

In Praise of Missions
First Presbyterian Church, Wilkes-Barre, October 25, 2020

Scripture reading:

Acts 17 ¹⁶ Now while Paul was waiting for them [Silas and Timothy] at Athens, his spirit was provoked within him as he saw that the city was full of idols. ¹⁷ So he argued in the synagogue with the Jews and the devout persons, and in the market place every day with those who chanced to be there. ¹⁸ Some also of the Epicurean and Stoic philosophers met him. And some said, “What would this babbler say?” Others said, “He seems to be a preacher of foreign divinities” — because he preached Jesus and the resurrection. ¹⁹ And they took hold of him and brought him to the Are-op’agus, saying, “May we know what this new teaching is which you present? ²⁰ For you bring some strange things to our ears; we wish to know therefore what these things mean.” ²¹ Now all the Athenians and the foreigners who lived there spent their time in nothing except telling or hearing something new.

²² So Paul, standing in the middle of the Are-op’agus, said: “Men of Athens, I perceive that in every way you are very religious. ²³ For as I passed along, and observed the objects of your worship, I found also an altar with this inscription, ‘To an unknown god.’ What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you. ²⁴ The God who made the world and everything in it, being Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in shrines made by man, ²⁵ nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all men life and breath and everything. ²⁶ And he made from one every nation of men to live on all the face of the earth, having determined allotted periods and the boundaries of their habitation, ²⁷ that they should seek God, in the hope that they might feel after him and find him. Yet he is not far from each one of us, ²⁸ for

‘In him we live and move and have our being’;
as even some of your poets have said,

‘For we are indeed his offspring.’

²⁹ Being then God’s offspring, we ought not to think that the Deity is like gold, or silver, or stone, a representation by the art and imagination of man. ³⁰ The times of ignorance God overlooked, but now he commands all men everywhere to repent, ³¹ because he has fixed a day on which he will judge the world in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed, and of this he has given assurance to all men by raising him from the dead.”

³² Now when they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some mocked; but others said, “We will hear you again about this.” ³³ So Paul went out from among them. ³⁴ But some men joined him and believed, among them Dionys’ius the Are-op’agite and a woman named Dam’aris and others with them.
18:¹ After this he left Athens and went to Corinth.

1 Corinthians 2:1 When I came to you, brethren, I did not come proclaiming to you the testimony^[a] of God in lofty words or wisdom. **2** For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified. **3** And I was with you in weakness and in much fear and trembling; **4** and my speech and my message were not in plausible words of wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power, **5** that your faith might not rest in the wisdom of men but in the power of God.

1 Thessalonians 1: 5 for our gospel came to you not only in word, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction. You know what kind of men we proved to be among you for your sake.

Message:

When I was young, I understood that the highest calling one might have is to be a missionary. Now, yes, I was an unusual case. My mother was born in the Congo to missionary parents. My first memory of those grandparents was when they returned to the United States in 1956 on retirement. My, but they seemed old! My grandfather Plumer Smith was 70! We visited them at “Mission Court” in Richmond, Virginia, where the missionaries on furlough resided. I came to know my grandparents well. Then they moved to the small city of Hopewell where my grandfather pastored a small chapel for a few years until he fully retired to a house across the alley from where we lived in Richmond. My grandfather had lots of color slides he would show my sisters and me, and he would tell us about Africa, and life there. There were many vivid images.

There was the picture of one of my grandfather’s friends holding a snake – a very big snake! There was the picture taken after my grandfather was struck by lightning, with his clothes torn up. A native showing off the enormous head of a hippo. My grandfather practicing with a small bow under instruction from pigmies, who had given it to him. They also gave him poison for the arrows, for use against his enemies. There was a small tree hung with fetishes, charms appealing to their gods, for luck with hunting. A man chained up who had sleeping sickness. He was out of his mind, and yelled and screamed. Nobody could do anything for him; it was incurable. There were medical missionaries – one picture showed a tumor the

size of a football, or bigger, sitting on a small table, that had been removed from a woman at the mission station hospital. It was all so very different from the places I knew, in what was mostly suburban neighborhoods in the United States.

My grandfather's stories spoke of travel on the Congo rivers by steam boat, and traveling overland where there were no proper roads, visiting in villages. He had a snakeskin about 30 feet long and a foot wide, and a lion skin and a leopard skin. He spoke of the people. It was clear that he had dedicated himself to their well-being, especially bringing to them the good news of the gospel. Whenever someone would visit, Grandfather always ended the visit with a reading from the Bible and a prayer. My grandmother taught school, and brought to the children in the Congo the gift of reading and writing. It was like magic to them, being able to communicate at a distance by writing. She had traveled to the Congo in time of war, 1915, to marry my grandfather there. Even as young as I was, it was clear what their lives were about – dedication to God's calling in this particular way.

