

The Prime Directive
Making the Main Thing The Main Thing
Matthew 28:16-20 (NRSV)
By John Gill

Believe it or not when I was a young person I was a “Trekkie.” Some of you know what I mean by that. I was of the generation of young people that arranged their schedule so they would never miss watching Star Trek on TV.

We all were mesmerized by Captain Kirk and the crew of the starship Enterprise. We were amazed by the futuristic gizmos and gadgets they used. We had no way of knowing that many of the communication devices, wireless technologies, laser weapons, and advanced talking computers would become a reality in our lifetimes – many of these wonders are now standard features of the smart phones we all carry around in our pockets. Today, the science fiction of Star Trek does not seem quite so farfetched as it used to!

But Star Trek’s impact on our culture was not limited to gizmos and gadgets. The original TV show and its sequels and movies presented a worldview and a moral philosophy that has influenced the thinking of an entire generation of Trek fans. The show helped America explore the thorny issues of race, gender-equality, war and peace, and the value and meaning of our humanity.

I don’t think it is an exaggeration to say that, for better or worse, Star Trek may have had more impact on American society than any other television show in history.

If you’re a fan of Star Trek, then you know that the starship Enterprise, populated mostly by earthlings, was a part of the United Federation of Planets. The mission of that spaceship was to explore strange new worlds.

It was a peaceful mission, even though they often had to battle the Klingons or some other race of aliens, who sought to dominate of the universe. Captain Kirk and his crew were always the good guys who did what was right, even if it meant putting their lives at risk, which they did every episode.

Why were they willing to risk everything? What gave direction to their missions? What was the guiding principle they followed?

They had pledged their lives and their honor to fulfill Starfleet’s General Order #1, “The Prime Directive.” The Prime Directive dictated that there must be no interference in the internal development of planets that have not yet acquired the technology for interplanetary space travel. And the Prime Directive was tested each week.

Of course, it seemed that in every episode, Captain Kirk became infatuated with a beautiful young girl on every planet they visited — an “interference” in that planet’s development that would have been a clear violation of the Prime Directive!

But alas, by the end of the episode, Kirk always remained true to the Prime Directive, and would bid a sad farewell to his alien love interest.

Captain Kirk and his crew were clear about their mission, their “Prime Directive.” They knew that if they were not faithful to their “Prime Directive,” they would have failed in their mission. The Prime Directive gave direction to everything they did, and it was the measure of their success or failure.

All kinds of groups and organizations have their own version of a Prime Directive. It seems that today every group or organization has adopted a mission statement of their own that gives clear focus to what it is they are to do and be. Their mission statement is the standard by which they can measure their success or failure.

If you own a business or have worked for a company or corporation, I’m sure you have gone through the process of creating a mission statement, or have had to attend workshops designed to ingrain in you the mission statement that guides your company.

Schools and universities have adopted mission statements to clarify the direction and values that guided them.

Nonprofits and civic clubs have developed their own mission statements so that their members and the community will clearly understand why they exist.

Even the military develops mission statements that give focus to deployments of soldiers, and precisely identify when they can declare that their mission is accomplished.

Well, in this way, the church of Jesus Christ is no different. Every congregation has gone through the process of developing a mission statement (sometimes several times); statements that appear on their letterhead, on brochures and bulletins, and even on their buses. Even we here at Sebastian United Methodist have mission and vision statements that were developed some years ago. I wonder how many of you know what they are?

Here is what we say our mission and vision are:

Our Mission: “We commit to living out the Truth of the Gospel through Spirit-filled worship and study, faithful fellowship and loving service, and to impact our world as followers of Christ sharing the Gospel.”

Our Vision: “A community of faith connecting and growing in Christ, transforming the world.”

Actually – pretty good statements – provided we are living them out.

But, like most congregations, I'm sure, we have had other mission and vision statements throughout our long history. They seem to come and go about as frequently as pastors come and go.

Sometimes congregations are very aware of their mission statement and try to fulfill it, but oftentimes a mission statement is adopted and then filed away somewhere in the office never to be seen again. The truth is that most of the time, mission statements have very little influence on the actual life of the congregation. We may say that we are guided by our mission, but in practice we do something very different. We might as well have no mission statement at all.

But whether we adopt a mission statement or not, it doesn't really matter, because we have one automatically. We have been given a Prime Directive to follow.

In this way, the church is not like other organizations and groups in the world. All other organizations develop their own Prime Directives, they write their own mission statements, and they can revise them at any time. They set for themselves their own goals and they determine for themselves if and when they have accomplished their mission. They have no one to answer to but themselves.

Here, the church is different. In reality, congregations are not free to devise their own mission. Sure, we can go through the exercise of putting our mission in our own words, and that is probably beneficial. But we must always be aware that our mission has already been decided. Jesus has given us our mission, "if we choose to accept it."

What is the Prime Directive of the church? Of our church? Of our lives? What is the one thing that will determine whether we are succeeding or failing as followers of Jesus, or as a church? What is our Prime Directive?

We get our marching orders as a church from the scripture passage of the morning. "Go into all the world – and make disciples..." Or, as the mission statement of United Methodist Church states it: we are to be "Making Disciples of Jesus Christ for the Transformation of the World."

