

WHY MISSION?
I Corinthians 11:17-29, 33-34

A sermon given by Larry R. Hayward, on September 22, 2019, the Twenty-fifth Sunday in Ordinary Time, at Westminster Presbyterian Church in Alexandria, Virginia, as part of a fall sermon series entitled “Why...?”

Now in the following instructions I do not commend you, because when you come together it is not for the better but for the worse. For, to begin with, when you come together as a church, I hear that there are divisions among you; and to some extent I believe it. Indeed, there have to be factions among you, for only so will it become clear who among you are genuine. When you come together, it is not really to eat the Lord’s supper. For when the time comes to eat, each of you goes ahead with your own supper, and one goes hungry and another becomes drunk. What! Do you not have homes to eat and drink in? Or do you show contempt for the church of God and humiliate those who have nothing? What should I say to you? Should I commend you? In this matter I do not commend you!

For I received from the Lord what I also handed on to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took a loaf of bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, ‘This is my body that is for you. Do this in remembrance of me.’ In the same way he took the cup also, after supper, saying, ‘This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me.’ For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord’s death until he comes.

Whoever, therefore, eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be answerable for the body and blood of the Lord. Examine yourselves, and only then eat of the bread and drink of the cup. For all who eat and drink without discerning the body, eat and drink judgement against themselves...

So then, my brothers and sisters, when you come together to eat, wait for one another. If you are hungry, eat at home, so that when you come together, it will not be for your condemnation. About the other things I will give instructions when I come.

In this sermon series on seven “Why” questions concerning the church, we come today to “Why Mission?” Since for the last two and a half years Patrick has moved into a position on the staff where approximately half of his responsibilities lie in the area of mission, I thought I would ask him what questions concerning mission he thought I might consider for this sermon. He sent me sixteen. The questions are endless, and I promise only to address thirteen or fourteen today!

For this sermon, I want to be clear that what I am talking about is not “mission” in the overall sense of the church’s purpose as an institution, as we might find in the phrase “mission statement.” Rather, I want to ask today *why* a local church would *engage in ministries* that seek to improve or change *society as a whole* or ministries that *focus on people who lie beyond* the congregation’s membership: people who have spiritual or physical needs, people who may live anywhere in the world, and people who may or may not profess Christian faith. In other words, why does the church give time and attention to people *beyond* its members? I want to give two traditional reasons and a third which may be a bit new to our thinking. Let us pray: *Here we are Lord, send us.” Amen.*

I.

The first reason for the church to engage in mission is that from the earliest days of the formation of the people of God, there is a clear *mandate* on the part of God for us as God's people to be responsible for the entire created order.

At creation, God says to the man and woman who form our spiritual ancestors:

*Be fruitful and multiply;
Fill the earth and subdue it;
Have dominion over the fish of the sea
And over the birds over the air
And over every living thing that moves upon the earth.¹*

When the second generation of humans ask, in cold blood, "Am I my brother's keeper?" God responds by saying: "Your brother's blood is crying out to me from the ground! And now you are cursed from the ground, which has opened its mouth to receive your brother's blood from *your* hand."² A graphic rejoinder to the question, "Am I my brother's keeper?"

When God calls Abraham and Sarah, while promising the aged couple heretofore unrealized descendants as well as the gift of land, God also bestows upon them a "blessing," but a blessing not for their own retirement ease, but a blessing that "through *them*, all the *nations* of the earth shall be blessed." "All the nations." "All of them."

As the people of God are shepherded through two thousand years of history, God consistently reminds them – over twenty times – to make provision for the "widow and orphan." In the scriptures that grow out of their experience with God, "the poor" are mentioned 213 times, "the hungry" 56 times, "the naked" 88 times, "the oppressed" 54 times, "the prisoner" 42 times, and "the sick" 96 times. (Thanks be to Oremus.com, I didn't have to tabulate these myself.)

