

Needs-Oriented Outreach: Ten Years On

Introduction:

Prophetic Multiculturalism, Kingdom Building Stewardship, Contextual Brethren Life, Intentional Christian Hospitality and today, Needs-oriented Outreach. Our Core Values that we've talked about.

Today we'll talk about this Core Value, "Needs-oriented Outreach," what we mean by "Outreach," what particular shape it takes for us as a church. We'll look at a tip or two to help us live out this Core Value, and I hope when we're done we'll be thinking about this Core Value, how each of us can live in light of it, and how it relates to the stuff we do together, even now when it's still hard to be together in the ways we're used to.

But first, let's Pray:

Prayer:

Walk Through:

So. Let's do this! Core Value to thoughts and back again, just like last week:

Needs-oriented Outreach: "A"

A. As a core value of Smoky Row, outreach includes

both evangelism and missions. Evangelism tends to focus on telling nearby people what God has done for the world through Jesus. Missions tends to emphasize serving people who are far away through actions. At Smoky Row, we strive to unite these two Christian mandates—evangelism and missions—under the holistic understanding of outreach. Just as Jesus communicated the work of God in the world by both word and deed, our outreach does the same.

Needs-oriented Outreach: Regarding “A”

So. Outreach. It’s not a very “Christian” word, really, although I think it’s getting used more and more as time passes by the Church, as Christians try to shake-off any baggage those outside have with other words, like “evangelism” and “missions.” And, really, we’re using the world to talk about those two things: Evangelism and Missions. But, like, maybe we started doing it back before it was cool? Does that matter? (It doesn’t matter.)

But very practically, our Core Value reminds us that we often think of “Evangelism” and “Missions” in different, particular ways.

Generally, when we think of “evangelism” we think that it has to do with telling someone about Jesus. Telling them about Jesus. It’s a thing you do really quickly, usually,

without much regard to context or need, or fitting the telling into your own normal life. Evangelism is usually something that we think of as happening outside normal life for us; it's like going skydiving or building a house; it's an event that you have to prepare for in some really unusual way.

And when it comes to Missions, we can tend to think of it as stuff we do; whether on a special trip, or as a life, a way of living that is usually far away out there: It's immersive, where we do far more than talk about the gospel, but we basically serve and serve and serve and either verbally connect our service to the Lord, or the assumption is that it is already connected to the Lord because our place of service is a churchy place, some ministry thing.

So when we think of Evangelism and Missions we think of them in very different ways. Our emotional and practical responses to them are very different. And we're using the word Outreach to gather in one place, under one umbrella, Evangelism and Missions. And, honestly: it is unhealthy that they have been separated into two the way that they have. It's not good. Both are part of the Christian life and both are pieces of one thing: reaching out to people with the love of God. They are part of the forward journey into ministry of the Christian life, which includes both living the life of, and sharing information about, the Word of God, Jesus Christ.

Remember our Mission Statement? "We join together"--the

outward journey into relationships--“to pursue God’s love”--the upward journey into deeper awareness of God’s love for us--“become more like Jesus”--the inward journey of inner transformation that results in outer change--“and build God’s Kingdom through word and deed.”

This is the forward journey into the life of Christian Ministry, which is given to every Christian--along with the power to get it done. And it’s a journey that is both action and speech, both telling and doing. The separation of these two parts of the Christian life into nearly antagonistic caricatures--Evangelism on the one hand, Missions on the other--is terrible.

We’re using the term Outreach to gather them back together, piece them back together. So: Is Outreach Missions or is it Evangelism? That question makes no sense, right? These are two partners who dance around one another, come together now and then, and split apart: but who are always engaged with each other, hold hands the entire dance. Or if you prefer, they’re like a choreographed martial arts fake movie fight. Whatever.

When Jesus says to his disciples in Acts “you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth,” he doesn’t say “Okay, consider Jerusalem “Evangelism,” and, umm, we’ll call

Samaria “Missions”--there’s a synagogue there that needs bunk beds built for their orphanage. It’s all one thing, one long chain of Jesus-oriented word and deed witnessing.

