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Sermon preached on June 22, 2006
217th General Assembly (2006)
Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)



It is such an honor to stand before you today – an unbelievable honor. You all have done great work this week, a week of both joys and disappointments. Now it is almost time for all of this to be over, for you to back to your homes and your work, down from the mountaintop of being surrounded by devoted – though not necessarily like-minded – Presbyterians. Thank you for this honor. Please pray with me:

God of our great cloud of witnesses,
Thank you for being with us in this space. I empty myself before you, my Mother and Father God, so that you may put your words in my mouth and I may do your will. Open our hearts and minds so that we can hear your word. Amen.

This may come as a surprise to none of you, but I am a young adult. I know! My age group is the LEAST active in your congregations and in this nation's political processes, its almost like kids just check out in their 20's! Some of you may be hoping I'm here today with a magic formula, the top 10 list of ways to get youth and young adults involved in the work of the church. Well, I've gotta be honest with you – I don't have a magic formula. I'm not a pastor – I'm not even an elder or a deacon! But I am studying theology, and I am considering being a pastor some day. I am a staunch Presbyterian (is there any other kind?!) and am intensely devoted to the work of this church. The only thing I can offer you this morning is what I have experienced as a young adult seeking to serve God in our world. Maybe that will bring to light some ways that God is calling our church to live out the message that Luke writes about in our passage this morning. In the process, maybe we'll find out how to draw more young people into the work of the church.

Two years ago, I went to Guatemala as a PCUSA Young Adult Volunteer where I lived and worked with some of the most devoted Christians I have ever met. The relationships I formed while I was there greatly impacted my life. I want to share one of those friendships with you now.

Martin Sop Baten is many things to many people. He is a tailor who learned his trade from his father and makes clothes for his children. He is a craftsman who creates bags and purses and jackets from colorful fabrics woven by local maya women, and sells them to supplement his family's income. He is also a farmer, a grower of corn/maize to feed his family. He is a driver for PRESGOV, a program of the National Presbyterian Church of Guatemala, and so he's been a guide for countless groups from PCUSA who have visited Guatemala in the past years.

He is the friend, co-conspirator, and sometimes caretaker of the Young Adult Volunteers who have served in Guatemala over the years. He is husband to a beautiful woman, Graciela Sam Yac, and father of her 6 children (Francisco, Edwin, Yadira, Marlon, Eduardo, and Josecito) as well as father to the three North American Presbyterians who he has welcomed into his home in the past 4 years. He has not had an easy life, as an indigenous man whose life has spanned the 36 years of la violencia, when the Guatemalan military and government perpetrated unspeakable crimes against humanity, genocide, against indigenous communities. Not an easy life by any means, but his smile lights up a room and he is quick to laugh, always bringing a joke to lighten any situation. Martin is my father, and I learned much from him during the year that I lived in his home in Pasac Segundo, Cantel, Quetzaltenango, Guatemala.

You see, we spent a lot of time together that year – we hosted delegations, like the one from Idlewild Presbyterian Church in Memphis where we built a fence together ankle deep in (ahem) “mud” in a cow pasture! We cut back brush together with machetes to make way for a fish hatchery and camped out on the beach on the tiny island of El Chico, where pigs were our alarm clock and we got eaten alive by mosquitoes. I have seen Martin navigate rivers and lakes and mangrove marshes. Together, we have made countless trips driving the winding roads that cut through the highlands – despite a few terrifying moments, we always made it safely home!

Martin and Graciela Sop Sam welcomed me into their home with open arms. Thrown into an unknown environment, I became like a little kid again, because they had to teach me everything – how to speak a new language, how to wear traje, the traditional Mayan dress, so I could be a real Cantelena. They taught me how to wash my clothes in a pila by hand, taught me how to grind corn and how to plant corn, how to cook and eat corn at least fifty different ways, and most importantly how to make tortillas by hand.... They taught me the history of their town and of their families, and taught it what it means to be maya Quiche – porque ella necesita aprender nuestra cultura (because she needs to learn our culture) as one of my aunts once said.

The Sop Sams fed me, sheltered me, and welcomed me into their family, me, this strange gringa who didn't eat meat and had nothing to give in return except friendship and my immense gratitude.

It was not easy – relationships take a lot of time and energy to build! I didn't realize I was truly a part of their family until my own beloved grandmother died. All I wanted was my mother's embrace. They comforted me and wiped away all of my tears, assured me of God's presence. Tener paciencia, Caty, they told me, be patient, this will pass. It was then that I realized that they had become my support system, my second family.

When people back home asked me what I was doing in Guatemala, it was always a little hard to explain. “So you’re a missionary?” they would say... Well, I would respond, that depends on how you define mission. What is mission? Mission, I have learned, is meeting people where they are, sharing what you can with one another, and building relationships in and through our differences. Mission is listening to each other and then hearing God’s voice speaking in return. Mission is being present in the difficult spaces, and offering the healing and reconciling love of Christ. What is the result of real mission partnerships? Our lives are transformed! I’ve found time and again that God speaks through mission partnerships and invites us to join in – to take part in the good work the spirit is doing in the world. It’s pretty amazing, when you think about it!

