

## THE CHURCH ON THE GROUND

II Corinthians 6:1-13

*A sermon given by Dr. Larry R. Hayward on the Twelfth Sunday in Ordinary Time, June 21, 2009, at Westminster Presbyterian Church, Alexandria, Virginia.*

### FOCUS TEXT

*As we work together with him, we urge you also not to accept the grace of God in vain. For he says,  
'At an acceptable time I have listened to you,  
and on a day of salvation I have helped you.'*

*See, now is the acceptable time; see, now is the day of salvation!*

*We are putting no obstacle in anyone's way, so that no fault may be found with our ministry, but as servants of God we have commended ourselves in every way: through great endurance, in afflictions, hardships, calamities, beatings, imprisonments, riots, labours, sleepless nights, hunger; by purity, knowledge, patience, kindness, holiness of spirit, genuine love, truthful speech, and the power of God; with the weapons of righteousness for the right hand and for the left; in honour and dishonour, in ill repute and good repute.*

*We are treated as impostors, and yet are true; as unknown, and yet are well known; as dying, and see—we are alive; as punished, and yet not killed; as sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; as poor, yet making many rich; as having nothing, and yet possessing everything.*

*We have spoken frankly to you Corinthians; our heart is wide open to you. There is no restriction in our affections, but only in yours. In return—I speak as to children—open wide your hearts also.*

During my life and ministry in the Presbyterian Church, I have had precious little exposure to what in my childhood days were called “overseas” or “foreign” missionaries.

My main focus as a pastor has been on seeking to understand and communicate the gospel of Jesus Christ – in its Presbyterian version – to the fast-paced and highly-changing lives of families and individuals in the congregations I have served in west Texas, Houston, Iowa, and Alexandria.

My immersion in twentieth and early twenty-first century American culture excites me tremendously but has also left me somewhat bereft of exposure to the servants of the church who have left the comforts and complications of American life for places remote and dangerous.

### I.

During my time in Cedar Rapids, however, I had occasion to research and preach a sermon marking the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the gift of a stained-glass window that was the centerpiece of the Gothic Sanctuary in which we worshipped.

- The window had been given 100 years earlier by the Sinclair family, by a founding family of the church and community. It was in memory of their daughter, Elsie Campbell Sinclair, who had graduated from Bryn Mawr College in 1897; in 1899 had married Dr. Cortlandt Van Rennsselear Hodge, a physician fresh out of University of Pennsylvania Medical School; and had joined him in his work as a Presbyterian missionary in China. On June 30, 1900, in their sixteenth month of marriage, Elsie had joined her husband in death as their living quarters were set afire by citizens involved in the Boxer Rebellion.<sup>1</sup>

In preparing that sermon, I read her letters from the mission field prior to their deaths as well as reading old newspaper accounts of their final days and hours, which had been written by fellow missionaries who survived them. During the week I was preparing to preach, I had nightmares of fire.

\*\*

A few weeks ago, my wife Maggie received a manuscript from her sister of an article their grandmother – Jessie Lee Ellis – had published in *The Atlantic Monthly* in 1919.

---

<sup>1</sup> Information is available at <http://www.phcmontreat.org/BoxerRebellion-Presbyterians.htm>.

The article was a synopsis of letters Jessie Ellis wrote during the time when, newly married, she served with her physician-husband Wilder at the American hospital at Urumia, Persia, which is present-day Iran. Jessie and Wilder Ellis were part of a second-generation of Presbyterian missionaries who served in a hospital, college, and orphanage, all built with American resources, primarily Presbyterian.

For four years, they were essentially trapped in their compound as what we now call World War I waged around them. The introduction to the article, written by the editor of the magazine, describes the setting:

In the midst of battle, murder, [rape], pestilence, and famine, this group of American missionaries all stuck to their posts. For four long years, with hardly a scrap of news from home and only rumor of how the Great War was going, they continued steadfastly caring for the sick and wounded, friend and foe alike, feeding the hungry out of their scant stores, and furnishing a refuge in their compound, now for Syrians from the [Muslims], and again for the [Muslims] from the Syrians, as the fortunes of war changed.

In this situation, Jessie Lee Ellis, gave birth to three of her four children, one of whom was my wife's father, Paul. She describes trying to feed her two infant sons, Edwin and Paul:

...our little boy [Edwin] became so [emaciated] that we greatly feared for him. I can't bear to describe to you how his little body looked. My heart was nearly broken and my back too for I carried him in my arms hours at a stretch and out of doors too when allowed.

Paul...just slept and smiled his father's heavenly smile and I left him to play while I nursed the other little boy.

...we kept finding one nurse after another who lost her [own] baby who kept *our* little one alive, with the help of the little [milk] that I still had.

Unlike Elsie Sinclair, Jessie Ellis survived, as did her two infants and her husband. Edwin grew up to become an educator at prep schools in America; Paul, Maggie's father, to become a Presbyterian pastor.

My mind suffers the agony of those days [Jessie writes in the article]. Yet the Lord stood by me and my only regret now is that I did not trust *him* more.<sup>2</sup>

## II.

As I read the Apostle Paul's words to the church at Corinth which we have as our epistle reading today, I could not help but think of Elsie Sinclair and Jessie Ellis.

*...as servants of God [Paul writes]  
we have commended ourselves in every way:*

*through great endurance,  
in afflictions,  
hardships,  
calamities,  
beatings,  
imprisonments,  
riots,  
labours,  
sleepless nights,  
hunger...*

Paul's words are intense and powerful.