Our use of the term Outreach is important, because we’re attempting to break down the dividing wall of hostilities that can stand between Evangelism and Missions, but should have never been built in the first place. Which side of a coin is most important? Which wing on an airplane?

So whatever association we might have with the idea of “outreach,” what I hope is that from now on, whatever context we’re in, whatever situation we find ourselves in, when this word comes up, we immediately associate it with that “word and deed” engagement with the world that makes up the Christian Life. I really do want us to claim this word; if not for the Church, then at least for us. Outreach is the dance Missions and Evangelism dance together.

Let’s keep Reading.

Needs-oriented Outreach: “B”

B. Yet regardless of the form it takes, SRBC’s outreach is always needs-oriented. This means that our outreach takes into account the needs of the people we are trying to reach. We do this because it is often in meeting a need that the message of God’s work through Jesus can have the most lasting

impact. However, it is also clear that Jesus models a paradigm of meeting needs while telling people about himself and God's kingdom. Sometimes the lines blur: meeting needs and reaching out with the message of God's kingdom are, for Jesus, often the same thing. The needs we try to meet can take two forms:

Needs-oriented Outreach: Regarding "B"

We'll stop here for a moment: Our Outreach at Smoky Row is of a very particular type. It's Needs-oriented. This is both strategic and biblical.

The truth is, the Lord meets people in their places of greatest need. It's in brokenness, in desperation, in loneliness and forsakenness and want, in "being lost," that most people first come to realize the comfort and peace and love of God. Where there are needs, there is the Lord. Many of us first encountered God in a personally powerful way during a time of great need.

And so our Outreach takes this into consideration. When we do those things that many people separate--those evangelizing or missional things--we do them with the needs of the people with whom we are engaging in mind. We do them with the needs of the people with whom we're engaging in mind.

We do this because if we are acting as ambassadors of the Kingdom of God-- messengers of the good news of what God has done and is doing and will do through Jesus--then of course want to act when our actions are most effective. And our words and our deeds done and spoken in the name of Christ are most effective when they are done and spoken while meeting the needs that people have.

Regarding "B": Beyond Effectiveness

But beyond this effectiveness question, this truth about God meeting people in their neediness, there is the simple fact that we are called to meet needs. We are called to meet needs; the passage that was read to us this morning about giving "to the least of these," should be a startling passage, it should make us consider our choices, our checkbooks, our time. Because we, as those who bear Jesus' name, simply are supposed to meet needs. We are supposed to meet needs.

And this "supposed to"--in truth, it's a privilege. We're invited by God, given resources that are natural and supernatural, to--if not change the world--change someone's life. Care for them in the most human and honest of ways. Feed them. Clothe them. Ease their thirst. Be present with them in very lonely places. And as we feed, clothe, offer drink and our time alongside these ones, we do it not because it's what our church or our pastor says we should do, not because we're afraid we'll disappoint our

parents or our children, not because we're hoping to earn enough chips to cash in for a ticket to heaven, but just because, really, it's what Jesus asks of us.

And without Jesus, there's just death, you know, waiting for us--and with it all the meaninglessness, hopelessness, and worthlessness of whatever we could fill our days with. But we've been saved from these; and so we live out our salvation acting like Jesus for others.

Our outreach is needs-oriented because needs are where God meets people, meeting needs in the power and name of Christ makes the most lasting difference, and more than this: Jesus met needs, and it is just what those who have been gathered into him do, too.

Can we remember when our needs have been met by God? Do you remember when you were first introduced to the Lord? Can you remember when you were most recently re-introduced? What need did God meet you in the middle of?

But "needs" of course is a tricky term. Let me keep reading from our written Core Value:

Needs-oriented Outreach: "Types of Needs"

A: Felt needs. These are things that someone believes are critical to his or her life. Though to

another person such felt needs may seem quite unnecessary, we believe that if they are truly important to the individual they are also truly important to God, and thus do deserve our efforts to meet them.

B: Real needs. However, such “felt needs” are second to “real needs,” such as food, shelter, clothing, health care, companionship, healing, and the like. These “real needs” are those things that truly are critical to life and well being. Our needs-oriented outreach focuses primarily on these real needs.

