



“Risk-Taking Mission”

Texts: Matthew 25:31-46

a sermon by the Rev. Anna von Winckler

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FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH - EVANSVILLE, INDIANA

Do you remember that a few months ago Sue Hartig, our treasurer, started a “Did You Know” blurb in the newsletter and in *Connect*? I’m sure you learned a lot you hadn’t even thought of before. Well, I decided I’m going to do a *Did You Know* from time to time. My first one is this morning. *Did You Know* that after the Civil War began, both the Northern Presbyterians and the Southern Presbyterians, because of course they had split, each decided that despite the troubles of the war, it was important to still send missionaries overseas? The Northern Presbyterians sent a missionary to Cameroon and the Southern Presbyterians sent a missionary to, I believe, to Siam, which is now Thailand, of course.

The Presbyterians have always been mission minded and connectional in their thinking. Those are two reasons I love this denomination so much. The PC(USA) is connectional not just through the church, Presbytery, Synod, and General Assembly, but it is also ecumenical in its thinking; understanding that we serve one God who loves and embraces us all - regardless of ethnicity, culture, economic status, sexual orientation, and whatever else you can think of that humans put up to divide instead of unite. While international mission throughout the ages wasn’t always collaborative in nature as it is today, the understanding that we play a part in God’s salvation history, not just in the places that we reside, has always been understood by our governing body. The PC(USA) understands that through the prayers and financial support provided by local churches, we can support those individuals and families who are called to go abroad to work alongside our partner churches.

Now I know that many people are of the belief that there is so much need here in the United States that we should focus our attention here. Focus our energy here. Focus our financial giving here. But Jesus never said that the church was to choose local mission or international mission over the other. Mission is a both/and venture. Let me say that again. Mission is Both/And - we are to care for our neighbor and for the stranger. We are to preach the gospel both here and also into all the world. Jesus sent some of the disciples out to preach the gospel to all the nations. While some stayed close to Jerusalem. Some went to the far reaches of the known world - Ethiopia, Greece, Turkey, Rome. What would Christianity be today if the early disciples hadn’t been willing to go out into the world?

I would like to go through this parable of the sheep and goats and share stories of what I've seen or been a part of.

For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat: In Zimbabwe, I met a woman and her adult son whose ministry it was to care for pregnant women. They provided lunch for them, opportunities to learn how to sew, so that they could provide for their children afterwards, and prenatal vitamins.

In Zambia, there is an orphanage that through donations from the PC(USA) has a farm, which feeds the children, but even more than that they have boats that teach the teen boys how to fish. Some of the fish is used at the orphanage, but the rest of the fish is sold so that there is money to buy clothes, books, and medicine for the children. These boats are built in stages as donations come in and one of my churches raised several thousand dollars for a boat to be finished. I think in the end they raised \$9,000 to finish that boat.

I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink: Where we lived in Cameroon the people had to go to different water sources to carry water. The stream near us would become a trickle in the dry season and they would spend much time scooping the water one cupful at a time. We raised money from our supporting churches in the USA and oversaw the extension of the water line from the town into the village where we were at. This provided jobs for the locals, both men and women, while the pipeline was being put in and then they had only to turn on one of three taps to get access to water.

And you might remember that under the Trump administration there was a man, Scott Warren, who was part of a group that brought food and water out into the desert for refugees coming in from the Mexican border. They wanted to make an example of him for caring for these refugees, by helping them to get through the desert alive. The government first claimed he wasn't doing it in the name of Christianity, because his group, while Christian, was not run through a mainline denomination, so he shouldn't be exempt from charges of religious freedom. In the end, he was acquitted.

I was a stranger and you invited me in: The PC(USA) is involved in refugee work around the world - at our border and beyond. While I was a missionary, I met a PC(USA) missionary working with refugees in Germany. I even once saw a position advertised for a missionary to work in Russia with displaced persons who ended up in that country.

I was naked and you clothed me: One of the foci of mission for the PC(USA) is empowerment of women. There are programs that teach women to sew, which brings in money for them to live independently, if need be, to provide for their children. Always for the PC(USA), it is about teaching people to be able to live to their fullest as a child of God, to be able to work and make a decent wage to support their families by giving them the tools to do so.

I was in prison and you visited me: I worked with a Palestinian man who had been arrested and spent time in an Israeli prison. He taught at the same school as I did in Ramallah. There were many times when I would go into the teachers' lounge and he would be holding his head. He suffered from major headaches due to the beatings he endured while in prison. One day he did not show up for work and word got out that he had been arrested in the night. He may well have been a part of a resistance movement, but seeing first hand how the rights of Palestinians were often violated, it is easy to understand why they protested. The desire to live free in their homeland is just as strong for them as it is for the Israelis. One course I taught was on ethics, which included a component on passive resistance. We brought the youth to see the movie *Gandhi*, which happened to come out that year. They didn't see that as ever being successful in

their country, but we have missionaries there to this day who continue to work with the Palestinians and with Israelis to bring understanding, communication, advocating for humane treatment of Palestinian prisoners; advocating for humane and dignified treatment of all Palestinians.