When Jesus is born as Messiah, Savior, Lord, one of his most telling statements is "In as much you did it to one of *the least* of these my [brothers and sisters], you did it to me."³ His greatest commandment ends with the call to "love your neighbor *as yourself*."⁴ One of his most universally known parables is entitled "*The Good Samaritan*."⁵ Though he acknowledges he "was sent only for the lost sheep of the house of Israel,"⁶ his final and ultimate commission to his disciples is "go therefore and make disciples of *all* nations...."⁷ Particularly in the Gospel of Luke his focus has accurately been characterized as being on "*the least, the last, and the lost*."⁸

¹ Genesis 1:28.

² Genesis 4:9-10.

³ Matthew 25:40 RSV.

⁴ Mark 12:31.

⁵ Luke 10:25-36.

⁶ Matthew 15:24.

⁷ Matthew 28:17.

⁸ Reverend Elam Davies of Fourth Presbyterian Church in Chicago first coined this phrase, which was later used as the title of a chapter on Luke in the DISCIPLE Adult Bible Study Curriculum. See <https://www.chicagotribune.com/news/ct-xpm-2003-06-13-0306130116-story.html>.

Over a century ago, our little denominational expression of Christianity, known as Presbyterianism, formulated, as part of the larger “holy catholic church,” what we named “The Great Ends of the Church”:⁹

- *Proclamation* of the gospel for the salvation of *humankind*
- *Shelter, nurture, and spiritual fellowship* of the *children* of God.
- Maintenance of divine *worship*
- *Exhibition* of the Kingdom of Heaven to the *world*

How less than *great* these *ends* would be if they read as follows:

- *Proclamation* of the gospel for the salvation of *people already Christian*
- *Shelter, nurture, and spiritual fellowship* of the *children of the church*
- *Exhibition* of the Kingdom of Heaven to the *people who already believe*.

From the earliest days of the formation of God’s people, God issues a clear mandate for us to be responsible for the entire created order. “We’ve a Story to Tell to the *Nations*.”¹⁰

II.

A second aspect of mission I feel compelled to address is particular to most of us in this room, in the circles in which we run, in the zip codes in which we receive our mail or welcome the Amazon delivery trucks, and even still in the nation we call home. It is the phrase Jesus uses in Luke: “*To whom much has been given, much is required.*”¹¹

I think you know what I am talking about here:

- Our level of education
- Our income
- The food we eat and the daily guidance we receive, sometimes contradictory, as to what is most and least healthy
- The homes we live in
- The arts we enjoy
- The longevity of our lives and the health care to which we have access that often makes that longevity productive and relatively enjoyable.

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⁹ These come from the Presbyterian Church 1910.

¹⁰ Ernest R. Nichol, “We’ve a Story to Tell to the Nations,” words and music written in 1906.

¹¹ Luke 12:48.

In the early nineties I was doing pre-marriage counseling with a couple both of whom were living in Chicago as young adults, just out of graduate school, in their first professional positions. They had returned to the town in which I was living to be married. In Chicago, they were attending Fourth Presbyterian Church, one of the “cathedral churches” of our denomination, a church that rises stately on Michigan Avenue, “The Magnificent Mile.” A friend of mine who knows Fourth Pres well has dubbed it “law firm at prayer.”

The man of the couple said to me:

The first time I attended, the minister was describing everything that was good about the privileged lives so many of us lead. It described everything I was feeling at the time, everything to which my childhood and college years had pointed.

Then he said:

The minister paused. Looked up. Continued to pause. Seemed to be looking right at me, and said: “Now earn it.”

“To whom much has been given, much is required.”

III.

The third and perhaps most personal reason for a church to be involved in mission relates in a heightened way to our time and place. It is this: We benefit from being exposed to people who are *not like us* –

- Economically
- Racially
- Culturally
- Politically
- In sexual identity
- Religiously
- Educationally
- Ideologically
- In life experience.

We benefit from exposure to “the other” because it makes them more human to us and us to them. It increases our understanding of the world in which *we* live in and the world in which *they* live. It draws forth our capacities for sympathy and empathy. It therefore makes us better equipped to live faithfully in the world, exercising positively that “dominion” with which God charged us at creation, because through those less like us, we know the world better. Indeed, when we are exposed in a personal way to people different from us, we experience a glimpse of the “truth” which Jesus promises “will make us free.”¹²

- When someone walks into our building and asks to see a pastor and I am the minister who happens to come down from upstairs and meet with the person, I learn a little bit more of what it is like for someone not to be able to pay their rent, not to be able to buy medicine for their children, not to have enough cash to even buy their next meal at McDonalds. I benefit from sheer exposure to them.

