

In 1530, the world changed forever. That was the year that a little known Polish clergyman named Nicolas Copernicus published *On the Revolutions*. His seminal work asserted two things that stopped the world in its tracks: that the earth rotated on its axis once daily, and that it traveled around the sun once yearly. It's difficult for those of us on this side of history to imagine, but these were truly fantastic concepts for the times.

The effects of Copernicus' work reached far beyond the domain of science. It was none other than a clergyman who forever changed the place of humanity in the cosmos, and the place of the church in society. Though Copernicus was a man of the cloth, his ideas were not embraced by Rome in the way that they were by the academy. The church could no longer claim to have a monopoly on knowledge. The chipping away of authority initiated a religious crisis that spread like wildfire throughout all of Europe. Some thought that since Copernicus' model displaced the earth as the center of the universe, it somehow dislocated the place of humanity from the center of God's concern. Accordingly, the powers of the time did everything in their power to downplay the heliocentric cosmological model; Bruno was burned at the stake, and Galileo, as we will remember from our history lessons, was forced to recant all of his life's work and spent his last days in a lonely prison.

Out of this struggle, a paradigm slowly began to shift. It is impossible to imagine going back to a way of thinking that the sun revolves around the earth. It is nearly impossible to assume that this poses any problem for religious faith. That world simply doesn't exist anymore. As medieval systems of thought gave way to the Renaissance, the Church fought tooth and nail to keep its hold on knowledge, obstinately refusing to acknowledge the legitimacy of any truth that did not fit into its doctrine.

The point that I want to make from the illustration is this: we live in a world that is changing more rapidly than ever before; if the Church refuses to read the signs of the times, it may find itself responding to a world that no longer exists.

In most parts of the world, the Church no longer enjoys the cultural dominance that it once had. Whereas it could be said of previous generations that if parents were Presbyterian, or Methodist, or whatever, children would grow up in their faith, the reality of today is less certain. Somewhere our culture is undergoing a Copernican-shift that hears in the voice of the Church out-dated responses to the issues that concern our lives today. Perhaps what is needed is an equal paradigm shift in the way that the Church engages with the world. How does the church go about forming her people in a world where Christianity no longer sets the public agenda? We are no longer members of a culture that can legitimately describe itself as Christian, but "resident aliens" in a secular world that has pushed the church to the fringes.

What I think is at stake for the church to survive in the midst of this changing culture, is for the church to remember that it began as a missionary movement. Indeed that God is a missionary God and that mission defines the community of God's people. The

trouble is most of us have in mind a certain picture when we hear the word “mission”. Mission is something that happens “out there.” It involves travel or an element of the foreign. Well, consider this: every document in the New Testament is written to a congregation that finds itself at odds with the dominant culture surrounding it. In the first and second century, those who dared to continue on the ministry of Jesus had to win the right to be heard and often faced persecution for their witness. The very Church exists as the result of the missionary impulse that began at Pentecost. All of the early churches were a fulfillment of the promise of Jesus to his disciples on Ascension Day: “When the Holy Spirit comes upon you, you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.” The congregations of the earliest Christians had a different understanding of mission than we do. They did not look upon mission as one activity of many which they sponsored, but understood themselves to be missionary by their very nature. They were there to continue the witness that had brought them to faith and new life. All the writings of our New Testament address that missionary vocation. They all deal with the way that each of these congregations, in its very particular place and with its very particular challenges, continued the witness to Jesus.

That’s what is going on in St. Paul’s second letter to the Corinthians. He is not telling the Corinthian church to get involved in mission; they have no choice in that matter. That is, after all, *why* and *how* they exist. There would be no Church in Corinth were it not for missionary activity. Someone brought them the message of the gospel. However, he is telling them that they need to engage in the constant process of learning how this radically different vocation translates into their daily living, their actions, their attitudes, and their decisions. Their mission is not merely a message they communicate when they use certain terms and tell certain stories. Their mission defines everything they are and say and do – their mission is bearing witness to the reality of what God has done on their behalf.

To help them understand that, Paul uses a remarkable image. It is found in the opening verses of the third chapter, “You, yourselves are our letter, written on our hearts, to be known and read by all; and you know yourself that you are a letter of Christ, prepared by us, written not with ink, but with the Spirit of the Living God, not on tablets of stone, but on tablets of human hearts.” You, Corinthians, Paul is saying, are God’s letter to the world – this is God’s word not only to the Corinthian community, but to every Christian community in every time, place, and context. This is who you are: God’s letters to the world.

