

Greenfield Hill Congregational Church

1045 Old Academy Road
Fairfield, Connecticut 06824

Telephone: 203-259-5596



Date: January 8, 2012
Sermon Title: Mumsense: A Theology of Missiology
from "The Book of Mormon" and "The Muppets"
Scripture: Matthew 28:16-20
Pastor: Rev. David Johnson Rowe

Matthew 28:16-20

Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them. When they saw him, they worshipped him; but some doubted. And Jesus came and said to them, "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, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age."

I grew up in an era of fancy sermon titles, big words with profound thoughts. Yet, for most of my career, I didn't use sermon titles, but once our church got a Web site, there had to be a way to distinguish sermons and to grab the attention of folks who use the Web site. But I tried to keep the titles simple, clear. So today I've crafted a somewhat tongue-in-cheek title that harkens back to the good old days of impressive titles: "Mumsense: A Theology of Missiology from 'The Book of Mormon' and 'The Muppets.'" Theology is "God talk." Missiology is the study of "mission." "The Book of Mormon" is a successful Broadway musical. And "The Muppets" is a very popular new movie that actually features two of our church members who play, if I counted correctly, 13 of the Muppets! Taken all together, there are a lot of lessons about mission and maybe some fun along the way.

Let's start with some terms. Mission: at its root, mission is purpose, as soldiers go on a mission. Astronauts go on a mission. People ask, "What is your mission, your purpose?" Companies print "mission statements" in their annual reports. Businesses and nonprofits wrestle to come up with creative, pithy, descriptive "mission statements." I've seen a "mission statement" (sort of) on the wall next to the cash register at McDonald's: "Our mission is

to deliver you a decent hamburger in a short amount of time for a reasonable price in a friendly way."

At its root, mission is just a lofty term for what you and I do with our lives. But in the world of religion, "mission" takes on another meaning. In the world of religion, in church talk, "mission" is what we do for others, and "missionaries" are the folks who do it. Sticking with terms, "foreign mission" is what we do for others overseas, outside America, beyond our borders; "home mission" is what we do for others in our own backyard, for our fellow citizens. Put it all together, and you have something like this: Christians believe they have a purpose to represent God's Good News in the best possible way near and far. That's "mission."

I have to keep this sermon to 17 minutes, so I can't go into all the details and disputes and philosophies about mission. Truth is some like it, some don't. The simple truth is that mission is like everything else; there is good and bad. People who do it right, people who do it wrong. There are good movies and bad movies, good pizza and bad pizza, good sermons and bad sermons. And there's good mission and bad mission.

Read my new book. Seriously. The book is written on several levels, several messages, but one of the most important for me was to give a picture of how to do mission right and how *not* to do it. Noble purposes, noble intentions, the very nobility of mission itself has been ruined by bad people, bad motives, bad methods, bad attitude, bad religion. By "bad" I mean everything from immoral to sloppy, from ill conceived and poorly led, from racist to selfish, from naïveté to arrogance.

My book has been out now for three months, about a thousand people have read it, and I've heard from a lot of them, a lot of you. What people love are the stories, and the stories are all about mission. Good people trying to do good things. Stuff gets in the way. Revolutions. Civil war. Ego. Turf battles. International politics. Backstabbing. Stupidity. It's all there in my book. Mission gone bad. But there are also stories that lift your spirits and fill your heart with joy.

The greatest people I have ever known, the most heroic, most energetic, most visionary, most amazing people I have ever known were doing mission, and doing it right and well and good. And that's my mission today, to have us think about how to do mission right and well and good. In fact, I ask you to do me a favor. Spread the book around. Take a copy home today or five copies and give them to people who care, to people you know who are trying to do the right thing. I don't care if you leave the whole \$10 or \$5 or \$1 or none. Just join me in helping mission to be done right, well, and good. I also

can't take half the sermon to convince you that as Christians we are supposed to do mission!

Our Scripture lesson is about as clear as you can get. Jesus's last words on earth, his final utterance, his marching orders, or a clarion call to mission. "Go and do it," Jesus says, that bluntly. "Go and do it." It's not as though it's up for debate. Just "Go and do it." In another of my books I call it "Nike theology," echoing the famous Nike slogan, "Just Do It." The great Christian theologian Emil Brunner said, "The church exists by mission, as fire exists by burning." It's who we are, it's what we do, it's our purpose: mission.

Let me be blunt, even bragging. I think this is a great church. Greenfield Hill Church is a great church. We've got our priorities right. We do what we can. And we do it with the right spirit. So this is not a sermon designed to guilt-trip you into more mission. If anything, I'm applauding you. You care deeply. You give generously. You jump into mission with both feet. I came up with a formula for good mission. The mission ought to be good for God, good for the beneficiary, and good for donors. We live that to a "T" in our church. God gets glorified. People get help. We get blessed.

There is plenty of mission work that does one out of three or two out of three. We do three out of three. Last Monday, 32 of our church people went to St. George's Church in Bridgeport to feed the hungry, the lonely, the needy. Thirty-two people, 25 teens and seven adults. It was a holiday. Christmas break for college kids, Christmas break for high school kids, a holiday for adults, the day after New Year's Day. Aren't people supposed to be tired, cranky, hung over, overstuffed, lying on a couch watching football, playing video games? Instead, 32 people chopped, cooked, sliced, diced, poured, served, picked up, cleaned up. Plus, they prayed, sang, smiled, greeted, laughed, and listened. Thirty-two people, 32 church members, 32 of you spent Monday night making God happy (after all, Jesus did say that feeding the hungry was equal to feeding him!). But they also made the hungry happy. And guess what, they made themselves happy! I watched them closely. I looked at them carefully. I spoke to almost every one. And they were all very, very happy. That's mission. Done good, done well, done right.