Needs-oriented Outreach: Regarding “Types of Needs”

Needs is a tricky term. And so we’ve defined it, right?

Two kinds: Felt needs and Real needs.

Felt needs are simply the things we feel like we need, but if we were asked at our healthiest moment and we answered most honestly, we’d say, “I don’t need it, not really. I just feel like I do.” And this gets tricky, because life is complex, and over time and by degrees everyone seems to move from being thankful for having enough to actively acquiring the best we can acquire. We become accustomed to a certain way of living and tie our lives so deeply to things

that we can't imagine life without them...but really, at the end of the day, some of these things that we people say we "need," we just don't.

And we have a choice when we're discovering the felt needs of people: to write them off and ignore them, or instead remember that every single person matters to God, and what matters to that person also matters to God. Our hearts are not unknown by the Lord, nor are their longings dismissed as valueless. And if we have been deputized by Christ to act on his behalf for others, we've got to care about the felt needs of others, and not write them off. Smoky Row tries to meet the felt needs of people; we just do.

But in a world of limited resources, we simply can't meet every felt need, and if we have to make choices, we make the choice to meet the real needs people have.

Needs that if left unmet leave people dead or less than human. And so our Outreach focuses on meeting these real needs, "food, shelter, clothing, health care, companionship, healing, and the like"--as it's put in our core value.

It's worth each of us taking time to think about: What are your felt needs? What are your real needs? Have we confused the two? Does any real need in your life go unmet? And what should you do with the answer to that

question?

And follow me to the ocean, because our Core Value has a “C.” I’ll read it. And stop making weird, bad puns.

Needs-oriented Outreach: “C”

C. Finally, just as God’s reign was ushered into the world by God becoming one of us, so we do ministry by immersing ourselves in the contexts into which God is calling us. Such incarnational ministry is articulated in Paul’s paradigmatic statement: “I have become all things to all, in order that by all means I might save some” (1 Cor 9:22b).

Needs-oriented Outreach: Regarding “C”

Our Core Value reminds us that when we are at our best we are engaged in reaching out to others in ways that meet their needs with the love of God seen in Jesus. We do this by word and deed. We call it Needs-oriented Outreach.

And ultimately, ultimately, we’re talking about Christmas. We’re talking about incarnation. Incarnation, Incarnation, Incarnation. It is a huge theological word; we trot it out every December. Show it off, and put it away. But it really is an hugely impactful principle of the Christian life.

God took on skin and bones so that he could save it; God became flesh because flesh needed him to. God entered

into our context because the only way to save us was from the inside, not outside.

If we want our Outreach efforts to have the most impact we always need, as much as we can, to enter into the context of those people whose needs we are trying to meet. We need to cross the gaps that stand between them and us, and meet them in their own place, the same way the Lord entered into our space.

Regarding “C”: Our Own Context

But if we need to enter into the contexts of those we are trying to meet, we first have to realize that we ourselves are already contextualized; we all have particular contexts that are unique to us. We live in particular neighborhoods, we work or play in particular places, we speak particular languages and have particular shared cultural experiences. We are already contextualized, each of us.

We gather together this morning out of some context that is more or less stable most of the time. We are contextualized, we each are found in context. And so the very simplest place to start practicing Needs-oriented Outreach, reaching out with Christ, is where we are.

This is so obvious we maybe don't need to say it, but starting where we are is low-hanging fruit, you know. Paul may have “become all things for all people,” but he didn't

have to become all that much different for those people who were a lot like him in the first place. The immediate context where we find ourselves is the easiest place for us to reach out with Christ in a way that meets needs. And of course I'm talking about each of us as individuals or households, here, but I want to because even if we've checked in, sometimes things change around us in ways we don't realize. There's something about this Core Value that we really, really get right as a congregation, together--so much so that I do want us to consider how well we're doing this as individuals and households.

So what contexts do you find yourself in? Where are you much of the time these days? Who in those places can you reach out to, with Christ, in a way that keeps in mind and meets when possible, their needs? These are important questions.