In a very few words, the apostle lays out for us the foundational definition of our calling as Christians. He reminds us that we (and our witness) are the result of God’s action. In the formation of God’s missionary Church, the Holy Spirit is always at work, always drawing a community together, always causing it to engage with the culture in its particular place.

Paul says to the Corinthians, “You, yourselves are our letter, written on our hearts”. The formation of the Corinthian church began with the message that apostles sent to them. The message was shared from one person to another, and God used very human processes to call a new church into existence. The message reached the church at Corinth just as it has reached us – through others who have been God’s letters to each of us. We all have a story about the way that God wrote that letter on our hearts: parents who brought us up, a Sunday

school teacher who challenged us, a camp counselor who shared her life with us, a pastor whose loving concern reached us, a couple whose marriage bore the marks of God's grace, the friend whose steadfast support began to reveal God's love to us. God has been writing us, shaping us into this letters to the world in a variety of ways.

The point is that we, like the church at Corinth, as a community of faith, are God's letter to the world. All of us, the recipients of the Gospel, become its witnesses once we hear and begin to understand its message. In these very brief phrases we see the whole missionary vocation of the church.

This definition of God's people as letters to the world raises a couple of questions. The first has to do with the actual writing of ourselves as letters to the world. Paul is suggesting that everything we do, everything we are about bears witness to the Truth of Christ and to the reality of his presence in the world. As we go about our work or as we navigate the social jungle of school, we are Christ's letters to the world.

The second has to do with the sending of the letter. Letters are not effective until they are sent and "known and read by all". God is a sending God. This is why John the Evangelist begins his gospel with the story of God's self-sending in the person of Jesus and why, shortly after the first Easter morning, Jesus told his cowering disciples, "As the Father has sent me, so I am sending you" (John 20:21). Disciples are made not only in the calling but in the sending. John tells us that God is active and decisive and has taken the initiative in healing broken and sinful creation. As God has sent Jesus to initiate his kingdom, now Jesus is sending us into the broken and hurting places of our world in need of God's redemption.

We see that mission does not begin when we cross over boundaries or go overseas. Mission is not an option for God's people – it defines who we are and what we are for. We do not exist to be shaped by God's writing on our hearts only to have the message remain inside the envelope and not get sent into the world. What we do in here, in fellowship and communion with each other, has essentially to do with what God is sending us to be and do out there. So we gather together to remind each other, to share with each other what God has done for us – to see our lives as the continuation of God's story so we can then go out to become the communication; an open letter from God to the world.

What does it look like for the love of God to be translated through the concrete actions of a living, breathing, community of the Holy Spirit? What does it look like for our mission to look like Christ's incarnation? Some years ago, I came into contact with a congregation in the Northwest. For many years, the Northwest has been one of the least churching regions in the United States. The phrase "spiritual, but not religious" aptly describes many of its residents. This particular congregation is acutely aware of the fact that they fit-in somewhat oddly with the surrounding culture. But part of that oddness allows them to take some bold risks. A number of years ago their Wednesday Night Dinner seemed to be flagging. On one particular night one of the members noticed a homeless person outside of the church and offered him a warm meal. Something stirred. The church began to wonder what would happen if they began to retool their Wednesday night program and open their church up to the city's homeless. After a season of prayer and discernment they opened their doors, and before long, the people came. The congregation now feeds over 200 individuals each week. Many churches offer similar programs, but what struck me

about this particular congregation is that it's not a downtown church. It's hard to get to. So they actually bus people in for meals. And they don't just provide for the material needs and then send folks on their way; relationships form the core of this dinner. God knows that we cannot live by bread alone. People have their lives turned around, often even joining the congregation as a result of the grace that is embodied in this meal. In 2008, the church had a slight surplus and decided to invest that money in providing 38 families with either partial or full rent payments.

That is how one congregation is becoming a living translation of God's grace. It looks different in every context. What does it look like for Tuckahoe, and what will it look like in the future? That, in part, is what we are gathering in small groups to discern. Where is the Holy Spirit sending us in all of the particularities of our cultural context? Wherever it is, we are called to be visible, legible, available translations of God's grace and love - an open letter, known and read by all so that when people see us they see Jesus.

Almighty God, you sent yourself to us in Jesus and in doing so you emptied yourself and became a humble servant. You stepped into the darkness and brokenness of our humanity and brought light and healing - you have restored our souls. And you have called your church to continue to bear witness in word and deed to your redemption in Christ, Jesus. Give us discernment to see what you are doing in this world that you love and give us the courage to follow. And with boldness let us pray as you taught us, saying...