

Global Mission in a New Key

Text: Isaiah 58:6, Acts 1:4-8

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Transcription of the spoken sermon

“...to loose the bonds of injustice, ...to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke.” Isaiah 58:6

“...to the ends of the earth.” Acts 1:4-8

It would be difficult to challenge the statement that it is the intention of God that all God's children live in freedom and human dignity. I don't think anyone would want to challenge that. Certainly that is the biblical vision. We noted last week in the celebration of our own Declaration of Independence that God has blessed this nation. This political arrangement was founded on the conviction that God has created all people, all people, equal in God's image. That to live in freedom is to realize the human potential with which God has endowed us, and to live in that freedom as we have for the last two hundred plus years, we've also found economic prosperity because there has been, along with political freedom, economic freedom. I suggested last week that perhaps, after some two hundred years living with a Declaration of Independence, it is time for us now to declare our Declaration of *Interdependence* because history doesn't stand still. History moves on.

While those thirteen colonies on the eastern seaboard were knit together by a common vision, they lived not in nearly the proximity to each other that we live with the whole globe today. Through the satellites that go through our sky we are in touch with the whole world, and we know what's going on everywhere. We have become a global community. That global community calls us to a concern for the whole world, for the freedom and the dignity of all people everywhere. Certainly that is God's intention. It was the prophetic vision the prophet was most often called to speak to the people of God, to remind them that God's purposes transcended their own narrow interests. The prophet in Isaiah 65 of last week's Old Testament lesson spoke of the “new heaven and the new earth,” in the time when people would build houses and dwell in them, plant gardens and eat their fruit, living with dignity without exploitation or coercion, where the world

eventually would become a place where the lion and the lamb could lie down together, and no one would hurt in all God's holy mountain.

The Old Testament lesson this morning from the 58th chapter of Isaiah says the same thing. The people of Judah having returned from the Exile carrying on their religious observances said, "Why doesn't God heed? Why doesn't God hear us?"

And God says to the prophet, "Look, religious observances are not ends in themselves. If you want to be truly religious, then care one for another. Break off the thongs that bind people. Be done with injustice. Set the captive free. This is God's intention for humankind, for all people everywhere."

With the globe becoming no larger than a grapefruit, and community becoming world community today, it is incumbent for us to think of global mission "in a new key." Jesus stood in that prophetic tradition. Jesus sent his disciples into all the world, "to the ends of the earth," he said. He proclaimed the Gospel, the good news. That good news – Jesus standing in the prophetic tradition – was that God is near. God is present. God is gracious. That God would include and would reconcile all people. Jesus said, "Go tell that good news." And the Church has become a missionary church.

We have noted in past weeks since Pentecost that it was unfortunate that there had to be that break between Judaism and the Jesus Movement, but even so God has used that division. The Christian Church has brought the God of Israel to the nations. But the history of the Christian Church now encompassing the globe is really a mixed affair. On the one hand you can write the story of the spread of the Christian Church in glowing terms. There have been many heroes and heroines in the faith. Christian Mission at its best has been concerned for medicine, and for education, and for agriculture, and for the whole human condition. There have been those who have given their all in order that the light of Christ might illumine the lives of people. But the Christian Movement has a shadow side too. If we would be honest we would have to admit that that movement into all the world to make the world Christian was a movement that was characterized at many periods with coercion. There were the enforced baptisms. There was the development of that anti-Semitism which came to its ugly climax in the Holocaust. There was the Inquisition - the enforcing of faith on people. There was too often a lack of sensitivity to native cultures and native mores. So the history of the Church has been a history of mission movement with a light and a shadow side.

The modern missionary movement of the 19th century is the mission movement that most of us are aware of. It was a movement that arose out of a passion to bring all people to knowledge of Christ. What fired that mission was a conviction that outside of Christ there was no salvation. But as that modern missionary movement arose there was also the development of modern atheism. That whole development of atheism in the Western World said that religion is not anything that has any true counterpart here, but rather arises out of the human need itself,

that human beings create religion. And then, encountering atheism, that most serious of all criticisms of religion, there was the counterclaim that human religion doesn't start with us but starts with one who encounters us from beyond and draws response from us.

