

Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church

(February 25, 2018)

Dave Smith

Sermon manuscript

Sermon Series: Building Faith At Home 2018

Ambassadors to the World

(2 Corinthians 5:20; Ephesians 6:20; Matthew 5-7)

Study #1

Introduction: Ambassador “YOU” ...

Nations all over the world put diplomats on foreign soil to represent their interests in that foreign place. The chief diplomat is called an “ambassador,” and from the beginning of our own country, we have stationed ambassadors in other countries.

America’s first ambassador (to France and to Sweden), Benjamin Franklin, said, *“The qualities of a diplomat/ambassador are sleepless tact, unmovable calmness, and a patience that no folly, no provocation, no blunders may shake.”*¹

Ambassadors understand that they may find themselves in dangerous situations and places. A posting in Fiji sounds cushy and Luxembourg might be tranquil. But somebody has to be in hard places in the Middle East and in certain third-world countries.

An ambassador goes where he or she is sent.

The ambassador may serve in a large or a small country. Some are well-known (Madeleine Albright, George H.W. Bush, Nikki Haley). Most are not.

But when US ambassadors negotiate a treaty, or attend a state dinner, or arrange a visa for a traveler to the United States, they are all about carrying out their central mission - to represent the interests and policies of the United States of America.²

I found a story in my files that describes what an ambassador does and thought it might be helpful to share it with you today.

Bob Kreuger, a Texan, was appointed by President Bill Clinton to serve as ambassador to the central African nation of Burundi in 1994-95.³

Burundi was and is a small nation near Kenya and just south of Rwanda. It has a temperate climate and hilly terrain. It is to this day, desperately poor, with few natural resources.

It is populated by two tribes, the Hutus (85%) and the Tutsis (15%). In the years prior to Bob Kreuger’s posting as ambassador, there had been two seasons of genocidal civil war, one in 1972 and in 1993. In 1993 at least 300,000 Burundians were killed in tribal warfare. Over a million were displaced into neighboring countries.

It was into this powder keg that Bob Kreuger walked as its new US Ambassador.

Kreuger saw the possibility of an even worse outbreak of violence. (This was just one year after the slaughter of over a million in nearby Rwanda.)

He called both tribes to the table to negotiate for peace.

¹ The State Department’s website says this about the role of an ambassador. “An ambassador is the President’s highest-ranking representative to a specific nation or international organization abroad. An effective ambassador has to be a strong leader - a good manager, a resilient negotiator, and a respected representative of the United States.”

² From the State Department website.

³ Burundi at Risk, Ex-Ambassador Warns; “Perhaps a Million” Could Die in Conflict Between Tribes” by Thomas W. Lippman, Washington Post Staff Writer, Saturday, May 25, 1996; Page A21, The Washington Post.

Kreuger was opposed for his efforts. He received death threats and had to send his family back to the United States for their safety.

He fought for the highest ideals of America while in Burundi. He worked for peace and justice in Africa as a representative of the USA.

That is the work of an ambassador. He represents his own nation's highest ideals while working for the welfare of the nation where he is stationed. He promotes his or her home culture and priorities while living in another culture.

Ambassadors know their leader back home. They know his policies. It is their role to represent the leader's policies on foreign soil.

Now the Bible uses lots of images to describe those who follow Jesus. Disciple. Child of God. Salt. Light.

This morning, you and I are going to consider another image. We are God's ambassadors to a world He loves desperately.

Preview...

Each February for the last several years, Jeff and I have brought a series of messages that focus on Building Faith at Home. We're doing that again this year.

For these three Sundays we're going to speak to the role of Christians as ambassadors for Jesus.

Next Sunday, Jeff will tell us that we are ambassadors who are empowered by our relationship with our king - Jesus! - through prayer. On the following Sunday, he'll emphasize the opportunities we have as ambassadors to point others to God who either live with us at home or who visit our home.

Today, I am going to highlight our role as God's ambassadors to the world, at large. Like Bob Kreuger, we are to represent the values and the culture of heaven to the culture in which He has placed us.

The actual term "ambassador" occurs only twice in the New Testament. Both times, it carries the thought of an elder statesman who proclaims and lives out the values of God's kingdom on earth's soil.⁴

But if the word only shows up twice, the idea of God's people representing the interests of heaven on earth is everywhere.

As Exhibit A, I present Jesus.

Jesus. Heaven's Ambassador

He Taught Heaven's Values

Jesus' most famous sermon, the "Sermon on the Mount" (Matthew 5-7), was nothing other than a call to His followers to give their unalloyed allegiance to heaven, to value what God values.