Back in November the Fernandeses took us to Broadway to see "The Book of Mormon." "The Book of Mormon" is an old-fashioned musical, a lot of song and dance, a simple story line, good sets, upbeat, a happy ending, great fun. And great lessons. We loved it! But before you rush out to take your beloved grandmother or your 10-year-old daughter, let me admit: it is vulgar, sacrilegious, and raw. With great lessons! O.K., quick summary. Yes, it is about Mormons. You get the basic Mormon story, Mormon jokes,

Mormon culture, which includes all the young men going off for two-year assignments as "missionaries."

Every Mormon is expected to go on a mission, to be a missionary. It's always in the sports pages. Some big college football player or basketball player at Brigham Young University or Utah State is skipping a year or two to do his "mission." Mitt Romney is talking a lot about his missionary stint in Paris. Yes, missionaries go to Paris! And Fairfield! I've had Mormon missionaries come to my house on Bronson Road to fulfill their mission. It didn't go well. I said I'd read their book if they read mine. They refused!

Well, in the musical, a bunch of young, energetic, clean-cut, idealistic Mormons end up in Uganda, Central Africa, in a rural village ravaged by AIDS, dominated by a brutal warlord named "Butt Naked." The missionary zeal and loving innocence run smack into cold, harsh, brutal, evil reality. It knocks the stuffing out of them. They lose their innocence, they lose their confidence, they lose their faith.

Until... until they get back to basics. Until they lose their Mormonism, their Americanism, they lose their cultural arrogance, they lose their smugness and sense of "woe-is-me" martyrdom, and they get down to that cross (and I use the word "cross" on purpose), they get down to that cross, that intersection of humanity and divinity, that place where God's love and human need rub up against each other. That's mission.

"The Book of Mormon" isn't really about Mormonism. I don't think tens of thousands of people would pay top dollar just to see what makes Mormons tick! The musical could be about the Peace Corps, Vista, any charitable effort, any development project, and a church mission; it could be about our 200 people off to Appalachia or the 32 people who showed up last Monday to feed the poor in Bridgeport, or our FOCI medical team in India this very morning.

In any such effort the key questions are the same: what's our attitude? What's our spirit? What's our "M.O."? What's our purpose? What's our mission? Jesus is pretty clear. "Go ye into all the world ... teaching *all* that I have commanded." Which is what, exactly? Again, he's pretty clear. The two great commandments: "Love God. Love your neighbor." The Beatitudes: Do what you do with gentleness, humility, peace. The Good Samaritan, where Jesus redefines a neighbor as the one in need and the one in a position to meet that need. The final exam, Matthew 25, where we are told specifically, practically, look for who is hurting and stop the hurting. And the Great Commission, "Just do it."

Which brings me to "The Muppets"! What a delight! And what fun. It combines everything from nostalgia for old friends brought back to life to the eternal yearning to "Let's put on a show!" From impishness and whimsy to plain old human nature at work. Dreams unfulfilled, love unrequited, friendships lost, greed run amok. And redemption, hope. American ingenuity. The "can-do" spirit. Generosity. And mission.

I didn't go to "The Muppets" expecting them to give me a better sermon about "mission" than I'm giving you! But they did! It was shorter and better acted. Let me give you a summary, I hope without ruining it. The Muppets are forgotten, over, done, has-beens, scattered, nobody cares. A paltry Muppet Museum in Hollywood is in disarray and threatened not only with closure, but also with destruction by an evil mogul. But two of the Muppets' biggest fans are determined to save the museum and resurrect the Muppets and get them back together, recapture the energy, the fun, the magic ... the MISSION. And for me, that is the key to the whole story. Kermit the frog, Miss Piggy, Fozzie Bear, Beaker and Rowlf and Sweetums — they've all moved on in their lives, given up on their old selves, not happily, but hey, you do what you've got to do. A little jaded. A little cynical. A little hurt. A little lost.

Until ... until they are reminded of their mission. What were the Muppets about? What did they stand for? What was their purpose? What got them up in the morning? What was their motivation? Why did people need them? Why should they come back? What was their mission? And slowly, one by one, Muppet by Muppet, they remember their mission: laughter. Yes, a fire exists by burning. A church exists by mission. Muppets exists by laughter. It was time to laugh again.

This is a good Sunday to talk about mission. This very morning our FOCI medical team arrives in India, ready to do two weeks of free surgeries, meeting as many as 500 patients, visiting our rural village clinics, doing 200 surgeries, quite literally bringing God's divine touch to thousands. The team is led by two doctors, our own George Longstreth and his buddy Joe Bardenheier of Essex, Connecticut. Two retired doctors, worked hard their whole careers, they have a chance to enjoy a well-earned retirement, in peace, without hassle, no responsibilities, play some golf, lie on a beach.

Instead, for the 15th year, they are leading 10 doctors and nurses to nowhere. Our hospital, our FOCI is in the middle of nowhere. Working in primitive conditions, living simply, battling mosquitoes, looking out for scorpions, eating curry, doctoring 14 hours a day, trying to save a decrepit old missionary hospital, facing legendary Indian red tape, risking their own personal health, paying their own way — every dime — partnering with very

imperfect Indian colleagues, all in the name of a mission organization nobody but you has ever heard of, which we even mispronounce as FOCI! What on earth are they doing? Mission. Plain and simple. Mission.

They know it, the people they help know it, the people they work with know it, the people who give to fund them know it. Mission. Purpose. Done well, done right, done good.

Muppets got to laugh. A fire's got to burn. We've got a mission. It IS that simple. And you do it great.