

What Mission Looks Like

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Third Presbyterian Church
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Jeremiah 29:1, 4-14 and Luke 10:1-12, 17-20

Last evening, nearly 180 of us shared in Meals with a Meaning. From all reports, good times were had by all. Meals with a Meaning does two things, both important. It connects us at a deeper level, providing a unique relationship-building opportunity. And it raises important funds to support our ministry. Thanks Beth Aten, Hope Herting and Becky D'Angelo-Veitch for organizing, to all who participated, and a special word of thanks to those of you who hosted. We are grateful indeed.

Several weeks ago, when the city's primary campaign season was in full bloom, we received a steady stream of visitors to our front door. It was an important primary – mayor, city council, school board. I appreciated the commitment of the canvassers, so, despite occasional interruptions of Jeopardy, I always answered the door, to engage in a bit of conversation.

So the doorbell rang, and I popped up off the couch. When I opened the door, I knew this was different, no election campaigner. Two women, well dressed. Jehovah's Witnesses. They asked if we could talk and I said yes, for a few minutes. Their topic that day was "angels," about which I confessed that I hadn't give much thought, though I knew that angels played a prominent role in the Bible.

I'm not sure they knew exactly what to do with me. I told them I was a Christian. I didn't mention that I was a minister because that often elicits a response I'm not seeking.

But allow me a tangent.

- Oh, you're a minister. My second cousin is a priest from Nebraska. Do you know him?

- Oh, you're a minister. I used to go to church.
- Oh, you're a minister. Do you really believe all that stuff?
- Oh, you're a minister. You must believe this about that, or that about this. You'd be surprised, I sometimes say.
- Oh, you're a minister. Have you read this book, or that book?
- Oh, you're a minister. That must be very interesting.

In this case, I clearly wanted to tell these women I was a Christian, but I didn't want to mention what I do, because I didn't want them either to defer to me or try to out-Bible me. Both can happen. Neither is desirable.

So we talked a few more minutes. They gave me a copy of "The Watchtower." We agreed to pray for one another. I said that while we may disagree on some things, we agree on some important things as well, and that I appreciated their commitment. All in all, a win for civility and respect, on both sides. Yay!

I thought of those two women as I read this morning's gospel passage, from Luke's gospel. I thought about the context and culture in which they – in a non-doorbell-ringing and religion-declining world – would dress up and go out, knowing that they would encounter silence or indifference or skepticism or outright hostility, perhaps the occasional decent conversation and even rarely a truly interested party. What was success to them, and did that even matter.

We can link the gospel passage with the passage Tim read from the prophet Jeremiah. What is our vocation as witness, as missionary, here, and now? What are we called to do, and why, and how, and what does success look like for us?

Each passage speaks its word into a particular culture. Jeremiah spoke his words some 600 years before the birth of Jesus. The people had been exiled from the land of Israel by the Babylonian empire. They were faced with a difficult question. How to live in exile. Do you settle where you are, both feet planted, or do you live as if you will return to your home land, the promised land, one foot always out the door?

Some 600 years later, Jesus spoke to his followers and prepared to send them out, two by two, to share his message. They, too, were faced with a difficult question. How to live when you know you will not be well-received.

We live neither in exile nor in a hostile culture, but we do live in a culture that is bewildering and indifferent, not sure what it thinks about religion, or absolutely sure what it thinks about religion that is simply *not* the religion we embrace.

And we live in a culture that is fractured in so many ways, that exhibits huge gulfs between those who have and those who do not, between those who look one way and those who look another, certainly between beliefs. It's *always* a matter of how we live in a strange land, whatever that land is, how we, as followers of Jesus, exist as resident aliens. That's the faith story. In fact, in our history, the points when we've been the *most* comfortable have probably been when we've been most distant from our truest core.

In exile, Jeremiah offers surprising advice. Build where you are. Plant gardens where you are. Marry and multiply where you are. It is not your ultimate physical and spiritual home, but it is your temporary home and it is where you are.

And then this extraordinary ethical move: "...seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the LORD on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare." Justice will come, says God, and I will eventually return you to your home. But for now, make a difference where you are, including bringing justice and compassion in the city where you've been exiled.