In our passage this morning, Luke tells of the 70 disciples – witnesses, if you will -- who Jesus sends out before him to prepare the way as he journeys to Jerusalem. The harvest is great, Jesus says, but the harvesters few! And it isn’t going to be easy, because they are going out like sheep amidst wolves, and they should take nothing with them for protection, not a purse, not a bag, not even shoes on their feet! The seventy should speak words of peace to all in the towns that they visit, heal the sick, and proclaim the nearness of the kingdom. Now, one thing we know about Luke is that he sought to connect the story of the life of Christ to the story of the growth of the early church. So, we can think of this passage as Luke doing this – telling of the charge Jesus might have given to some of the very first missionaries.

Two years ago, Rick Ufford-Chase challenged us to “get in the boat with Jesus” – what did he mean by that? I think that getting in the boat means to join in the revitalizing and reconciling work of mission, to cross to the other side and experience what it is to form relationships across the divides of culture, class, race, sexual orientation, and political persuasion, and to find the transformative love of Christ in those new relationships.

What a comfort to know that God doesn’t invite us to get into the boat by ourselves, that Jesus doesn’t send us out to the wolves on our own – In Luke’s story, the disciples are sent in pairs, just as we are called as a community to take part in God’s ongoing work in our world together. As we have seen this week, maintaining our relationships in community is difficult, even painful at times, but it is *vital*. Like it or not, we are in this boat together, and we’ve gotta have faith upon striking out into the unknown. Like I was, I pray we will be welcomed with open arms by the brothers and sisters we never even knew existed.

Jesus tells the disciples: Eat what is given to you! A scary thought for a vegetarian... broadly, I take this to mean that even in unfamiliar places with people who seem to be very different from us, we should share our stories and break bread together! It’s simple, but it’s true – This is what God’s mission is all about, and this is the unity that we affirm each time we eat from the communion table – whether that table holds bread and grape juice, wafers and wine, or club

crackers and red Fanta as it did the first time I took communion in Guatemala. It is the SAME TABLE! When we form mission partnerships, we affirm that unity.

My mentor and friend in Guatemala, Marcia Towers, points out that God doesn't even so much call us to go to certain places as much as God calls us to live different lives, to see with new eyes and to be transformed, so that we act to bring love and justice in all of our relationships with all of God's children. And really, where does God call us except to enter into right relationship with one another? That means transformation of our selves, of every aspect of our lives – transformation of our economic activities, our political advocacy, our work for systemic change and our service of the least of these.

We are not all called to be international mission coworkers, not by any means. But the work that mission coworkers do can greatly enhance and guide the ministry of our local churches, and local churches can support mission coworkers both spiritually *and financially* – you will notice that the same dynamic is present in Luke's story! Seventy are sent, strengthened by the spirit, into service, but countless others then receive them into their homes, accept their blessing of peace, hear the good news of what Jesus is doing in the world, and are transformed. THIS TRANSFORMATION IS KEY! Remember, Luke wants to connect the story of Christ to the story of the growth of the early church. If this is how the early church grew, then I believe it is how our local churches can be and ARE revitalized today – by sharing the transformative love of Christ in mission partnerships!

Now, what does that look like? Congregations following Christ's example by serving the least of these and ALSO by working fearlessly to spread love and justice in our broken world, in our own communities, AND in OUR CHURCH. This is what I learned firsthand in Guatemala, with my relationship with Martin and Graciela, with their family and church – my experience sharing life and sitting at table with them impacts every one of my days, and fuels my struggle for justice.

Mission means listening to the testimony of those whose voices often go unheard, and hearing the moral summons to action that lays within stories of struggle. That summons is how God calls us to be present in the world, acting out our faith by bringing justice to marginalized people, healing the sick, binding up the broken hearted, and setting the captives free. We risk merely indulging ourselves unless we become a great cloud of witnesses to all who struggle for justice today, from the Sudan to Birmingham, from the gospel of our Lord to the lower Ninth Ward my friends – we are called to be witnesses and to work for JUSTICE!

I'm here to tell you that I believe in a church that hears God consistently calling us to be transformed and to live different, more sustainable and equitable lives,

and to work for love and justice in the world. I think that's a church that everyone – even young adults – will want to be involved with.

The world is a scary place. Violence and war permeate our daily existence, God's earth is polluted, and extreme, abject, inhumane, inexcusable poverty rules the lives of 2/3 of the world's people. An authentic church does not allow doctrinal differences to overshadow God's call to faithful action of reconciliation in our world. A relational, mission focused church reaches out to and stands up for the marginalized and oppressed, and in so doing takes part in the work of love and justice that the spirit is doing in the world. I hope and pray that this is the direction our church is moving, toward greater authenticity, because an authentic church will draw in people of all ages who are looking for a way forward through the brokenness of our everyday lives, the way forward to peace and reconciliation and wholeness that God intends for us, and – let me tell you, if this is where we are moving young adults will lead the way! We are full of energy and ready for a new direction, ready for the challenge. All you have to do is ask – think of age as just another boundary to be crossed for us to be able to glimpse the kingdom. So go forth now. Speak words of peace to all that welcome you, heal the sick, break bread together, and declare the nearness of God's kingdom through your work for love and justice. May it be so! AMEN.