stand up for God. If you choose to live *“in the world”* without letting the world push you around, you’ll reflect the light of Christ in a way others will see. Maybe they’ll think you are odd. Maybe they’ll wonder why you are acting differently. You’ll show the world around you that you have a sense of integrity, what you say and do will reflect what you believe, and that one thing you truly believe is God is with you. Or you can act in a way that will stop other people from seeing where God is present in the world. It’s your choice. You can cast a shadow, but you don’t have to. That’s a choice with every decision in every day. You can choose to shine, to show others how God is at work in your life. You can do the one thing Jesus wants most from you. *“Shine! Keep open house; be generous with your life. By opening up to others, you’ll prompt them to open up with God.”* Do that my friends, and your heart will be lighter, and the world, a brighter place.