¹² John 8:32.

- When I visit someone from the congregation in a psychiatric ward of a hospital, I benefit.
- When I visit a member of the church in a county jail or state prison – as I have over the course of my ministry, I benefit.

I learn from people who are *like* me, but sometimes I learn more from people who are *not* like me. And that learning increases when I am directly involved in one of the mission programs of the church or in volunteer work in the community.

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A few weeks after the 2016 Presidential election, a member of the church sent me a copy of *Hillbilly Elegy*, a moving account by J. D. Vance¹³ of his own Appalachian upbringing in an opioid-infested environment and then through his days thereafter at Yale Law School. About that same time I had a rare visit with my brother's twenty-something son – who has grown up in Knoxville and entered a world not unlike that of Vance's upbringing. I heard from him his own struggle with addiction, with treatment, with marriage to a person he had met in treatment, with becoming a father of two girls through the marriage, with his wife's subsequent relapse and abandonment, with his descriptions of some of what these girls still under ten saw and faced – prior to their tenth birthdays – in rare times they were under the care of their mother who could not give care. It was as graphic as anything Vance describes in his book.

As sad as it was for me to hear my nephew's tale, I came away admiring him for his courage and my brother for the role he played in helping his son through the arduous process of securing custody of the girls. I came away understanding at a deeper level what it is like for so many people who experience “the worst of times” in what remains for many of us in privileged haunts “the best of times.”

IV.

In our scripture lesson today, the Apostle Paul is speaking about differences in class and wealth which lead us as human beings to gravitate toward people *like us*. He is writing the church at Corinth and brings up something he has been *hearing* about the way they comport themselves when gathering for communion after a meal together in a small house church.

...to begin with [Paul writes], when you come together as a church, I hear that there are divisions among you...For when the time comes to eat, each of you goes ahead with your own supper, and one goes hungry and another becomes drunk.

Paul adds:

When you come together [in this way], it is not really to eat the Lord's supper.

Then he offers a solution:

Examine yourselves, and only then eat of the bread and drink of the cup. For all who eat and drink without discerning the body, eat and drink judgement against themselves.

¹³ J. D. Vance, *Hillbilly Elegy* (New York: HarperCollins, 2016).

I have grown up hearing these words in church and Sunday School and from the pulpit on Communion Sundays, I have always thought they simply admonish us against taking communion without thinking of the ways Christ is present to us in the “bread and wine.” I have assumed the passage was simply saying: We are to *discern* the *body* and *blood* of Christ within the *bread* and *wine* we lift to our lips.

But I have it on good scholarly authority that Paul is talking not only about discerning the body and blood of Christ in the bread and wine of the elements, but also about discerning the *body* of Christ within the *body* of the church, within the *bodies* of the people gathered to partake of the *body* and *blood* of Christ. Paul is saying:

*Discern within all who have gathered – whether they are prosperous and have arrived early or are poor and have arrived late – discern the body of Christ within the body of the church.*¹⁴

*...when you come together to eat [he then adds], wait for one another, accept one another, welcome one another.*¹⁵

When we engage in mission, we discern the body of Christ in the lives, the struggles, the courage of those we serve, of those who serve us, *even* and sometimes *especially* when they are different from us.

Amen.

© Larry R. Hayward, Westminster Presbyterian Church, Alexandria VA

¹⁴ I Corinthians 11:28n, in *The New Interpreter's Study Bible: New Revised Standard Version with the Apocrypha* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2003).

¹⁵ The verb for “wait” can also be translated “accept” or “welcome,” as in I Corinthians 8:11-13 and 12:25. I Corinthians 11:33n in *The HarperCollins Study Bible: Fully Revised and Updated New Revised Standard Version* (New York: HarperCollins, 2006).