

PASTORAL PRAYER

Gracious eternal God, today we hear the call again. We hear your call to love, to serve, to follow in the footsteps of the Lord Jesus Christ. We hear the call to worship, in word, song, and deed. We hear the calling to be with our neighbor as we would want others to be with us, in love and collaboration. We hear the calling to be grace in the broken world as we have received grace. We hear the calling to be different from a world that abuses power and counts the neighbor as nothing. Gracious God, we hear the name and wish to be it: Christian. By that wonderful name, we are called to live a life of mission. Help us to discern faithfulness among many voices that pose as truth. Help us to treat those we serve as our partners, not objects to follow the instructions we lay out. Help us to lean upon your goodness and direction, not making mission our success or failure. By that, God, we create an environment where all are respected and served and authority lies where it should. Let us be people of faithful mission in all parts of our lives.

Gracious God, hear all the prayers on our hearts. We pray for our neighbors near and far, those suffering from immeasurable poverty, those who cannot go outside when it is dark out of fear for their lives, those who truly suffer because they carry the name Christian. We pray for those who have heard they carry cancer, those who have suffered a new loss, and those who carry the scars of loss still fresh. We pray for them and all your loved ones around the world. We know not all the burdens of the heart, but you do, and we entrust them to your care as we pray the prayer Christ taught us, saying...

SERMON

So, let me tell you how this is going to happen. I am a pastor because I have years of education and experience, so that means I can sufficiently tell you what you need to do. So,

this week, I am going to come to each of your houses and rearrange your furniture to the absolute best arrangement for the space. After that, I'm going to go into the kitchen and throw out all that I think is no good, like mayonnaise. I really dislike mayo. I'll also rearrange the kitchen tools to their best ergonomic function. And I will do all these things without asking what you think. I can, since I'm the expert, right? How does that sound?

Unfortunately, that is the vision of mission the world often sees when we talk about going out and helping others. It's about walking in, doing what we need to do, and running away back to the comfort of our own homes and country. Mission completed; let's feel good about what we did. But that wasn't the ministry of Jesus. That was not the image he showed us, and unfortunately, that got lost in the zeal of mission in the past. We are the victims of bad example when we look at the mission of colonial times and beyond. It was about making converts at any expense, and Christianity gained a bad name because of it. But there is a faithful space of sharing the Gospel and doing good work without being focused on the ultimate outcome. That's really not in our hands. Good mission has a much different face than those bad examples. It is about more than the action; it is about how we do it. It is more than what we want; it is about what the people truly need. This week and the next weeks to come, we will look at mission through scripture's eyes as more nuanced than a drive-by helping. Most importantly, it's about relationship; we never do mission alone.

As you probably know, I returned from a mission trip to Guatemala at the beginning of last week. After about ten days of traveling and work, it took a lot out of me physically and mentally, but it refilled me spiritually. It renewed my heart for this important part of the Christian faith. It reminded me of one of the greatest commands of Jesus Christ, the

Great Commission, which calls us to live a life of mission, near and far. But mission has to be done well. Mission must be well thought-out and focused on faithful follow-through or mission can easily become more about our own zeal and desires than faithful serving of our neighbors near and far. Over the next few weeks, I will share several thoughts about this important aspect of the Christian life. Today, there is one factor that we cannot forget: faithful mission is done in partnership. We don't do it alone, and we don't work in mission on behalf of others; we work with others. Ultimately, we work for and with God. Let's confirm these ideas from our scripture passage, some instances of mission well done, and translate these things into a faithful, loving lifestyle that keeps Jesus Christ above all.

This passage was a major turning point for the mission of Jesus Christ. This was the second sending out of Jesus' disciples in the Gospel of Luke, but in this instance, it was a larger vision of mission. Christ sent out seventy-two disciples, two-by-two, across the world. The New Interpreter's Commentary suggests that this number is no accident; in the time of Jesus, that was understood to be the number of nations in the world. He was, then, sending someone to reach all the countries of the world. His instructions are intentional, with purpose. "Whatever house you enter, first say 'Peace to this house!'...Remain in the same house, eating and drinking whatever they provide...do not move from house to house." Jesus is crafting the first piece of good mission: relationship. He is showing that we need to become friends with those we go to in mission. He does not advocate, as we might call it, "drive-by helping," by stopping long enough to do what we want to do then move on. Instead, we are to dwell among the people, to become one of their community so we can better work with them. Mission, like everything else in the Christian life, is a marathon, never a sprint. It's more about the process than the results. The process begins with

relating with one another, and then the work can begin. Then we can “cure the sick who are there and say to them “The Kingdom of God has come near to you.””

