

Rick Snyder
First Presbyterian Church
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Our Vision: To Connect and To Send, part 3
Luke 10:25-37, Rev. 6:1-8

Billy Graham was once asked, “Are you disturbed by those passages in Scripture that you don’t understand?” He responded, “No! I’m disturbed by those passages that I do understand.” The Bible is filled with wonderful promises – promises of God’s tender love and concern, “The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want!” promises of God’s readiness to forgive, “Though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be made as white as snow.”, and promises of God’s empowering might, “Those who wait on the Lord shall renew their strength. They shall mount up on wings like eagles. They shall run and not be weary; they shall walk and not be faint.”

The Bible tells us of God’s readiness to hear our prayers, “Ask and you will receive; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened.” It tells us that each of us is precious in God’s sight, “Not one sparrow can fall to the ground apart from the will of the Father . . . So don’t be afraid, you are worth more than many sparrows.”, and it promises that in Jesus Christ, we will receive a life beyond this life, “Jesus says, ‘In my father’s house there are many rooms and I’m going to prepare a place for you.’”

But the Bible is also filled with challenges, and one of the most prominent of those challenges is Scripture’s charge to care for the poor and the hungry. Author Jim Wallis tells how a group of fellow seminary students underlined every verse in the Bible that dealt with poverty, wealth, justice or oppression. Then to arrange the passages, a student cut every one of those verses out of the Bible with a scissors. The result was a tattered volume that barely held together. Genesis tells of famines, struggles to find water, and Israel facing marauding tribes. Exodus tells of slaves seeking liberation, yearning to be freed from their bondage in Egypt.

Even the ten commandments deal with justice. It was the poor who needed a Sabbath; the rich had time at their disposal. It was the rich who most often preyed upon young women, committing adultery. It was the rich who most often bore false witness, using their position and power to evade the truth.

Every single prophet in Scripture speaks of justice. Amos dreams of the time when “justice will roll down like a river and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.” Micah succinctly describes what God requires, “To do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with our God.” Isaiah ridicules Israel for her shallow worship, for trying to please God while having insincere hearts. What will please God? Isaiah says this,

This is the fasting God chooses, to loose the chains of injustice and the oppressed from their yokes, to feed the hungry, shelter the poor wanderer, to clothe the naked and care for your flesh and blood? Then you will call

and the Lord will answer; you will cry for help, and He will say, Here I am. Jesus is born in anonymity to a pregnant, unwed mother and a couple who were homeless. Joseph might be a carpenter, although the Greek word "teknon" translated carpenter is more often translated "day laborer," a man who works for pennies a day. During His ministry, Jesus seeks out the poor and the sick. He feeds famished multitudes, and warns us to not walk past beggars, like the rich man did to Lazarus.

In his final parable Jesus warns that at the last judgment, the sheep will be separated from the goats, on this basis, "Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? When did we see you a stranger and invite you in or needing clothes and clothe you? When did we see you sick or in prison and visit you?" Jesus' surprising answer is this, "Whatever you did for one of the least of my brothers or sisters, you did for me."

The book of James insists that faith without works is dead, that pure and faultless religion means to look after orphans and widows in their distress, that a poor man in shabby clothes should be seated next to the wealthy. "What good is it," James asks, "if we claim to have faith but have no deeds, if we say to a hungry person, 'Go, I wish you well; keep warm and be well fed,' but do nothing about his physical needs?"

I'm in the midst of preaching three sermons on our mission. I've mentioned that our updated mission statement is about two words, Connecting and Sending! Our mission is to connect people to the relationships that really matter – to Jesus Christ and to one another, and to send them to meet real needs. This statement captures what our church has always done throughout its 150 year history. We have always connected people to Jesus Christ and to one another. And we have always sent people out to serve. What is different about this mission statement is that hopefully it is more easily remembered. It is about two words – Connecting and Sending.

Two weeks ago I told how connecting to Jesus helps us become new creations. Last week I described the importance of being connected to one another. This morning I am speaking about our call to be sent to serve. To be "sent" doesn't necessarily mean something exotic. Wherever we are: in our homes and offices, in our work and play, in all our relationships, we are ambassadors for Christ, those who bring Christ's light and love into each situation. So we listen; we forgive; we build bridges; we serve; we offer encouragement; we rally around a friend in need. When my next door neighbor broke his foot, I cut his grass. That wasn't a big deal; I was going to work out that day any way. Being "sent" doesn't even necessarily mean doing more. But it does suggest intentionality. We keep asking, "Lord, use me wherever I am."

Mary Ann and I offer a deep "thank you" for your prayers, cards, e-mails, and words of encouragement during her surgery last Tuesday. We're deeply grateful for the skill and compassion of medical personnel, for a phone call from a friend we hadn't talked to in years, for offers of food and help with chores. I contrast that with the CEO who told a

senior staff member whose wife had been diagnosed with breast cancer, "Sorry to hear that. But I expect all your work to be done on time." Period! End of discussion.

But we may be sent much farther than our immediate neighbor. The parable of the Good Samaritan is usually misunderstood. We tend to think that is a parable about stopping to help a neighbor in need. But the parable is given after a legal expert asks Jesus, "Teacher, what does the law require?" Jesus responds, "Love God with all your heart, mind, soul and strength, and love your neighbor as yourself." But the legal expert wants to know the limits of his responsibility before God, so he asks, "And who is my neighbor?" Jesus' answer shocks the legal expert's world-view.

