

Sermon for July 19, 2020

16th Sunday in Ordinary Time (Year A)

Sermon Texts: Isaiah 44: 6-8 and Romans 10: 11-14

Sermon Title: *Mission Impossible?*

Prayer of Invocation: Lord, you are the God of mystery and miracle. Reveal yourself to us this morning as we gather for virtual worship. Teach us the best way to be witnesses to your power, to your love, and to your grace. We have heard you call our names, and we are ready to serve you and your people with trust in your promises that are yet to come. Amen.

Prayer of Illumination: Holy Spirit, come. Come as Holy wind and cleanse us from within; come as Holy light and illumine us; come as Holy Truth and dispel our ignorance; come as Holy Fire and burn in us; come as Holy Life and dwell in us. Amen.

When I was teaching English and assigned students a topic for a paper, they would often begin with a dictionary definition of the topic – for example, when I assigned a research paper on homelessness, the first paragraph would start with the dictionary definition of homelessness. I would encourage them to begin with an example of seeing or encountering a homeless person, rather than beginning with a definition. Today, I find myself violating my own advice; I begin with a dictionary definition of mission: *an important assignment carried out for political, religious, or commercial purposes typically involving travel*. The reason I do this is that a great deal of religious mission has involved travel and contains both political and commercial elements. The latter two characteristics, political and commercial, are why a lot of mission is shrouded in controversy.

For example: Hawaii. Early in the 19th century American missionaries arrived in Hawaii, later followed by Scottish missionaries who were heading toward Tahiti and stopped in Hawaii on their way. When they arrived, they asked the natives: *Who owns this land?* Like most aboriginal peoples, the Hawaiians had no concept of private property. They simply pointed out that *we fish here, we plant there*. The missionaries subsequently claimed ownership of the farmland and the harbors. Although missionaries did much good in protecting the natives from marauding pirates, brought horticulture to the island, and discovered a fresh water table that brings fresh water to the island to this day, those original missionaries with surnames like Dillingham and Cook are now the names of large Hawaiian corporations. As James Michener remarked in his book *Hawaii*, *missionaries came to do good, and they ended up doing well*.

In our Romans passage for today, Paul says a lot about God's love and generosity and about the need for proclamation of the good news. I don't think he imagined that proclaiming the good news would involve pineapple plantations. In a later verse Paul writes: *So faith comes from what is heard, and what is heard comes through the word of Christ*. For me this raises the question of how we hear the word of Christ. I remember

that Christ always met people where they were, he didn't get angry with them for their lack of faith or understanding, and he taught in parables. Not many people are converted by talk; they are converted by seeing the love of Christ through what we do. We've learned a lot in the last two centuries about what it means to do mission. Our own Cindy Corell, whom the Presbytery of the James has sponsored as a missionary to Haiti, has frequently remarked that she goes to Haiti, not to change the people there, or to convert them politically or economically, not to make them more like us, but to meet them where they are and to *listen. Listen.*

When a church does mission well, it listens to the needs of others. Which brings me to the ways in which South Plains has listened to those needs and done mission well. The voices which follow have been intimately involved with South Plains missions.

BILL (Speaker 1): Our support of the Presbyterian Chaplains, PCUSA represents the longest relationship we have with a mission organization. We are considered by their leadership to be one of the champions of their work. Several other mission outreaches have a long-standing history: The Presbyterian Home of the Highlands continues to receive annual support from South Plains. You might remember that the director, Billy Rice, came to our church last year to speak about the work of the facility in Wise County. At the Home of the Highlands, the children, many of whom have lived in multiple foster homes, experience a stable, nurturing environment. Please pray for these ministries.

HEIDI (Speaker 2): Locally, South Plains supports many organizations, including the Crafters of South Plains who provide commemorative welcome samplers for families who move into their own homes. We also provide an annual monetary gift. Mission Crafters also sew ditty bags for veterans and donate them to the Veterans Administration Hospital in Richmond. Our own unique prayer quilt ministry provides beautiful prayer quilts to members, friends, and strangers as they walk through health, emotional, and spiritual issues. Food banks in Fluvanna, Charlottesville and Albemarle counties receive quarterly donations and monthly cents-ability offerings. Souper Bowl Sunday and CROP Walk for Hunger are two additional avenues for helping the hungry and needy. Alliance for Interfaith Ministries, AIM, is supported through donations of goods. We also make annual pledges to Camp Hanover and Massanetta Springs; our donations during the pandemic have been additionally meaningful as these organizations have no summer income. We pray that both will be able to return to their strong ministry programs in the future. Please pray for these ministries.

PAT (Speaker 3): South Plains makes significant contributions to missions around the world, including Presbyterian Disaster Assistance, which has helped hurricane and flood victims, and World Disaster Relief which utilizing funds to sustain people during natural disasters. Discretionary funds donated to this organization provide for the immediate needs of traumatized and devastated people. In addition, we have a collaborative relationship with the Medical Benevolence Foundation. They hold us in prayer, and we craft items that are used to further their missions around the world. This past year our donations to date reached 691, which included 82 ditty bags for veterans;12 prayer

quilts; 24 baby quilts and blankets; 14 sweater and cap sets for babies; 30 layette kits for Haiti; 418 individual baby caps and 37 samples for Habitat dedications. Please pray for these ministries.

LYNN (Speaker 4): In the past South Plains has had very successful partnership with many global mission groups, including FairTrade organization through the Gift Fair, Partners for Just Trade in Peru, Bead for Life in Uganda, and Mission of Hope which provided free medical care to the poor and needy in Bolivia. Unfortunately, COVID-19 and adverse political and economic climates have brought these ministries to a halt. Please pray that in the future we will be able to find, once more, the perfect gift at the Gift Fair from an artisan on the other side of the globe; that Ugandan women will once more be able to support their families through their paper and resin jewelry; that artisans in Peru will be able to export their goods without prohibitively expensive cost; that the Mission of Hope will be able to travel to Bolivia in October, a rescheduled time, to provide ear, nose and throat, and general surgery and gynecological surgery. Please also pray for PalCraft Aid which supported Palestinian Christians, and which was forced to close because of the Israeli government's embargo against Palestinian trade. Please pray for these ministries.

J-A: In the Roman's passage, Paul makes reference to Isaiah 52:7: *How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of the messenger who announces peace, who brings good news, who announces salvation.* The ministries of South Plains have indeed brought peace, good news, and salvation locally and globally. Thank you South Plains for your generosity, your commitment, and your partnership in being the hands and the beautiful feet of God's messengers. Amen.

