

1 Sermon, February 9, 2014

Texts: Acts 18:1-11, Mark 9:38-41

Title: "UM Stuff: Mission With, Not For"

1. Mission is a big topic – but I'm focusing on mission outside our community
2. Mission needs to be appropriate to the people served (Acts)
3. We view mission as a partnership (Acts)
4. We don't have to be in charge (Mark)

1. Mission is a big topic – I'm focusing on mission outside our community

This is the second sermon in a series of things that are especially United Methodist. Today, I want to talk to you about our understanding of mission.

Mission actually starts with the church, and each of us as we try to spread the good news of Jesus Christ. I once visited a church that had signs to be read as you left the parking lot. They read: "You are now entering the mission field."

Mission starts here in each of our hearts, but today I want to focus especially on mission that is beyond our local community, and what is our church's understanding of how that works.

2. Mission needs to be appropriate to the people served (Acts)

Looking at the book of Acts, we see that the Holy Spirit is the motivating force for mission.

In today's reading from Acts, we see that Paul is active in mission in very different ways. With Aquila & Priscilla, he is a co-worker; they make tents together, and Paul teaches them while they work. Then on the Sabbath Day, he would go and preach to the local Jewish Population.

Silas and Timothy were fellow travelers with Paul at various points, and when they arrived, Paul renewed his ministry. Now every day Paul could preach, not just on the Sabbath, probably because some money had been sent on his behalf, and he didn't have to do the tent-making.

When Paul was rejected by much of the local Jewish population, he moved in with Titius Justus, who was not Jewish, but one of those who had sympathy for the Jews and their understanding of God. It was a different relationship with Titius Justus than with Silas and Timothy.

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Lastly, this passage tells us about Crispus and his family—who became believers and were all baptized, along with many others.

Each of these groups of people received something different from Paul. He was in mission with all of them, but each in a different way.

So it is with the United Methodist Church in mission. We do not respond to people in Liberia with the same tools as we respond to Roma people in Hungary, or the Methodists in Cuba. They have very different needs.

We can see that most clearly in the area of agriculture. Our missionary Paul Webster uses a few farming techniques that are common in the US, but uses much more “appropriate technology” in Zambia. Few plow with oxen here anymore, but that is a big help in Zambia. Donkeys pull carts. An oil press is run by hand crank rather than by electric engine. Milking is done the old-fashioned way, into a pail and used fresh.

3. We view mission as a partnership (Acts)

In the United Methodist Church, mission is viewed as a partnership. Just as Paul was in partnership with Silas and Timothy, and did not need to direct them all the time, so we are in partnership with churches around the world.

The United Methodist Church sends missionaries where they are requested. When Paul Webster went to the Democratic Republic of the Congo and to Zambia, it was because the local chief had asked the church to send an agricultural missionary. It took several years for the chief's hope to be realized.

Mission needs to be based on trust. We trust our overseas partners to tell us their needs. We do not decide for them.

In St. Petersburg, Russia, a United Methodist Church started a program for the many street children in St. Petersburg, children who may have parents, but parents work and are unavailable to care for them. The church in St. Petersburg then applied for funds from the General Board of Global Ministries.

In a similar way, the United Methodist Conference in Russia decided to buy a camp, and people from the US and around the world can give toward that camp. Most United Methodist churches in Russia don't have buildings, so this camp, purchased in 2003 in dilapidated

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condition, is a meeting place that churches without buildings can call their own.

Mission is a partnership.

Our churches in Russia have worked hard to partner with the Russian Orthodox Church, even though it hasn't always worked.

In the United Methodist Church, it is rare for one of our members to say, "I think I'd like to serve in the Ukraine," and for them just to go there. Instead, those called to be missionaries are trained and their skills are matched to the needs in a particular place.

Paul Webster had studied Spanish, and had thought to work in South America, but the church got him to study other languages, and sent him to south-central Africa. That's where the Board of Global Ministries thought he was needed, and it has proved to be a great blessing. It has definitely been a "God thing."

Rev. Ronald Whitlatch, a Missionary with the General Board of Global Ministries, has written about the way we do mission, and I'd like to share with you an article he wrote:

"Ministry With" is nothing new to Methodism.

Soon after arriving in Argentina in 1983 as a United Methodist General Board of Global Ministries missionary, my wife Cathy and I were invited to meet with Bishop Federico Pagura who wanted to get to know us and welcome us to ministry with the Argentina Evangelical Methodist Church.

After informing us that we needed to plan on staying for at least two three-year terms in order to have sufficient time to first learn the language and culture and then contribute something to the church, he told us that we must no longer think of ourselves as missionaries. . . . Instead, we should think of ourselves as "obrerros fraternales" – fraternal workers – working side by side in partnership with the church in Argentina. We would be afforded all the rights of other pastors and would be treated the same as other pastors. In essence, we were encouraged to work among the people in ministry "with" them, not "to" or "at" or "for" them.

"Ministry With" was not a new revelation for Bishop Pagura. A decade earlier when he was bishop in Panama and Costa Rica he wrote a powerful essay, titled "Missionary, Go Home . . . or Stay." It reads:

"If you are not able to separate the eternal Word of the Gospel from the cultural molds in which you carried it to these lands:

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Missionary, go home.

If you are not able to identify with the events, anxieties, and aspirations of those peoples prematurely aged by an unequal struggle:

Missionary, go home.