Jesus offers distinct, but related advice. Go out, two by two. There is so much work to be done, but not many to do it. And when you get out there, to the towns and villages, to the backstreets and main streets, you will meet challenges, even hostilities. "I am sending you out like lambs into the midst of wolves," Jesus says. This will be hard work, very hard. But the Spirit will be with you, and whatever you encounter, whatever you experience, you will go with my blessing. That is success enough.

When we think of the meaning of the word mission, or practitioners of mission, called missionaries, do we carry an outdated concept? People going off to convert those "less fortunate," with the phrase "less fortunate" in huge quotation marks. That model was tinged with, if not soaked in, an imperialist view that included racism and classism and many other cultural and theological sins.

If I've learned anything in all of my mission work, from tutoring to LGBTQ rights to the recent visit from our Kenyan partners, it's that I have so much more to receive than give, have so much more to learn than ever could be offered.

If we use this morning's texts as benchmarks, we craft an entirely new definition of what mission looks like, and an entirely new job description for missionary. Mission seeks the welfare of the city. Mission shares the good news that the kingdom of God has come near.

That will look like many things, but those are very good parameters to help undergird and direct our work. And it's a very good job description, for those who might seek to shirk the job title of "missionary" because we associate it with my knock-on-the-door experience, awkwardness, proselytizing, inappropriateness. This is not that, though it's always OK to share our motivations and inspirations as we seek the welfare of the city and help to usher in God's kingdom.

What does mission look like? Three examples from our own life in these days.

>Today is the Children's Sabbath, an initiative of the Children's Defense Fund in which we have been participating for nearly a decade. "Sabbath" has two meanings here – a period defined by time and a state of being that is devoid of violence and trauma and stress. A Children's Sabbath is a commitment by us to work for the day when all children, our children, this church's children, the children of the city, will be adequately fed and sheltered, nurtured and protected, cherished and loved. Sign a letter after church today, as we recommit ourselves to the welfare of the children in our own lives and the children of the city. That's what mission looks like.

>This Thursday we are privileged to host the *New York Times* columnist Nikole Hannah-Jones. This is an initiative of Great Schools for All, for which Third Church plays a leadership role. Hannah-Jones writes about education, and focusing on how racism and poverty prevent urban children from experiencing the kind of education they so clearly deserve. I hope you will come Thursday night. You will be challenged, but you will also be connected to hundreds of others who believe that the status quo is unacceptable, and who are committed to change. That's what mission looks like.

>Two weeks from yesterday will be our eighth annual East Avenue Grocery Run. More than 1000 runners and walkers will participate. Many of you will either run or walk or volunteer or all of the above. The Grocery Run is the primary generator of funds for our Dining Room Ministry and Food Cupboard, and it increasingly supports food programs throughout the city, including our partners at the South Wedge Food Program in the historic Calvary-St. Andrews site. That hunger exists at all in a land of such abundance is a cultural blight and a scandal to the gospel. That we can do something about it – by walking and running, by inviting and supporting, is a creative response that makes a difference. That’s what mission looks like.

These are all good things, and there are many more examples from this place and many others of which you are a part. They make a difference. They advance the welfare of the city and they demonstrate, in flesh and blood, real-life ways, what the kingdom of God looks like.

Mission is engaging the culture, wherever we find it, not to be adversaries, but to be conversation partners, not to lambaste or harangue or condemn, but to bring the best of our values – hope, justice, reconciliation – to the table. Sometimes that will look like collaboration. Sometimes that will look like education. Sometimes that will look like protest and resistance. Sometimes it will look like a 5K, or a guest speaker, or a letter to a politician. And it will be done always from a place of humility and integrity and clarity – we do what we do because of what we believe, because we are committed to the welfare of the city and because we believe the kingdom of God is at hand, a kingdom that looks so much more like a peaceable kingdom than a conversion scene from early morning television.

We are missionaries, and we do what we do because it’s what we are called to do – not because it fits within our lifestyle or our comfort level, nor because we think it might work, be successful. We will face many things. Success. Receptivity. Hostility. Uncertainty. Skepticism. Indifference. No matter. We do what we do from a sense of community, this community, and with the faith that the God who calls us travels with us and the Christ who sends us out is present with us always. Amen.