That's about where I was in Europe about a couple of decades ago, a quarter of a century ago, wrestling with that one. Recognizing that if human religion is response to the encounter of God from beyond us, which is really the vital claim that we must make, then it became more and more difficult to say of all the human responses in the respective religions, there is only one that is right, and that one is mine. I didn't have to solve that when I came back here in the early 70s because some of us went out to California to the Institute for Successful Church Leadership, and we learned that you ought to bloom where you are planted and that mission is where you are. So we gave ourselves to creating here a loving community, a compassionate community. The last couple of decades are the story of creating here a Center for Creative Christianity.

But time marches on. History moves. The world changes, and it's time for us to make another move. It's time for us to come to Global Awareness. I have to credit Peter Theune for bringing to us, as he came to the Christ Community team, a greater sensitivity to the larger world. The Task Force on Global Awareness in our midst has been a catalyst to get us to think outward. I think in the recent past, for the past two or three years, our whole world has exploded to such an extent that we know that we are part of a global community whether we want to be or not, and we have to decide whether we will put our resources and our efforts in trying to maintain things as they are - building walls and developing a fortress mentality, or whether we will cast ourselves on the side of the agents of change to bring about reconciliation, to remove the barriers and the divisions, and to bind the human family together, which it seems to me is reflective of the biblical vision of God's intention. The God of all compassion who loves people, who would mediate grace to all, who would gather all in his bosom in order to build the family of God.

Let me challenge this community of faith this morning to a new engagement with concrete mission. We've begun already. For a number of summers now some of you have gone to Staten Island, Project Hospitality, where The Rev. Terry Troia works with the alienated and the outcast of society. Your lives have been touched and changed by that encounter. We are sending today a group of young people to Chicago to an urban ministry to encounter the realities of the city. Later this summer we will send a group to Wales to be with Bob and Kris Kleinhessel in that urban ministry in the city of Cardiff. Concretely this morning you have before you Jeanne Farrer who will be going from us to be our presence in Africa, in Gambia, to teach, to serve, to be there as the presence of the love of God that she has come to know in Jesus Christ. Let me challenge all of us this morning to a new commitment to Global Mission.

But that commitment to Global Mission needs to be in a new key.

I hinted a moment ago that when I came back here in the 70s I could not rouse you to passionate action in order to bring Christ to the world as though that was the world's only hope. That was the theological problem I was struggling with. Now let me simply say boldly, having not solved all those problems, this I know - the world is a hurting, bleeding, wounded place. We cannot deny it any more. It comes into our living rooms and our kitchens and our dens day after day after day. The anguish on the faces of the adults who bury their dead, who look into the eyes of the starving children. The knowledge that in Zambia sixty cents per child per year goes for their education. The knowledge that our world is being torn apart most decisively by religious fundamentalisms. The knowledge that, with the umbrella of oppression that held the world at bay for some decades now evaporating, there is a new uprising of ethnic feuds and national pride and arrogance. Our world is bleeding. Our world is wounded.

The God of biblical vision is a God who cares, a God full of compassion, a God who calls God's people not to the exercise of religious observances - the fasts and the rituals, and the worship that ends there, but rather the God who calls God's people to true religion which is to be concerned for the poor and the homeless and the naked. To break off all injustice and take away the yoke and set the captive free. Jesus in his inaugural sermon in his hometown quoted Isaiah 61 saying, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me to proclaim liberty to the captive." Jesus, standing in that prophetic tradition with all of the compassion of God moving through him, crying out to a world to break off the bonds and to set the prisoner free.

Jesus would call us to his way; Jesus gave us the promise of Pentecost, which was not a commission to found a church and a religion, but to move into the era of the Spirit of God who transcends all human forms, the God of all mercy and compassion who calls us to love the world as God loves the world. *A new commitment to Global Mission but in a new key.* Not in order to found Christian churches all over the globe, but in the name of Jesus to love, to heal, to bind up the wounds, to teach, and to create a world in which it is possible for every person not to become Christian, but to become human - for God's sake. To realize God's purpose for human kind so that people might live in justice, peace - dancing before the God of creation who dances in our midst, whose light shines upon us when we catch the vision and allow our passion to be unleashed.

To bring salvation, *salve*, healing to the world. That is our calling. That will be our joy. Together. We can't do everything, but we can do something.