The Beatitudes invite us to lead the life of a citizen of heaven.

Every topic He addressed - anger, sexual temptation, the permanence of marriage, promise-keeping, revenge, loving enemies, generosity, prayer, fasting - is given a very non-Roman, non-first-century-Jewish, eternal kingdom, slant.

He was telling His followers, "*You are My ambassadors. Live in such a way that you reflect well on Me and My Father.*"

And not only the teaching, but the life of Jesus reflected heaven's values. Think with me about two of heaven's values that were hallmarks of Jesus' life.

His life Reflected Heaven's Priorities

He embraced the least and the last and the lost (Luke 4, 15)

As God's ambassador, Jesus showcased God's love for all people everywhere. He showed no partiality.

⁴ In 2 Corinthians 5:20 and Ephesians 6:20..

He told stories about farming and housework that connected with the poor.

When those who were on society's fringe invited Him to their parties, He gladly went. The tax-collectors and notorious sinners considered Him their Friend.

He reached out to the disabled, lavished value on the unclean, set the demonized free.

When the wealthy and well-connected sought Him out honestly (like Nicodemus, John 3), He was patient and loving. He loved Jews and He loved non-Jews. But when the powerful abused the least, the last, and the lost, He confronted them and spoke truth to that power. (Matthew 23)

Jesus also reflected heaven's priorities by serving.

He served (Mark 10)

He drew a thick line separating how God's kingdom and the kingdoms of this world "work".

The world's construct is that of a pyramid where the more power you get, the more people serve you. You, the powerful, are on top. Jesus inverted that pyramid and said that in His kingdom, the powerful use their power to serve.

He washed His disciples' feet and taught them to do the same. He, the Leader, gave and gave and gave. He sought to serve rather than to be served. And in the end, He served by giving His life a ransom for our eternal souls. (Mark 10:45)

At the end, it was clear that Jesus was an Ambassador who was representing another kind of kingdom. He told Pilate, the Roman governor, **[John 18:36] "My kingdom is not of this world."**

He was an ambassador sent from heaven to earth to represent His Father's values.

His apostles watched Him for three years and learned their lesson well. With the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit, they were His ambassadors to the cultures of their day.

Apostolic Ambassadors

They Gave Ultimate Allegiance to God's Kingdom

They obeyed God rather than man

We see this, first, early in the book of Acts, after Peter and John had performed a miracle and preached a powerful message.

The Jewish leadership gave them orders to stop talking about Jesus. The apostles responded, **[19] "Whether it is right in the sight of God to give heed to you rather than to God, you be the judge; [20] for we cannot stop speaking about what we have seen and heard."**

That is a remarkable answer for these God-fearing Jews to give to the Supreme Court of Israel. But they are speaking as ambassadors of a foreign state. They are Jews living in Israel, sure. They are not, though, ultimately, citizens of Israel.

They lived in Roman-occupied lands...but were not ultimately citizens of Israel or Rome (Romans 13)

Later, after the Apostle Paul was converted, he wrote to the Christians living in Rome and told them to be submissive to the state.

[Romans 13:1] Every person is to be in subjection to the governing authorities...[2]...Whoever resists authority has opposed the ordinance of God.

Obey Rome. Live as model citizens. And we won't miss the irony that these words came from a man who spent considerable time in Roman jails.

While he did everything he could to honor Roman law, it was never at the expense of obedience to God.⁵

The apostles spoke as ambassadors to governors and kings. Like Jesus, they spoke truth to power - they evangelized the powerful AND the poor and the slave and the outcast.

These early ambassadors for Jesus - the apostles and their immediate followers - not perfectly, but substantially, represented the values of heaven.

They Lived a Kingdom-of-God Ethic

For instance, they stood against the cruelty inherent in the Roman slavery system. And by the emphasis Christians placed on the value of each life, they planted the seeds for the end of that system.

They radically altered the understanding of marriage and home life. They transformed the husband's role by calling him to love his [one] wife, calling the wife to treat her husband with respect, and calling parents to love and to nurture their children.

They lived out the ethics of Jesus' kingdom with respect to worship, changed the sexual mores of the day, and modeled servanthood and generosity.

They were ambassadors, living out heaven's "policies" on earth.

And what about the nineteen centuries that have followed Jesus and the apostles?

The church of Jesus hasn't always lived up to its ambassadorial mission. We all know that.

