

We Are Witnesses! **Luke 24: 44-53**

Mission Trip

From Monday to Wednesday this past week, Juhee and I went on a mission trip to Salem, Maine, to a mission site of the United Methodist Economic Ministry. The United Methodist Economic Ministry supports and partners with rural communities to create healthy and sustainable communities within the region. They offer a big thrift store, food pantry, a space for gathering, and emergency fuel assistance to local communities. This means that there were lots of things to do, so all volunteers were busy with various tasks like moving boxes, sorting out items and repairing buildings. In addition to these tasks, Juhee and I were busy cooking for the volunteers. As you know, Juhee is a good cook. Juhee was initially asked to prepare one meal but ended up becoming the main chef and I became her assistant for every meal. The leader of the mission trip said, “Juhee spoiled them.” Bishop Peggy Johnson joked that she would not go on any more mission trips without Juhee. Anyway, we had a meaningful time, though our bodies were sore.

On the second day of the mission trip, I was asked to help making cornholes. Do you know what this is? [ppt] Everybody knows cornhole. At first, I didn't know what a cornhole was just like I didn't know what “Mary in a Bathtub” was. When I saw the instructions, I knew. Then, I was interested in why it is called cornhole. So I asked several people in our group, and they didn't know why it is called cornhole. Do you know why it is called cornhole? Originally, the small tossing bags were filled with corn kernels so that's why it is called cornhole. But as time went on, other synthetic materials have been used to fill the bags and people gradually forget why this game was called cornhole. The name of the game remains, but people have forgotten the origin of the name.

Mission

I think the same thing can happen even in our spiritual lives. Once we get familiar with things we do, we casually repeated them without deeply thinking of their original meaning. Mission is a good example. When you hear the word, ‘mission,’ what first comes to your mind? [ppt] For me, the first scene of the movie ‘the mission’ often comes to mind. A man was hanging on a cross and was pushed into a river and over a huge water fall. So, when I hear the word, ‘mission,’ I feel that it's something we have to do though it's a difficult task. Also, whenever I hear the word mission, I think of ‘mission-trip’ or ‘missionary’ so mission is something that is done in a distance place to evangelize people. We have a mission or missions to carry out. What's your understanding of mission? What do you feel when you hear the word mission? Where does the mission begin and end? We may have different understandings of mission but first, we need to learn from the Bible.

Today, we commemorate Jesus' ascension to heaven. The ascension of Jesus is the mark of an end and a beginning. First, Jesus' ascension signifies the ending of Jesus's physical presence on Earth and his return to his rightful place in heaven. Jesus ascended to his full authority as the Lord of the whole earth and thus, the ascension of Jesus indicates the fulfilment of Jesus' incarnate work on earth so it's a mark of an end. At the same time, Jesus' ascension marks the beginning of the work of the church through the Holy Spirit. Next Sunday is the day of Pentecost and we will commemorate the descent of the Holy Spirit on the disciples. At the end of his ministry and the dawn of the church, Jesus gave his disciples a mission.

Jesus made his disciples to understand that he was the fulfillment of the prophecy of the Old Testament. He said, “Thus it is written, that the Messiah is to suffer and to rise from the dead on the third day and that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things.” Jesus called his disciples to be witnesses of the risen Christ.

We Are Witnesses!

As disciples of Jesus Christ, we are also called to be witnesses! We are familiar with this term, ‘witness.’ When do we most often use or hear this word? In a courtroom. A key witness, witness protection program, cross examination of the witness. Witness is a legal term. Imagine what happens in a court trial. A trial aims to search for the truth and to get at the truth, a witness is brought to the stand to testify. There are two credentials to be a witness. First, the witness has seen something. Without seeing or hearing something, the witness has nothing to

testify. The second credential to be a witness is that the witness is willing to tell the truth about it. Before testifying, a witness must raise a hand and say, “I solemnly affirm that the testimony I am about to give in this court is the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth.” A witness should tell the truth. In current times, we have a witness protection program, but in the ancient world, there was no such a thing. So having told the truth, the witness had to take the consequences of their testimony. Sometimes, the witness who provided incriminating evidence against powerful individuals or political figures might face retribution or harm. Also, people may despise what they have heard and the witness may suffer as a result of the testimony. The very life of the witness was bound up in the testimony. Being a witness meant that you staked your life on your testimony. So, the New Testament word for witness is... *martyr*.

We are witnesses to the risen Christ and the gospel he proclaimed. We are called to be witnesses who testify as to what we’ve seen and heard. We are sent to tell about Christ and his calling for repentance and forgiveness of sins through our actions and words. And we stake our lives on what we testify. In other words, we embody what we testify, the good news of Jesus Christ! That is our mission.

We often misunderstand mission as particular works we do for others such as an outreach program, food collection, a mission-trip, evangelization or justice ministry. What we do are particular ways of faithfully embodying the good news we have heard and seen, but they themselves are not our mission. We are called to be witnesses to Christ. This means that we are not saviors and our mission is not saving the world or other people through our works.

Since the Ukraine war broke out, our church has ended our worship service with singing “Let There Be Peace on Earth” to pray for peace and show our solidarity with Ukrainians. However, the Ukraine War continues and our efforts seem ineffective. Then, what do we feel about it? Do we feel powerless and useless? Sometimes, we feel that prayer is not enough to change the world. Our small actions seemed ineffective and we are too small to change the world. Sometimes, we feel that we fail to carry out our mission. But, my friend, don’t be discouraged. We are witnesses, not saviors. Efficiency is not the center of the church’s mission. Faith is the heart of our mission. It’s how we faithfully embody what we testify!

In an interview, Stanley Hauerwas, one of the most influential theologians of our time, was asked a question. “what is the church’s mission?” His answer was “the church doesn’t have a mission. The church is mission because our fundamental being is based on the presumption that we are witnesses to Christ who is known only through witnesses, who bear the mark of that life that gives life to us and other people. And so I can’t imagine Christians who are not fundamentally in mission as constitutive of their being.”¹

The primary mission of the church is to be the church. The church is a gathering of people who have been formed by God’s story of creation, redemption through Jesus Christ and sanctification by the Holy Spirit. Christians are people who live by this divine story that provides us with the skills for navigating our way to embody the gospel in the world and discover God still working in our midst. We are witnesses who live by and testify to this wonderful story of God’s salvation and love.

The mission of the church is to be the church and this mission is not a burden we have to bear and endure. Rather this is a joyful task. When Jesus left, he lifted his hands and blessed his disciples. As he blessed them, he left them and was taken up to heaven. How did the disciples react? “They worshipped him and returned to Jerusalem overwhelmed with joy. And they were continuously in the temple praising God.” Witnessing Christ is a joyful task.

Our task is to embody the joy that comes from being a part of the body of Christ. During the week, I want you to reflect on what joy is in you to be the witness of Jesus Christ and to share that joy with people around you. Amen.

¹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=opKKCbvUFiE>