That is our Prime Directive. That is what gives clear focus to what we are to do and be. It is the standard by which we can measure our success or failure as a congregation. To do anything less would mean we have failed the Prime Directive that we have received from Jesus.

Now, we all know this. It shouldn't come as news to us that we are to be about the business of making disciples. We have studied the great commission in Sunday school and bible studies. We've heard countless sermons throughout our lives that have told us just that.

I think we can all agree that this is the mission we have received from Jesus. There's no debate in the church about this. We'll all give the Great Commission of Jesus lip-service.

But how well do we do at fulfilling our Prime Directive? I'd like you to find someone sitting near to you and discuss that question together for just a moment. How effective are we as individuals and as a congregation at carrying out our mission to make disciples?

So what did you decide? How many of you would say we're doing an excellent job at making disciples for Jesus? How many would say we do a so-so job? A poor job? It appears we have some work to do!

That doesn't mean we are total failures at making disciples. There are many people who have grown tremendously in their discipleship as part of this congregation, many of whom are present in this room right now. We rejoice that there are people who come to faith and grow in their faith through Sebastian United Methodist Church.

But, if the truth be known, we as a church are not as successful at this Prime Directive as we should be. Why is that?

Sebastian Church is a good church. We are a busy church. We offer lots of opportunities for people to live out their faith, through worship, bible studies, Sunday school, fellowship groups, activities, and opportunities to minister to others. We do many things very well.

And yet, it seems that we are not particularly good at our primary mission of making disciples.

The problem is that, over the years, we have allowed ourselves to become distracted and therefore have forgotten our Prime Directive. As a congregation, we have lost our focus on the great commission of Jesus. Our church has experienced, what is sometimes referred to as, "mission creep" or "mission drift."

According to Thom Reiner and Eric Geiger, authors of the book [Simple Church: Returning to God's Process for Making Disciples](#), there are two ways churches can experience a drift away from their Prime Directive.

One is by drifting off-mission. Like a sheep that nibbles her way farther and farther from the flock until she is lost and in danger, congregations little by little drift away from their mission to make disciples. These congregations don't even notice that they are off track until they look up one day and see how far away they are from where they started. Does that describe the experience of this church?

We've all seen it happen: a new congregation is all excited about making disciples for Jesus, but, as time goes by, they become more interested in making church members. They become more obsessed with filling the pews and balancing the church budget than they are with making disciples. And because they have lost their focus, fewer and fewer people come to faith, attendance drops, and giving dries up. They have drifted off mission. And God will not bless a church that has drifted off-mission.

The other drift that affects many congregations is a drift toward complexity. Some congregations that do understand that their mission is to make disciples of Jesus have allowed the other activities in the life of the church to distract from the Prime Directive. Could that describe our church?

The premise of the book by Reiner and Geiger is that churches that are effective in making disciples are simple churches... "Simple" meaning focused. They zero in like a laser on the Prime Directive.

Everything they do in the life of their congregation contributes to the mission of making disciples for Jesus. The authors argue that most congregations have allowed themselves to become too complex, offering activities and programs that, while good in and of themselves, do not contribute to the process of making disciples of Jesus Christ.

These congregations have allowed the good to crowd out the best, the worthwhile to crowd out the essential. Because the energies and resources of the congregation are defused in so many different directions, the Prime Directive is neglected.

Take a moment to get together again with your conversation buddy, and discuss for a minute or two which of these kinds of drifts best describes our congregation. Are we at Sebastian Church guilty of drifting off-mission, or is our problem that we have drifted into complexity? Take just a moment to discuss that.

I suspect that we at Sebastian Church are probably somewhat guilty of both. How far off-mission has our church drifted? Have we lost focus on the main thing by allowing ourselves to become distracted many things?

Friends, if we don't make disciples, nothing else we do really matters. We might as well become a secular charity or a civic club, because we would no longer be a church!

This is such an important issue for our church that I believe we need to greatly enhance our Outreach Team, as we expand our focus on evangelism and community engagement. The goal would be to help our congregation develop a more effective process of reaching out to our community and making disciples. If you would like to serve on our Outreach Team, please let me know. My contact info is on the back of your bulletin. You may also contact Pastor Ginger Horton who is the chair of that team.

The disciples had been with Jesus three years. They had witnessed all his teachings and miracles. They experienced the trauma of Holy Week and the joy of Easter. After the resurrection they had spent weeks trying to make sense of what to do next. Jesus would no longer be with them in the flesh. Now what were they to do?

Then Jesus calls them together one last time on a hill in Galilee, and gives them their marching orders. And what does he tell them? “Go into all the world and have pot luck suppers.” No that’s not what he said. “Go only to your circle of close friends and invite them to church?” No. “Go have committee meetings to talk about taking care of your own members?” No. “Go and raise funds to care for your church buildings?”

Not that either. Now, none of those things are bad things, they're just not the main thing.

No, at his ascension, Jesus reminded us to “keep the main thing the main thing.” “Go into all the world and make disciples of all nations baptizing them the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to obey my commandments. And I will be with you always, even to the end of the age.”

Maybe it is time we took our commission seriously. In the years to come, I’d like for the us as a congregation to set as our goal to “make the main thing the main thing,” once again.

It is our Prime Directive – after all.

Amen.