⁵ Along these lines, it is sometimes pointed out that Muslims in America pose a problem because of Islam's call to obey shari'a law rather than our Constitution. Point taken. To be fair, though, this is precisely what Peter and John and Paul and many, many Christians have done through the ages. Like Muslims, we Christians answer to a higher call than the secular state and our Constitution, and "*must obey God rather than man.*"

There are famously ugly periods of church history, incidents that are embarrassing, and policies the church has followed that violate Jesus' teachings. And, while we're deeply saddened by this, we're not terribly surprised. Jesus' church has always been made up of redeemed and flawed men and women.

But while the uglies are all true, where and when the church has been healthy, it has distinguished itself as an embassy made up of loving ambassadors.

The Church as Ambassador

Care for the Sick

3rd century plague in Rome

The church has always cared for the sick and the disabled. She has always given solace to the dying.

In the third century, a terrible plague (referred to as "The Plague of Cyprian" who was the emperor at the time) swept through the Roman Empire. We don't know what caused it - influenza, Ebola, smallpox - but it lasted for over a decade and devastated the empire.

There are records of the general populace abandoning their family members to save their own lives.

But Christians throughout the Empire, gave help to the sick and dying. Many of those Christians themselves died, of course. But historians agree that the sacrificial love Christians showed to the sick during this plague won many, many people to the faith.

That distinctive of caring for the sick has been present wherever and whenever Jesus' church is healthy, including today.

Present-day care for the sick

A man who attended our church some years ago and now lives in Ohio, Colonel Hadley Reed, once told me the story of how his grandfather became the first in his family to believe in Jesus.

It was when people in his mid-west town were sick and dying of influenza (The Great Influenza of 1918).

Hadley's grandfather was among those who were very sick. A Christian man came to his home, despite orders of quarantine, and cared for him until he recovered. He told Hadley's grandfather, "*I know Jesus - I can die better than you can.*"

Hadley told me that his grandfather put his faith in the Jesus who moved his rescuer to love so well. The man was an ambassador.

Cross-cultural missions agencies have historically served the health needs of the people they have come to serve with the Gospel.

Hospitals have often started because of the love of Christ to care for the sick. I've seen, firsthand, how the church - our church! - has cared for those who are suffering from poor health.

It's what ambassadors do. Jesus' ambassadors have also cared for some of the most vulnerable members of society.

Remember the Widows and the Orphans

In James 1 we read, ***[27] Pure and undefiled religion in the sight of our God and Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself unstained by the world.***

In any culture, orphans and widows are *at risk* populations. From Acts, chapter 6 forward, when the church in Jerusalem provided daily meals for widows, Christians have cared for these.

One of the ministries we support, Crossway, International, has a vibrant ministry in Kenya to widows and to orphans. They help support hundreds of children in orphanages. Dean Chollar, who leads Crossway, is blind and has a special place in his heart for blind orphans. Many blind orphans are supported by this ministry.

In Kenya, too, there are whole villages of widows. Crossway has provided water supply systems for some of these villages.

They provide goats for milk that can mean the difference between life and death for these women.

It would be hard to describe the gratitude on the faces of widows and orphans when they learn that they are loved enough that others would provide for their needs and that there is a God who loves them even more.

Today, you could get in the game of serving parent-less children by being a foster parent or adopting. If you want to find out how, call the church office and we can direct you to some great helps.

And simply being willing to open our eyes to "see" widows will often reveal a world of opportunity to help.

Then, too, whenever the church has been healthy, women have benefitted.

The Elevation of the Status of Women

It is surprising to some, given the era in which He lived, to see the prominent role women played in the life and ministry of Jesus. He was friends with women. He was supported, financially, by women. He obviously had great regard for women.

And then women were vitally involved in the life of the early church. Phoebe (Romans 16:1) was a deaconess in the church at Cenchrea. Priscilla, along with her husband, Aquila, taught Apollos the ways of Jesus.

There are lots of places in our world today where women are not valued and esteemed, safe or protected.

But the Gospel of Jesus affirms the worth of "half the sky". And in the places where Jesus' ambassadors have a voice, women and girls are blessed.

Protection of Babies and the Pre-born

In many cultures - ancient and modern - babies and the unborn are not cherished. Babies that are not wanted *were* and *are* left outside, alone. They are “exposed”. Plus, we should know that abortion is not a strictly modern procedure. Abortion has been practiced for thousands of years.

Early Christians opposed abortion. They rescued babies that were left exposed. And today, the most loving voices affirming the value of the pre-born and the newborn are the voices of Jesus’ ambassadors.

We believe in the sanctity of human life - the pre-born, the newborn, the disabled, the elderly - ALL human life.