It was important. As one of the elder natives asked the first Presbyterian missionaries, "If this gospel news is so important, why did it take so many years for you to come to us?" Missionaries have been around since the beginnings of the Christian church. Indeed, Paul the apostle, whom we read about in today's scriptures, is often thought of as the first missionary, in the sense of going out and traveling to far places to preach the gospel. The late 19th century and early 20th saw a big push to bring the Good News to everyplace on earth. Central Africa is one of the most forbidding places in the world. The Congo River is blocked from the ocean by impassable cataracts where it passes through the Crystal Mountains. Overland travel meant swamps, jungles, dangerous wild animals, and diseases. Until the late 1800's, only slave traders penetrated the interior.

But, Presbyterian missionaries went there in 1891. Lapsley and Sheppard, a white man partnered with a black man, set up a mission station in the Kasai area. Lapsley died within two years of blackwater fever. Shepherd persevered. It was two years before the first native that they had been ministering to turned to Christianity. Other missionaries came, including my grandparents. They went to share God's love through Jesus with people in what seemed to me the most remote, strange, and dangerous place on earth, deepest, darkest Africa.

There was a need for that message. The natives lived in fear. Yes, the dangers of crocodiles in the river, leopards taking children, and pervasive diseases. They believed in a creator God, but they thought that god had deserted them, and left them to be tormented by their ancestors. They thought that their ancestors' only pleasure after death was coming back to torment the living. The ancestors had to be appeased. In the Bakuba tribe, outside of a hut, you would find, on a pole, a

miniature replica of the hut. The residents would sprinkle it with blood to fool the ancestors into haunting it, instead of their real home. The witch doctors' magic was another source of fear. If someone died or was ill, the witch doctor might gather the community together and then "sniff out" who the guilty party was. The poison cup prepared by the witch doctor was used as a test of whether you had made evil magic that caused the sickness or death. Yet, the witch doctors themselves prepared and sold potions for various ends, including dealing with enemies. God's love and saving grace through Jesus was a needed and welcome message, and a relief from the power of superstition.

Things have changed. In our day, missionaries are seldom talked about. Depictions such as in Michener's book *Hawaii*, have been unfavorable. Sometimes missionaries are portrayed as tyrants lording it over enslaved natives. Within the church, there seems to be a sense that the mission of spreading the gospel is completed; the message has now reached all over the world. There is some truth to that. Our missionaries in the Congo always had the goal of establishing a Church of those who lived there, an African church, run by the natives. They intended to help it get started. Now, that church is alive and well, despite the many problems that continue to plague the Congo. Someday they be sending missionaries to us. Consider that it was the better part of three centuries between Paul's ministry and when Constantine chose to make the Roman empire Christian.

Within the Presbyterian Church, missionaries have been re-labeled "mission associates." On the foreign field, they are there to help the native churches, with an emphasis on social ministry. As in the Congo, the native churches are better positioned for conveying the good news of salvation in Jesus. Who am I to argue with that? The world does change, and a lot has changed between the early twentieth century and now. These days, a lot of foreign mission work is done in partnerships between churches here and churches in foreign lands. There are also non-denominational organizations. Cindy and I help with a child in Mexico through Compassion International, which works with local churches and learning centers. The basic human condition has not really changed all that much. There are still people in physical need of food, clothing and shelter. There are still people with a void in their lives where God should be.

I should also mention "home missions." My Uncle Roy Smith was a home missionary; his heart was not sound enough for foreign service. He ministered to Appalachian regions in western Virginia. I always heard that he had to work much harder at it than my Grandfather, and he did not get furloughs, either. Many need help right here in the United States, and Northeastern Pennsylvania. Much of what our own church does and supports in mission is this kind of work.

So, at this point, as we consider praise for missions, let's take a look at the apostle Paul, our prototype for what a missionary might be. In our scripture reading, Paul has come to Athens. Greece was under Roman rule, but Athens was still the center of Greek philosophy. Paul tries to win them over with logic. It doesn't work. He meets with contempt. Then Paul leaves Athens for Corinth.

The Areopagus means the Hill of Mars, there in Athens, near the marketplace. More importantly, it also meant the court that met there. The Areopagus as an institution reached back to mythological times. It tried the most severe crimes, murder, and impiety. The Areopagus functioned more or less as a Supreme Court, and assumed great powers sometimes, especially in times of crisis. Luke tells us **“they took hold of him [that is, Paul] and brought him to the Are-op'agus ...”** This implies that Paul didn't have a choice. He was being forced to face charges of impiety or blasphemy before a court that was empowered to judge him. There was a tradition or practice from centuries earlier, perhaps still in effect. The defendant could, after his first speech, abandon his case, and take exile, forfeiting his property. We have Paul's speech, thanks to Luke. We then read, ³²**Now when they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some mocked; but others said, “We will hear you again about this.”** That likely meant that the prosecution was now to be given the chance to make their case. Then we read, ³³**So Paul went out from among them.** If the tradition of allowing the defendant, at this point, to choose exile was still practiced, it would seem that Paul decided to withdraw, and leave Athens, rather than have his case continue. He may have had the sense he was not getting anywhere with the intellectual elite of Athens. This is speculative, of course; we can't really know. But that does seem to fit well with what Luke tells us. We read in the next verse, ³⁴**But some men joined him and believed, among them Dionys'ius the Are-op'agite and a woman named Dam'aris and others with them.** This Dionysius, as a member of this highest court, would have been a bit like a Supreme Court justice. We don't have any further details.