The other side of this coin is that the participants in this mission were sent out with to work with God, not on their own power and will. Their reliance was upon serving God, not saving the people by themselves. In other words, they were participants in mission working right alongside God. In fact, that should be our attitude with ANYTHING we do! It’s all too easy to proclaim that we are the one’s working on God’s behalf, but that creates an overwhelming sense of pride and self-righteousness. The task becomes about us, including the results when they weren’t in our hands in the first place. In scripture, when people were unkind to them upon their journey, when they were not welcomed when treating the people faithfully, then their recourse was to walk away and let God attend to the matter. When God sends us out into the world, God is not asking us to do everything and make the results ours. When we reach our goals, we do so with God’s help. When our goals are not met, then it is not fully ours to own, for God holds it all anyways. We can take too much responsibility, and when we do, the mission quickly becomes ours instead of us working with God. When that happens, the methods quickly become about meeting our needs instead of those we serve, and that is not mission.

So, I can tell you about good mission, and I can tell you about bad mission too. I’ve been on a trip that involved both kinds. When I was in college, I attended a medical mission trip to Nicaragua. I went with high hopes on how this would emphasize the Gospel and the love of Jesus Christ, but I was highly disappointed. The leaders of the group made hearing testimony a requirement before they could receive medical care. I’m all for sharing testimony, and I’m all for providing medical care, but that was not joyful sharing. That was

not spreading the gospel lovingly; that was imposing the Gospel on the people in order to receive basic humanitarian care. At the same time, we didn't learn anyone's name. We never heard their stories or how they understood how God was working in their lives. In other words, they were objects, not people. When Jesus healed in the Gospels, I remember the healing allowing the people to hear his message better. He didn't say, "I need you to hear all about my mission before I can heal you." It's dramatically different and it's far more loving. When we treat people like people, when we recognize that we are not in mission to do it all by ourselves, when we are not results-motivated over being motivated by love, then mission can take place.

On the other token, I saw something completely different in Guatemala. This was the twelfth mission trip to this village of Patulup over thirteen years led by First UMC here in Cheyenne, but they open it up to all who want to join. This was no drive-by mission; this was an exercise in creating relationship as one can see building over thirteen years. That's a theme we discuss over and over again in our faith because it honors people as people. You want to be known and respected for who you are, not merely someone to be served. And this is what has happened with this line of mission. I was amazed when we got there the first day, for members of our team and the community connected immediately. They knew each other's names and what was happening with them. They were like old friends seeing each other because they were. Over time, you grow in partnership because you know that the other respects who you are and what you do. You are more than those who serve and those who receive the service; you serve one another. We do not come in mission to be Saviors because, after all, there is only one Savior. From relationship, we can better know how to serve the people because they know we are here not for our benefit but

for theirs. From that relationship, they learned that stoves were something that would highly benefit members of the community.

From there, we jumped into the work. We built stoves made of a metal box filled with two clay boxes surrounded by pumice. You would burn just a few sticks of wood to heat the stove in the front, and the clay and pumice would hold in the heat while one would cook on the top. We had fifteen of these stoves to put together, as well as cut holes in the roofs for the smokestack to come out in a limited amount of time. Sounds like a lot of work? It was. But here's the thing: the mission wasn't owned by these visitors from the United States. It was owned by EVERYONE, the visitors and the villagers and church people from Patulup. So many people came to assist, whether it was our driver Pedro, our translator Mario, Pastor Juan, the pastor of the village, or any number of residents, a lot of work ended up being quite manageable for our time period because it wasn't just our work. It was everyone's work, and God was guiding all of us to take a hand in it. Only then could we walk away knowing that this was a truly good mission trip: everyone was in, and no one was out, allowing the ongoing partnership to grow even more. That was a blessing to everyone, for everyone benefited from the work.

There's a lot this particular mission relationship has to work on, but it has a good foundation. It has a faithful foundation, one that, with every meeting, grows and matures. It begins with the simple idea that we never do mission alone. It starts with relationship: relationship with your co-workers in mission. It starts with relationship with those you engage in service, because none of us want to be treated like objects to be served. We are partners working together for mutual benefit. And ultimately, it starts with relationship with the one who creates the mission, for the met goals or unmet goals are not ours to own.

God makes the mission, and we work together to make it a reality. That allows mission to be joyful, to focus on what really matters, and to leave everything that cannot and should not be in our control up to the one who holds everything in control. Thanks be to God!

Amen and Amen.