And the last thing I’ll note in this survey of Christians carrying out their ambassadorial role regards slavery.

Eradication of Slavery

The New Testament accepts the reality that slavery happens. In several places, slaves are told to respectfully submit to masters. More radically, it tells masters to treat their slaves well. And with those reciprocal obligations, slavery was doomed and did, actually decline in the Roman Empire.

In the early 18th century, William Wilberforce and other Christians convinced Parliament to end the British Empire’s involvement in the African slave trade.

Wilberforce was a force for good, for God. He did two hundred years ago what many believers are doing today, working to eradicate the continuing scourge of slavery (in the form of sex-trafficking, the sex trades, forced servitude by kidnapping, and countries where slavery is legal).

So...

...the prophet Daniel and his three friends were bright lights for God after being deported from their homes in Israel to Babylon.

...and the Lord told the prophet Jeremiah to tell the Jews of his day, who were living in captivity in Babylon, far away from Israel, ***[Jeremiah 29:7] Seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile; and pray to the Lord on its behalf.***

...and Mordecai, Esther’s uncle, told her when she had the opportunity to make a difference in a pagan land, ***[Esther 4:14] “Who knows but that you have come to your royal position for such a time as this?”***

And, Jesus, the apostles, the early church, and the healthy church of Jesus through the centuries have all been ambassadors to a world in desperate need, representing heaven’s grace and love.

Now it comes to us. You and I are to be Jesus’ ambassadors to the culture in which we live at this time. And what a time this is.

If you were to create a verbal collage of 2018 America, what would you include? I would include at least the following.

2018 Ambassadors for Jesus

A Collage of Our Times

I’d paint in a highly charged, politically adversarial background. And, I’d add that no matter which side of the aisle you find yourself on, your side is guilty of some secret abuses and corruption in high places.

I’d describe fiscal injustice on Wall Street, on Main Street, and in the tax code - the old one and the new one. I’d mention social injustice, some of it structural and some of it personal. And I’d throw in ethnic tension and serious international tensions, complete with nuclear threats.

I’d also mention a devaluing of human life (due to, among other things, abortion, infanticide, and euthanasia), seen in a glut of entertainment (a-muse-ment) that features violence, sensuality, and occult themes and that is billed as “adult” but is anything but adult.

I would add to this violence. And here is where I want to say something about how we, Jesus’ people, can make an ambassadorial difference.

One Particular, Pressing Need

Inner-city violence

In many cities, including San Antonio, especially in lower-income urban areas, there is an epidemic of murders and gang-related violence. When Dr. John Perkins was with us three Sundays ago, he spoke about this.

Large-scale shootings

And then, Dr. Perkins reminded us of what we have recently seen again. That in our more sub-urban areas, there are mass shootings - at churches, concerts, movie theatres, and schools.

Every one of us is grieved and sickened and angered by the Valentine Day shooting at the Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida.

Carnage. Seventeen dead and more wounded. Families and a school and a whole community ripped apart.

Understandably, we ask, "*Why?*" Not surprisingly, lots of answers present themselves.

Questions...

As possible explanations we hear: mental illness, criminal backgrounds, easy access to certain types of guns, "soft" targets, dysfunctional homes, young men (they are all male) who are desensitized by violent games and movies, young men who are disconnected from relationships, bullied, socially awkward, young men who feel the need to prove something.

And then we inevitably wonder, "*What can be done?*"

Recommendations abound: new, tougher laws, stricter background checks, outlaw certain (or all) guns, fight - or support - the NRA, "harden" school campuses.

And it dawns on us, as we consider the possible responses to the tragedies occurring around us, just how little power we each have, how little control I and you and we have over violent outbursts.

We have *little power* to effect change. But we don't have *no power* to make impact in this and other arenas of great need.

After all, we are ambassadors of God to the world...

An Ambassadorial Answer

Think SMALL. (and remember leaven and mustard seeds)

An ambassador is not sent to the whole world, but to a place. Bob Kreuger was sent to Burundi. Benjamin Franklin to France. Nikki Haley to the UN.

Leaven is hidden in *this* loaf of bread. A mustard seed is planted in *this* garden plot.

So, you have been posted in a place.

Hills and Dales neighborhood, Braun Station, Alamo Ranch. USAA, Lackland, HEB. O'Connor High School, Stevenson Middle School.

You won't have impact everywhere. But where you are, you can be leaven. You can be Jesus' ambassador there.

Remember. You are here to represent Jesus' priorities and values in the place where you are. You are importing His ways into your place. So, you pray.

