

“Ship Shape”

Deuteronomy 6:1-9 • Colossians 3:1-17

First Presbyterian Church, Corpus Christi, TX

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Last week marked the 45th anniversary of the commissioning of the *USS Nimitz* Aircraft Carrier. The *Nimitz* is a nuclear-powered supercarrier and one of the largest warships in the world. There are actually 10 *Nimitz*-class aircraft carriers currently in the Navy's fleet 11 carriers. And they are all impressive.

At the waterline the *Nimitz* measures 1040 feet long with a beam of 134 feet with the flight deck even larger. Her top speed is about 31 knots, which is about 35 miles per hour. The *Nimitz* carries a crew of about 6,000 personnel, with about 2,500 in the air wing, and roughly 3,500 in the ship's company. It takes a lot of food to feed 6,000 people a day. For example, they use about 1,600 pounds of chicken a day.

Now I want to compare the *Nimitz* to another similar sized ship, the *Carnival Magic* cruise ship. The *Magic* is 1,004 feet long with a beam of 122 feet, making it only slightly smaller than the *Nimitz*. Its top speed is 25 knots, or about 29 miles per hour. What we're most interested in is that fact that the *Carnival Magic* also carries about 6,000 people on board and they consume about 1,300 pounds of chicken each day.

On paper, the *Nimitz* and the *Magic* have a lot in common. And yet they couldn't be more different. What distinguishes these two similarly sized ships, what makes them so radically different from one another, is their purpose – their mission. Each of these ships has a mission but they are very different missions. Of the 6,000 people on board the *Magic*, fewer than 1,400 are crew. Their primary job is to feed and entertain the 4,000 guests. That's why there are so many different options for dining, shows, movies, and recreation. When you go on a cruise you expect to be catered to. You want to be served and entertained. That's why cruise ships exist. That's their mission. You are the *customer*.

That's not how it is on the *Nimitz*, or any other Navy ship for that matter. Aircraft carriers do serve meals and provide some entertainment. But that's not the mission. This is important. Every person on board an aircraft carrier is there

to perform part of the mission. Everyone has a job to do. There are no customers on the *Nimitz*. The purpose of an aircraft carrier is not to entertain those on board. The purpose is to launch, fly, retrieve and maintain the 90 aircraft on board. Every one of the 6,000 people on that carrier understands how their job helps achieve the mission.

So why am I talking about aircraft carriers and cruise ships? Well, it has to do with what we've been talking about the past couple of weeks. This pandemic is giving us an opportunity to reflect on what it really means to be the church today. The question we are trying to answer is, “what is our mission?” The place to find the answer, of course, is in God's Word. Just as the crew of the *USS Nimitz* doesn't choose their mission, the church doesn't try to decide what our mission will be.

When you look at what the New Testament tells us about the mission of the church, it's very clear that the Church exists primarily to make disciples of Jesus. Actually, the Church exists to make disciples of Jesus who make disciples of Jesus. Just before he ascended to Heaven, Jesus said, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.”

In the original Greek, “make disciples” is the only command in the Great Commission. The rest of the verbs are actually participles: going, baptizing, teaching. Make disciples. Over the years the Church has lost sight of the fact that our primary task is to make disciples of Jesus. We have added all kinds of things into the church that are not part of our mission. We stopped being intentional about discipleship. Many of us would have a hard time explaining what it means to be a disciple of Jesus, much less how we make one.

One of the things that happened is that somewhere along the line we exchanged making disciples for “Christian education.” It was a subtle change at first, but a significant one. Education is about transferring knowledge. It’s about learning facts. Discipleship is about a relationship. When you look at how Jesus taught his disciples, it was by spending lots of time with them, teaching them along the way. Sometimes he taught them with words, but more often they learned by watching how Jesus lived and how he interacted with other people.