Listen to what Paul says about coming to Corinth in his letter to them, later:

When I came to you, brethren, I did not come proclaiming to you the testimony^[a] of God in lofty words or wisdom. ²For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified. ³And I was with you in weakness and in much fear and trembling; ⁴and my speech and my message were not in plausible words of wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power, ⁵that your faith might not rest in the wisdom of men but in the power of God.

Words of earthly logic and wisdom had not worked in Athens! In Athens, Paul, and God's purpose, were seemingly defeated. But God is never really defeated. Even in Athens, some believers joined him. Furthermore, Paul came to realize that talking logic to the world's foremost philosophers, people who prided themselves in their worldly knowledge, was futile. God's message is not meant for the educated, the elite, for the smartest people around! It's meant for everybody! Indeed, being a philosopher, a genius, or some other kind of expert in humanity, is more likely to be a barrier to accepting God's love in Jesus Christ!

Remember what Jesus said in the Beatitudes, in Matthew's gospel, and in Luke's. Blessed are the poor, blessed are those who hunger, the meek, those who mourn ... Those who are rich already have their reward. Those who are full of their own worldly knowledge, they are not "the meek." Those whose lives are insulated from death and sorrow will not be sensitive to God's ultimate act of salvation, Jesus's death on the cross, for our sakes.

God's kingdom is meant for all. You don't have to be special to know the way in. Secret knowledge was the essence of Gnosticism, the idea that secrets disclosed to a select few had to be mastered to gain entry into the higher realms. There were both Christian and pagan variations of Gnosticism. Paul's message to his hearers didn't require the high intelligence or extensive training needed to master secret knowledge. It required only an openness to God's love. It was available to everybody.

So, when Paul comes to Corinth, he does not appeal to "plausible words of wisdom." Rather, he told of God's love through Jesus, and he lived out that message himself. That was sufficient. As he later wrote to the Thessalonians,

1 Thess. 5: "for our gospel came to you not only in word, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction. You know what kind of men we proved to be among you for your sake."

Those are important words, words we in this church live by. Look there! They are written across our stained glass windows.

Corinth was a great commercial center, on one of the most important east-west trade routes. People came there from all over the Roman empire, and brought their philosophies and customs with them. There were temples to the Greek gods, in particular a temple to Aphrodite, the goddess of love, and all that came with that.

In short, it was a city much like what we have here in the United States, with diverse cultures and peoples, all together in an unstable mixture under Roman rule. The Corinthian church had its problems. That gave Paul occasion to write these two books that we have in our Bible, full of good practical insight and advice, culminating in that magnificent chapter 13 on love. How to act as Christians in a pagan, often hostile, world, and do so in a way that is a light to the world. We need to do that, for here in the United States, the mission field has come to us. People want to come here. They seek better lives for themselves and their children.

My mother did not become a missionary herself. God did not call her to that. When she was young and single, and her parents were here on furlough, her father would bring seminary students home for dinner for her to meet. They were earnest young men, who wanted to marry her and take her back to Africa to the mission field. She said no. She became an elementary school teacher. She wanted most of all to marry and have children. She was a good mother. As good a mother as I can imagine anyone could be. Yes, I know this isn't Mother's Day, but that is a high calling too. My mother lived her life as a shining beacon of God's love, visible to us her children, to her students, to her friends, and to all the others she happened across.

I wasn't called to be a missionary either. I tried being a volunteer for some months at a mission in New Orleans, and found out it wasn't my path. For some reason I've found my way here, and found my own calling in teaching over at Wilkes, until I retired just this year.

You have all sought, and maybe have found, your calling as well. Maybe you are still searching. We are all called to missions in the broad sense. We are to live lives that reflect the hope, the joy, the peace, and the assurance, that we as Christians find in God's love. A love demonstrated to us and the world through the life, sacrifice, and resurrection of Jesus.

We do need to support those whose special calling to mission is beyond the ordinary. Those who travel to distant places or close, those who take God's message of love where it is unwelcome, those who need our prayers and support. I close, asking that you remember, and give praise to God, for the life and work of missionaries and missions, from Paul to the present. And that, in those examples of living out God's love, you find inspiration for your own calling. Pray that you can bring to it that light, which will shine through you, to a needful world.

Amen.