A counter-cultural response

After the Florida shooting, we heard from many voices, "*No more prayer and condolences. We want action!*"

We understand why people would say that - and we resolutely pray. Because? In God we trust.

Prayer is crying out to God to do what only He can do. Guidance comes as we pray. Energy comes as we pray. Conviction grows as we pray.

So, we pray. And we lavish love and value on the young. That's what Jesus did.

[Mark 10:13] And they were bringing children to Him so that He might touch them; but the disciples rebuked them. [14] But when Jesus saw this, He was indignant and said to them, "Permit the children to come to Me; do not hinder them; for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these. [15] "Truly I say to you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a child will not enter it at all." [16] And He took them in His arms and began blessing them, laying His hands on them.⁶

Ambassador Jesus represented the heart of His Father when He loved the young. And you and I serve as Jesus' ambassadors when we serve the young and lavish value on children and teens in all the settings where we might find them.

In homes...

You who have children at home are in such a strategic spot. Under your roof and at your table you have living with you the next generation of world-changers for Jesus.

Your children are precious and you can ensure that they are cared for, loved, and nurtured.

⁶ Also, ***[Matthew 18:1] At that time the disciples came to Jesus and said, "Who then is greatest in the kingdom of heaven?" [2] And He called a child to Himself and set him before them, [3] and said, "Truly I say to you, unless you are converted and become like children, you will not enter the kingdom of heaven. [4] Whoever then humbles himself as this child, he is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. [5] And whoever receives one such child in My name receives Me; [6] but whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in Me to stumble, it would be better for him to have a heavy millstone hung around his neck, and to be drowned in the depth of the sea.*** See also Matthew 19:13-14; Luke 18:15-17; Luke 9:47-48; Mark 9:36-37.

At church...

And there are young ones here at our church. Thank God! Every infant and toddler, child and teenager is a precious person and a priceless stewardship.

When Jeff was up front last week with the Gardiners dedicating Melody to the Lord, he asked us who were watching to ensure that "church" for Melody would be a place of happy and wholesome memories, a place where she tastes love and grace. We answered, "Yes."

How can we live that promise out?

Some of you are teaching Sunday School and serving in the nursery and you're giving of yourself weekly. Fantastic.

Is it possible that you are not doing so because you haven't recognized that serving in the nursery or in a Sunday School class, or talking with Landry Saathoff about how to invest in teens are all great ways to be Jesus' ambassador to people He desperately loves?

Could each of us always make it a point to greet children and youth who are here? Pass them in the hall and offer a high-five or a hug. Stop and tell them how glad you are to see them. Ask them about their week.

We talk about "next steps". What is your next step when it comes to lavishing love on those younger than you, here at church?

In our community...

And then there are young ones who don't come to church. Jesus loves them, too.

I talked with LeRoy Jacobson this week. LeRoy has served and loved teens for decades with Campus Life/Youth for Christ and has regular meetings with students from Marshall High School.

He estimates that 75% of the kids who come to Campus Life meetings never go to church. Never.

He told me that another Campus Life worker recently told a sophomore about Jesus and the student said, *"I've never heard any of that before."*

LeRoy says that he is working with a "lost generation." Many (most?) come from non-intact home and families. The kids he serves have no category for unconditional love. They can't wrap their minds around the thought of grace.

LeRoy would welcome anyone from Northwest who would like to serve middle or high school aged kids to talk with him. There are mentoring programs, hosting opportunities, financial partnerships.

And I love what one family in our church has done.

Sam and Diane Girard have a couple of great teenagers. And, Seth and Nirel have great friends. Their friends come to the Girard house all the time. These friends eat meals with the Girards and have sleepovers. These kids feel welcomed in the Girard home.

Some of them now come to youth group here at church. They watched our recent baptism. They're getting a taste of grace here.

The Girards have been hospitable ambassadors.

What the up-and-coming generation needs - the generation that is farther removed from exposure to Jesus and His ways than any previous generation in our nation's history, a generation that is floundering, pulled in dangerous directions, tempted by the lure of damaging distractions - is Jesus' love.

They need you to take a mustard-sized step of love toward them. They need an ambassador to represent Jesus to them.

It may be that your ambassadorship will be played out by serving the young or young adults. Could you explore fostering or adoption?

Could you represent Jesus to someone who is suffering from disease or to someone trapped in addiction?

Every one of the people you know is a person for whom Christ died. Every one of them is a victim of the devil's lies. Every one of them is fallen. Every one of them is a glorious wreck. Every one of them needs an ambassador like you to represent Jesus to them.