One of the things that happened when we bought into the idea of Christian Education is that we professionalized it. Just like we have professionals who teach our children in school, we decided we needed professionals to teach us at church. We began to see ourselves as *customers* of the church rather than part of the mission. The result is that for most of us, the only time we spend learning the Bible is during the Sunday morning sermon. Now I try to make sure that the sermon teaches not only what the Bible says but also how it applies to your life. But the truth is that’s less than thirty minutes a week. And most really committed Christians today worship an average of 2-3 times a month.

In Colossians 3, the Apostle Paul gives us a better way, a biblical way of being disciples and making disciples. He says, “Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom.” We’re looking at the “one another” commands of the New Testament and this morning we are talking about teaching one another. The church is not primarily an institution that provides religious services. The church is the Body of Christ. It’s a group of people who have been transformed by Jesus who then band together to build one another up.

Lesslie Newbigin was an Anglican missionary to India for many years. When he returned to England in the 1950s he found that the church there had lost its sense of purpose. They had forgotten their primary mission. In a lecture about the state of the church, Newbigin said, “It is surely a fact of inexhaustible significance that what our Lord left behind Him was not a book,

nor a creed, nor a system of thought, nor a rule of life, but a visible community.” According to Paul, that community has certain characteristics – compassionate hearts, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience, forgiveness, and above all love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony.”

But this community is also characterized by growing in faith from teaching one another. That means we must be willing to teach but we must also be willing to learn. In our reading from Deuteronomy 6, we’re told, “these words that I command you today shall be on your heart.” That’s another way of saying, “Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts,” and “Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly.” Each of us needs to spend time not just with God’s word but with God Himself! Then verse 7 says, “You shall teach them diligently to your children.” If you have children, teaching them the Word of God is one of your primary responsibilities.

Then Deuteronomy 6:7 continues, “you shall talk of them when you sit in your house, and when you walk by the way, and when you lie down, and when you rise.” In other words, you are to discuss God’s Word when you’re inside and outside, when you’re moving or being still. I think the point is that any time is a good time and any place is a good place to get together with a handful of people to talk about what the Bible says.

Right now we have several pilot groups experimenting with a way to make disciples who make disciples. These are groups of four people who have made a commitment to spend the next six to twelve months growing in their faith and learning to be disciples of Jesus. They get together about once a week and talk about the Bible. Currently the groups are only able to meet through the internet. But once we’re able the groups will meet in person – maybe for breakfast or lunch, maybe just for coffee or ice cream. We spend about 15 minutes a day reading, meditating, praying, and making some notes about what God is saying to us in that reading. When we get together with our discipleship partners we discuss what you’ve read and written.

We talk about where God's Word is intersecting with our lives. It's amazing how much more you get out of the Bible when you hear how it impacts others.

We are going to try to create more of these little discipleship groups later in the year. Here's my challenge to all of you: consider participating. We're only talking about 15 minutes a day for a total of 60 to 90 minutes a week. But what a difference it will make in your relationship with Christ and your relationships with other people because you will be doing what Jesus commanded you to do.

Colossians 3:16 says, "Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom, singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, with thankfulness in your hearts to God." An important part of teaching one another is worshiping together. That's why it was so strange and difficult these past few weeks when we couldn't gather for worship. When you come to worship each week, pay attention to those around you, because your genuine worship is contagious and helps others to experience God in worship. And pay attention to the presence of the Holy Spirit in worship.

There's one more ship I want us to look at today. Not far from here is the *USS Lexington*. The *Lexington* is a little smaller than the other two boats at 872 feet long and 93 feet wide. When you look at the *Lexington* it looks very much like the *Nimitz*. But think about this: what's the top speed of the *Lex*? It's ZERO. It never moves. How many personnel are stationed on board? None. They all go home at night. Even though the *Lexington* LOOKS like an aircraft carrier, its mission is more like a cruise ship. The mission of the *Lexington* today is to entertain. One of the tragedies of our modern age is that many churches LOOK like churches but their mission is more like something else. Their mission has become entertainment or politics or merely social. We need to make sure that we are putting all of our efforts into the mission Jesus has given us. It's only as we make disciples of Jesus – people learning to follow Jesus in every area of their lives – that we will be carrying out our true mission.

Amen.