Regarding "C": Toward a Shared Context

But it is important, too, to be honest about some things: it is not easy to "become all things to all people," it is not easy to share in the contexts of those we are trying to reach out to. It's not easy, but it's not impossible either; because of course, the incarnation reminds us that nothing is impossible with God.

And if we can't enter into the contexts of other people--we can't move across town, can't quit our jobs, can't uproot

ourselves in some dramatic way--then one thing we can do--and follow me close here--is create a shared context. Does this make sense? We can create a shared context. A shared space, where we can easily discover the needs--real and felt--that people have.

Just for kicks, let's call it a friendship.

Regarding "C": Friendships

Making friends isn't easy. It's not natural. It rarely happens immediately, and without costing something. COVID has made friendship-making really, really hard. It's also given those of us who don't want to try it, but could with many neighbors if we so choose, an excuse to not try it.

A friendship is maybe the most powerful context for effective Needs-oriented Outreach. Friends share needs with each other, real and felt; and receive the help of each other when it is given. Friends respect the positions one another take on all sorts of things, and listen to one another as they share the things that are important to them--from God and the gospel to what they had for breakfast.

A friendship that is fully ripened--or at least on its way there--is a thing of freedom, where friends freely are themselves and act like themselves. And if we are Christians, seeking to reach out in Christ's love to meet the needs of those around us, there is nothing as powerful as a

friendship for getting it done.

And because of this it is worth our while to work at creating the shared context of a friendship with those around us. Building a friendship is like building a little Christmas. And its power echoes the power of the first Christmas. Can change history. So who are your friends?

And for those of us who have hauled ourselves from our own contexts, and entered into other ones so that we might meet needs--which is something as simple as showing up on Saturday for the food pantry, or crossing the ocean to build a church--have you made friends? Are you building friendships in those places with those you serve?

Because if we haven't thought about it--and this is way more relevant for the Outreach we do over and over and over--but if we haven't thought about becoming friends with those whose needs we are discovering and trying to meet then we are losing out on the most powerful opportunity to connect our words and our deeds to the God who empowers us.

Conclusion:

I hope a lot of things at this moment.

I hope that we're thinking of our lives. Where are we? What contexts do we find ourselves in? And who there has needs

we could meet in the name and the power of the Lord?

And if we are for some reason unwilling to meet the needs of others, or unwilling to connect our needs-oriented Outreach to the Jesus who has saved us, then I hope we can figure out why.

And for those of us who are working or have worked at becoming all things to all people so that we can meet needs, have jumped from our familiar contexts into the contexts that other people find themselves in, I simply hope we can continue to do it! Keep on keeping on.

But I hope that all of us can go beyond this and just start making friends. I know what I'm asking of some of us, and when I'm asking it. Humans are not good friend-makers, much of the time. We have been disappointed often enough to know better. But Christ sends us back out there to create these powerful relationships where we can meet needs in his name without fear, and reach out with his love without shame. I hope we don't divide evangelism and missions, don't dismiss one and idolize the other, but begin to think about all our efforts at both living out and talking about Jesus and God's work as Outreach.

And there's always a Chicken and Egg question when it comes to these Core Values. Do they start with each of us, or start with all of us together? The answer is always,

frustratingly, “Yes.” But I do know that when it comes to us together, we’re good at this; let’s get better, even as we each get better.

Let me end on this, a thing Jesus said once:

“You are the light of the world. A city on a hill cannot be hidden. Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven.”

People are in darkness. Some of them need matches, some of them need to learn how to build a fire, some of them need to believe that the rumor of light is real, and some of them just need tears wiped away from their eyes, need held until they are brave enough to open them, so that they can see the light they formerly delighted in.

What are the needs of the people around you? If you don’t know find out. We can’t hide what we’ve been entrusted with; but it would be a waste of time to set up a thousand lamps in an empty field on a sunny day.

Be strategic and holy as you share Jesus--both by word and deed, by speech and behavior--to those around you. But do

it, somehow, even now when it is so hard to do. Our Core Value calls us to it, which is all well and good; but more persuasive than this is that Jesus calls us to it too, and gives us all of himself to get it done.