If your allegiance and fidelity to your nation of origin are stronger than loyalty and obedience to Jesus Christ:

Missionary, go home.

If you are not able to love and respect as equals those whom once you came to evangelize as "the lost":

Missionary, go home.

If you are not able to rejoice at the entry of new peoples and churches upon a new stage of maturity, independence, and responsibility:

Missionary, go home:

For it is time to go home.

But if you are ready to bear the risks and pains of this hour of birth which our peoples are experiencing, if you begin to celebrate with them the happiness of sensing that the Gospel is proclamation and affirmation of hope and liberation which are already transforming history, if you are ready to give more of your life in the service of these peoples who are awaking, then:

Stay! There is much to do."

4. We don't have to be in charge (Mark)

Maybe one of the most important lessons for us United Methodists in mission is that we are not in charge, and we don't have to try to be in charge. God is leading and guiding. Our partnership with local people sets the tone and often the direction.

Any good missionary is trying to work himself (or herself) out of a job, hoping that others will take over the work, or that things improve so much that there is no longer a need.

Today's scripture reading from Mark illustrates this.

In the reading, the disciples are upset because someone was casting out demons in the name of Jesus, even though they didn't know who he was, and they didn't think this man really knew who Jesus was.

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The disciples were upset because this man casting out demons what not one of the "authentic" followers of Jesus.

But Jesus surprised them. He said, "Don't stop him! No one who works miracles in my name will soon turn and say something bad about me. Anyone who isn't against us is for us."

Jesus didn't think he needed to be in charge of everyone doing good works in his name. That's pretty foreign to our way of thinking, and actually to the way of thinking back then, too. Back then, a rabbi was very strict with his disciples, and people couldn't easily become disciples of most rabbis. To do something in the name of a rabbi when you weren't his disciple was considered to be a very bad thing.

But Jesus is not as particular as we might think about certifying his followers, or making them follow certain guidelines. Jesus leaves a lot of room for us to be partners in mission, even if we don't have all the same beliefs, or the same customs, or the same Christian brand name.

Thanks be to God, who allows us to be partners in mission in a way that stretches our understanding of what it means to follow Jesus. Amen.

Paul left Athens and went to Corinth, where he met Aquila, a Jewish man from Pontus. Not long before this, Aquila had come from Italy with his wife Priscilla, because Emperor Claudius had ordered the Jewish people to leave Rome. Paul went to see Aquila and Priscilla and found out that they were tent makers. Paul was a tent maker too. So he stayed with them, and they worked together.

Every Sabbath, Paul went to the Jewish meeting place. He spoke to Jews and Gentiles and tried to win them over. But after Silas and Timothy came from Macedonia, he spent all his time preaching to the Jews about Jesus the Messiah. Finally, they turned against him and insulted him. So he shook the dust from his clothes and told them, "Whatever happens to you will be your own fault! I am not to blame. From now on I am going to preach to the Gentiles."

Paul then moved into the house of a man named Titius Justus, who worshiped God and lived next door to the Jewish meeting place. Crispus was the leader of the meeting place. He and everyone in his family put their faith in the Lord. Many others in Corinth also heard the message, and all the people who had faith in the Lord were baptized.

One night, Paul had a vision, and in it the Lord said, "Don't be afraid to keep on preaching. Don't stop! I am with you, and you won't be harmed. Many people in this city belong to me." Paul

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stayed on in Corinth for a year and a half, teaching God's message to the people. (Acts 18:1-11, CEV)

After this Paul left Athens and went to Corinth. There he found a Jew named Aquila, a native of Pontus, who had recently come from Italy with his wife Priscilla, because Claudius had ordered all Jews to leave Rome. Paul went to see them, and, because he was of the same trade, he stayed with them, and they worked together—by trade they were tentmakers. Every sabbath he would argue in the synagogue and would try to convince Jews and Greeks.

When Silas and Timothy arrived from Macedonia, Paul was occupied with proclaiming the word, testifying to the Jews that the Messiah was Jesus. When they opposed and reviled him, in protest he shook the dust from his clothes and said to them, "Your blood be on your own heads! I am innocent. From now on I will go to the Gentiles." Then he left the synagogue and went to the house of a man named Titius Justus, a worshiper of God; his house was next door to the synagogue. Crispus, the official of the synagogue, became a believer in the Lord, together with all his household; and many of the Corinthians who heard Paul became believers and were baptized. One night the Lord said to Paul in a vision, "Do not be afraid, but speak and do not be silent; for I am with you, and no one will lay a hand on you to harm you, for there are many in this city who are my people." He stayed there a year and six months, teaching the word of God among them. (Acts 18:1-11, NRSV)

John said to him, "Teacher, we saw someone casting out demons in your name, and we tried to stop him, because he was not following us." But Jesus said, "Do not stop him; for no one who does a deed of power in my name will be able soon afterward to speak evil of me. Whoever is not against us is for us. For truly I tell you, whoever gives you a cup of water to drink because you bear the name of Christ will by no means lose the reward. (Mark 9:38-41, NRSV)

John said, "Teacher, we saw a man using your name to force demons out of people. But he wasn't one of us, and we told him to stop."

Jesus said to his disciples: Don't stop him! No one who works miracles in my name will soon turn and say something bad about me. Anyone who isn't against us is for us. 41 And anyone who gives you a cup of water in my name, just because you belong to me, will surely be rewarded. (Mark 9:38-41, CEV)