Presbyterians are involved in so many different things around the world. We're involved in starting and maintaining hospitals where there wouldn't be any, providing labor and delivery in areas where women would otherwise be susceptible to death due to difficult pregnancies and deliveries. We provide mobile medical care by providing vehicles for our doctors and national doctors to go out into the small villages bringing vaccines and healing medicines.

We are involved in fighting human trafficking in Thailand, attempting to strengthen laws in Thailand, as well as working to help the women rehabilitate after the trafficking.

We are involved in all levels of education throughout the world - a hallmark of the work the Presbyterians have been doing abroad for hundreds of years.

And, global mission works to educate churches here in the USA, but they need to be invited in. It is important that we learn what our denomination is doing. Learn and partner with to help those who cannot help themselves. Helping through prayer, through financial donations, by learning about their work and sharing those needs with others for the connective health of the body of Christ.

One of the things we were told before we went to Cameroon was to write a letter to our supporting churches within the first two weeks that we were there. They said they wanted us to write about what we saw from an American perspective before we settled in and what we saw became common place. One of the first things I noticed on that long drive from the airport to the seminary was the number of men just sitting around in front of their houses or playing board games. Not old men, but able bodied men who should have been out working, but there were no jobs to be had. Willing to work, but where to find work was the problem.

I've heard people who have visited Africa romanticize it. The people are so friendly and they worship is so joyful, visitors say. They live so simply. I wish I could live simply like that. Do you? They live without because they can't afford to buy more. They live without indoor plumbing; they have pit toilets. The women and teens have to use cloth rags when they are menstruating. No medicine to deal with cramping. They live with having to walk miles to go to market and then bring home food that cannot be refrigerated because they don't own a refrigerator. Carry heavy buckets of water on their heads. A little girl who played at our house, who was my son's age, was being trained to carry water on her head as early as two. A twist of a cloth on her head and a small jar.

But, yes, they worship with joy and with all of their body. And that is another blessing of international mission. It is not just one sided. We lose out if we don't interact and learn from our brothers and sisters abroad for there are things in their lives that we need to learn, like totally relying on God for their next meal, gratitude for what one does have, humility in having to rely on others. Americans are not very humble, not very grateful. We take so much of what we have for granted.

Robert Schnase writes this in his book *Five Practices of Fruitful Living*:

"As followers of Jesus, we look at the world through the perspective of someone who suffered innocently - a person who was crushed and broken by the world's powers-rather than through the lens of privilege, power and wealth. Christianity began with catastrophic brokenness and violence, resulting in a persevering, sacrificial love that

drives us to work on behalf of the suffering with UNENDING PASSION. We can do no other. To follow Jesus in first century Palestine meant walking into caves of lepers, confronting violence against women, embracing children, exposing self-serving judges, condemning money changers, and challenging the indifference of the wealthy toward the poor and the vulnerable." (p.107)

Jesus was crushed and broken by the world's powers. It is through this lens, as Schnase writes, that we need to look at the world; not through the lens of our own white privilege.

Perhaps this parable might be written a little differently today:

I was an oppressed and persecuted Palestinian and you befriended me and advocated for my freedom and rights, I was living in the chaos of drugs and poverty under an oppressive regime and you welcomed me into your country and welcomed my children into your schools and gave us a chance to prosper and live with dignity and safety. I was a woman, a child, working in a factory in China, in Vietnam, in India, without access to toilet breaks, forced to have an abortion so that I could continue to work in these hellish conditions and you stopped buying the clothes I made until manufacturers insisted that the conditions be humane. I was kidnapped and trafficked and you saved me and rehabilitated me. I was thirsty and tired from walking miles for water and you brought me a pipeline. I was hungry and you taught me to fish. I was a political prisoner and you advocated for my freedom and didn't stop until I was free and the laws were changed. I was sick and you brought me doctors and nurses and medicine and I lived to praise God one more day.

What you did to the least of these you did unto me, Jesus said. On this World Communion Sunday, let us remember the lives of our brothers and sisters who struggle to survive this day, slaving away in factories for our cheap clothing, sheltering from bombs, sick and dying because they have no access to medical care. We are blessed in our lives and while we may struggle more than we used to. How much is enough? What more can we do, can we give, to help alleviate the suffering of even one of these precious children of God?

My little international church in Miami, 22 people on a Sunday morning, weren't rich, but they were generous. They were from Jamaica, Haiti, Cameroon and a few other countries. The building has one problem after another - leaky roof, broken water pipes. Something is always breaking down and yet when someone off the street comes in with a need, they are there to help. It is probably the poorest church I've ever worked at and yet it was the most generous church I've ever worked at. God will provide! That was their motto. God will provide. And so they gave generously of their meager resources and delighted with each person they were able to make the load a little lighter. They'd been there. They knew what it was like to struggle, but they also knew what it meant to be blessed. There are lessons we need to learn over and over again from our brothers and sisters abroad. It is a mutual giving, different gifts, but mutual giving that helps us grow and prosper as children of God, as the family of God. On this World Communion Sunday, let us remember them and remember that we are one family in Christ. Amen.