Jesus tells of a traveler who is beaten and dumped near the corner of Duncan and Kirby. A Presbyterian minister and elder happen by, but they have Bible Studies to attend, so they hurry past. Then an exchange student from Pakistan, who is a Taliban sympathizer and in fact, part of a sleeper cell which is discussing the detonation of a bomb at the U of I – Illinois State game this fall, comes upon the man. He stops, lifts the man into his 97 Yugo and drives him to Carle. "Spare no expense," he tells the E.R. physicians, pulling out his own credit card. "Bill me," he says, "for whatever costs there may be."

If that recasting of the parable sounds implausible, it was no more implausible than Jesus describing a "good Samaritan." Jews hated Samaritans; Samaritans hated Jews. But Jesus' answer to the question, "Who is my neighbor?" then is this: Our neighbor is anyone in need, even an enemy. Our "neighbor" may be our wife or daughter, or a co-worker or that local child who needs mentoring. But it may be a street child in San Pablo, refugees in Darfur, or AIDS victims in India or the Ukraine.

What is alarming is that the proverbial four horsemen of the Apocalypse are running rampant in 2009. The term, "the four horsemen of the Apocalypse" is drawn from our text. The "Apocalypse" refers to the book of Revelation. Revelation is written to churches being persecuted by Rome around 90 A.D., so it is written in cryptic language. John describes a white horse representing conquest, a fiery red horse representing war, a black horse representing famine, and a pale horse representing Death riding across our world. Sadly that description depicts exactly our global situation.

Think, for example, of the worldwide publicity if a jumbo jet crashes, killing everyone on board. But 26,500 children worldwide die every day from preventable diseases. That is equivalent to a jumbo jet crashing every fifteen minutes, hour by hour, day by day, year by year. In our country, two out of every 1000 children die before age 5; in Sierra Leone, 282 out of every 1000 children die before age 5. The average life expectancy in the U.S. is 78; in sub-Saharan Africa it is 47. The per capita expenditure for education in the U.S. is \$1780; the per capita expenditure for education in Uganda is \$5.

It is hard for us to imagine what it means to be truly poor. But one billion people live on less than a dollar a day. If we earn more than \$50,000 a year we are in the top one

percent of worldwide wage-earners. In many third-world countries, families spend seventy percent of their income for just enough food to keep them from starving. In parts of Africa, mothers take dirt, mix it with oil and sugar, cook it, and feed it to their children. Mothers feed their children "dirt," because at least it stops the hunger pangs.

Or just imagine if every water faucet in your home was turned off. The average American family of four uses 243 gallons of water a day. We use 36 gallons when taking a bath; 2 gallons when brushing our teeth or washing our hands, 15 gallons when we run the dishwasher, 3 – 5 gallons when we flush the toilet, and 40 gallons when we run the washer. But water weighs 8.34 pounds a gallon, so 243 gallons weigh 2048 pounds. So suppose we reduce our water consumption by 75%. The weight will still be over 500 pounds. Now suppose your nearest water supply is two miles away. How many four mile round trips would it take to carry 500 pounds of water by hand? Such is the plight of millions of people, even assuming the water is safe to drink, which often it isn't.

Sadly our eyes glaze over when we hear such statistics. Mother Teresa once said, "If I look at the mass, I will never act. If I look at the one, I will." In 2004, researchers from Carnegie Mellon tested two forms of "request letters." The first letter contained facts like "Food shortages in Malawi affect 3 million children" or "Four million Angolans have fled from their homes." The second letter said, "Any money you donate will go to Rokia, a 7 year old in Mali, Africa. Rokia is desperately poor and, as of now, has no access to education, medical care or good nutrition." The first letter generated a contribution of \$1.14; the second letter generated a contribution of \$2.38, more than double. So the researchers determined that hearing of the scope of a global crisis actually reduces compassion, for we think analytically, rather than emotionally.

But God cares for each of us; we cling to the promise that He knows us and loves us. God's goal, then, is that we begin to think, "What if Rokia or a street child in San Pablo or an AIDS orphan was my child? What would I do? How would I help?" Our mission is to be connected to Jesus, to be connected to one another, and then to be sent wherever God leads. Such "sentness" might be to a pregnant teen, or a lonely widow, or our next-door neighbor. But it must not stop there. God's vision is of a transformed community and world – where children needing guidance are mentored, where no homeless person sleeps outside on a cold, winter night, where everyone has access to clean, drinking water, where the light and love of Jesus shines into every arena of darkness.

On June 13, 1944 a baby was born to a poor Korean family, whose poverty grew far worse during the Korean War. The family often went hungry, and doubted that their son could stay in school. But the family received food, clothing and even school supplies. The boy still remembers the day he received a pair of used shoes two sizes too large that kept his feet from freezing. As he grew, the boy often thought of those kind strangers, strangers he had never seen, who cared enough to help. The boy stayed in school, then graduated from Seoul National University in 1970. In 1985 he received a master's degree

from the Kennedy School of Government at Harvard. Today he lives in New York City. His name is Ban Ki-moon, and he is the secretary general of the United Nations.

What if we hadn't helped Ban Ki-moon's family. No, we can't do everything. Once a storm washed 1000s of starfish up on a New Jersey beach, and a little boy was throwing them back into the ocean one by one. A man told the boy, "You can't save 1000s of starfish." "No," said the boy, "but I can save this one, and this one, and this one." God forbid that we fail to do something, because we can't do everything. What is our mission: It is to be connected to the relationships that really matter – to Jesus and to one another, and to be sent to neighbors in need, wherever and whoever that neighbor may be!