



A Sermon by Arthur Simon

Epiphany 2, 2003

Emmanuel, Catonsville

John 1:43-51

I am deeply disturbed that you and I and the church body to which we belong are letting God down, big-time, on a matter of central importance to our mission. So today I want to make a proposal to you as a congregation, and to each of you as individuals.

Today is the second Sunday after Epiphany, the part of the church year for focusing on how God revealed himself to the world as the Savior of all people in Jesus Christ. Not only has God revealed himself to us as the Savior, but he has called us to relay that good news to the rest of the world. "Go and make disciples of all nations," Jesus said before his ascension into heaven. We call this The Great Commission. It is **our** mission.

"We know that," you are probably thinking. "So what's the point?" The point is that we aren't doing it. We are not truly serious about doing it. We **say** it is our mission, but our **actions** say the very opposite.

Since the last time I preached here a month ago, the LCMS, the national Lutheran church body to which we belong, has announced that because contributions for overseas mission have dropped by almost \$3 million, one-fourth of our overseas mission staff is being cut. Think of it! \$3 million amounts to about \$1 dollar per person per year in our church body, about 2 cents a week for each of us. And for lack of that we are cutting one-fourth of our salaried missionaries! My friends, we are the richest nation in the history of the world. With few exceptions, you and I and our whole church body share in that prosperity. But for lack of 2 cents a week we have to dismantle one-fourth of our salaried missionaries?? Pathetic! Pathetic! That's not even bubble gum money! It is the story of the emperor's new clothes. We claim to be dressed to carry out the Great Commission, but we are found to be naked. We ought to be ashamed.

Several of those being cut are missionaries that I pray for every day. One of them is George Riemer, cousin of Del Riemer, principal of your school. George has served his entire ministry as a pioneer Lutheran missionary in Korea. He has trained thousands of pastors and lay people from all denominations to be Bible study leaders in the Bethel

Bible Study Program, and he is president of Luther Theological University in Korea. And for lack of 2-cents a week, we are losing him. That's just one example, but it tells me that we are letting God down.

Since 1960, average church contributions of all denominations combined in this country, have declined from a little over 3 percent of income, to 2-and-a-half percent. And with that decline, increasingly more gets spent on maintenance, and less on mission. Something is woefully wrong. The truth is that despite our pride in being faithful to God's words, we are as much conformed to the world, as much clones of the culture, as people of most other church bodies.

What is the underlying problem? Could it be that we have not truly given our hearts to God? Jesus said, "Where your treasure is, there will your heart be also."

Look at today's Gospel lesson. We are like Nathanael. When Jesus called Philip to follow him, Philip ran and told Nathanael, "We have found the promised Messiah, Jesus of Nazareth!" Nathanael was skeptical. He wasn't going to be taken for a sucker. He said sarcastically, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth" -- that little hick town?

We are like Nathanael. We don't want to be taken for suckers, either -- so here's a little bubble gum money for missions, but here's \$50,000 for my house, my car, my wide screen TV, and so on.

Philip didn't argue with Nathanael. He just said, "Come and see." And it was when Nathanael came to see Jesus that his whole attitude and life changed. Jesus told him, "I saw you under the fig tree before Philip called you." Nathanael was stunned. "Rabbi," he said, "you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel." And Jesus said, "Do you believe because I told you that I saw you under the fig tree? You will see much greater things. You will see heaven open and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man." In other words, "Nathanael, you will see the salvation of God unfolding for the world."

What was true for Nathanael is true for us. It is only when we see Jesus -- really see Jesus -- that our eyes are opened, and our lives dramatically changed. To see Jesus is to see the depth of his love for us, to know how much we have been forgiven. It is to see the cross and the empty tomb. To see Jesus is to come to a completely new understanding of ourselves in relation to God and the world around us. Is not our impoverished response to world missions merely a reflection of the fact that we haven't seen Jesus very well? That hearts have been so cluttered with a thousand things that compete for our time and our money and our love, that Jesus and mission get pushed aside?

Let me tell you a story. It's from the January issue of The Lutheran Witness, and it's about Scott and Miriam Yakimow and their 2-yr old son Jonathan. Scott was an engineering student at Valparaiso University, but along the way God prepared him and Miriam for work as missionaries in Kenya, Africa, in an area where people are coming to Christ at one of the fastest rates anywhere in the world. Only thing, there wasn't any money to support them. Then one evening Gary Thies of our world mission staff found himself speaking to about 35 people in the basement of a tiny church in the middle of cornfields in rural Nebraska and asked them to help.

Afterward. . . one farmer approached me saying, "Gary, I want you to know that I am the reason that you came here tonight. I have had trouble sleeping since my dad died. I was with him just before the Lord called him home. . . and he said to me, 'I could have done so much more for the Lord's work, but

I didn't. I don't want to say those words when God calls me home. I know God has called me to be the first to help the Yakimow family."

Then other people stepped forward, and soon from that congregation and others, 100 percent support for this missionary family had been provided in advance of their leaving. Isn't that exciting? That farmer's dad was like Nathanael, and like us. But when he saw Jesus, and his life in relation to Jesus, and when by his confession he enabled his son to see his life in relation to Jesus, then everything changed. Some people would say it made the farmer poorer -- and measured by dollars in the bank, maybe so. But can any of us doubt how much richer his life has become?

Now, I promised you a proposal, and here it is. I want to challenge you as a congregation and each of you as individuals, from the youngest to the oldest, to set aside one percent of your total income, above and beyond what you are already giving, for world missions. One percent. That's an exceedingly modest goal, when we consider what Jesus did to save us, and when we consider our purpose in life. I don't know what that would amount to here at Emmanuel, but a congregation of 500 members with an average U.S. per capita income, would be earning about \$15 million a year. One percent of that would mean \$150,000 for world missions. What would that do?

1. It would bring the gospel to thousands of people who are hungering for God.
2. It would send a dramatic signal to other congregations throughout Synod and prompt many to follow suit.
3. It would revitalize this congregation and our lives in ways that we can only begin to imagine, and give us a new and vital sense of mission that would act as a magnet in attracting others to Christ.

That's my proposal, and if you decide to do it, you can put me down for a pledge.

There's a Presbyterian church in Wichita, Kansas, that had designed a new sanctuary, when a devastating earthquake hit Guatemala. One lay person posed the simple question: "How can we set out to buy an ecclesiastical Cadillac when our brothers and sisters in Guatemala have just lost their little Volkswagen?" So the church scaled back its building program and got pledges to rebuild 26 Guatemalan churches and many homes. Soon they pledged more for a seminary. Today they carry on an extraordinary mission program that reflects the deep and abiding love of Christ in their lives.

It can happen here. At Emmanuel. In the words of Philip, "Come and see."