- When we hear them, we cannot help but admire them, but we also wonder if they might be applicable only to those who put their lives on the line in their callings: soldiers, police, firefighters, EMT workers, security guards at hallowed museums, missionaries in dangerous places.

---

<sup>2</sup> Jessie Lee Ellis, "Can Such Things Be?" *Atlantic Monthly*, Volume 124, July-December 1919, pages 391-402.

- “Do Paul’s words really apply to us,” we think, “especially if we do not face loss of life, physical hardship or deprivation, especially on account of our faith?”

Most importantly, we ask:

- “When we profess Jesus Christ in the relative comfort of today, are our confessions shallow at best, hollow and meaningless at worst?”

## II.

It may provide some comfort – and even comic relief – to learn that Paul actually wrote these words not in the midst of facing death, but in the heat of a nasty church conflict, a food fight in the Fellowship Hall.

Scholars tell us that Paul wrote at least five letters to the church at Corinth, a church he founded but then left with a lot of unresolved issues. Second Corinthians, from which our reading comes, contains portions of at least two of these letters.

Why are all these letters flying around between Paul and the Christians at Corinth?

- It appears that the disputes at Corinth were not simply about minute theological matters. A lot of the disputes concern Paul himself.
- Some in the church are concerned about Paul’s punctuality. (Nobody likes a minister who doesn’t start the service on time, or better yet, who doesn’t end it on time.)
- Some are concerned over Paul’s money management. (Perhaps they thought Paul was one of those ministers befuddled by money, or worse, one who is always asking for money and then using it to enrich himself or build a religious empire.)
- There appear to be some wannabees who are trying to take over the church, though based on divided and fractious it is, we might wonder why.
- And there is an inevitable debate over an upcoming capital campaign, something that, thankfully, our church will not have to debate for years to come.

In the midst of all this, as one of my friends says, diplomatically, “All Paul has in his conflict management arsenal is his own occasionally touchy personality.” “Occasionally?”<sup>3</sup>

While Paul’s courageous words describe things he has actually experienced – “hardships, calamities, beatings” – he uses these words to defend himself in what is a pretty ordinary church fight.

- While I know what it is like to give and give and give and feel like the fact that you have given should alone carry the day with those to whom you have given, I cannot help but also feel that Paul’s rhetoric is a bit overblown to the situation.
- He seems to be saying: “Because I have endured so much in the past, you don’t have the right to criticize me in the present.” Not exactly the most effective argument for an embattled minister to make.
- On the one hand, Paul may feel that he has earned his stripes, which he has; yet, on the other hand, his current members do not seem to relate all that well to his preaching, so *his* past heroism doesn’t seem all that relevant to *their* present. Yet on still another hand, they seem guided by a “What have you done for me lately?” syndrome.

A not untypical church conflict.

## III.

Whether we side with Paul or his critics, the questions that his words, and the experiences of Elsie Sinclair and Jessie Ellis, raise for us are deeper than matters of internal church conflict:

- Is the kind of Christianity you and I practice “mere child’s play” compared to that of Paul, Elsie Sinclair, and Jessie Ellis?
- Is our faith shallow at best, hollow at worst, compared to theirs?
- In order to be a true Christian, do we have to put our lives on the line?

I know that in the larger picture of my life, I don’t come to work every day thinking that this day could be my last, and thinking that I might lose my life because of my calling. Am I therefore a shallow Christian? Is my faith hollow?

---

<sup>3</sup>Thanks to Theodore J. Wardlaw, paper on II Corinthians 6:1-13, The Moveable Feast Preaching Seminar, January 2009, for insights, inspiration, and in some instances wording for the above section.

I am not sure. But I offer this:

In the introduction to the *Atlantic* article, the editor spoke of the missionaries and their predecessors as being Christians “on the ground.” They were representatives of the church in the harsh but beautiful situation of early twentieth-century Persia. They were “the church on the ground.”

What this phrase – from the *Atlantic* editor, not from the Apostle Paul – leads me to say is this:

- Jesus Christ calls us to be his servants “on the ground.” Paul echoes this call in our passage: “*Now* is the acceptable time. *Now* is the day of salvation.”
- Sometimes the ground on which Christ calls us to serve is *relatively safe* ground.
- Sometimes it is *dangerous* ground.
- Sometimes he calls us to endure physical danger, harm, even death.
- Sometimes he spares us such threats.

But one reality is this: The call of Jesus Christ nearly always involves the exercise of courage. Saying “yes” to Christ, answering his call, often leads us to exercise more courage in the situation we are in – the situation “on the ground” – than we had any idea we possessed.

- Sometimes that courage is moral, when we do the right thing even though we know we will suffer consequences.
- Sometimes that courage is emotional and spiritual, when we face something about ourselves, our lives, our past, our personality that is excruciating to face.
- Sometimes that courage is relational, when we stand up to a boss, a spouse, a parent, a child, a sibling, a colleague, a company, a church, a school, an organization.
- Sometimes that courage is physical, as when we stand up to a government, something citizens of Jessie Ellis’ former country are doing as we speak.

We rarely get to choose the situation “on the ground” *to* which or *in* which Jesus Christ calls us. The situation to which *we* are called is *his* call. Whether we respond or not is *our* call. But when we say “yes” to the call of Christ, it is almost always the case, that at some point, we will rightfully say, with Paul:

*We are treated as impostors, and yet are true;  
as unknown, and yet are well known;  
as dying, and see—we are alive;  
as punished, and yet not killed;  
as sorrowful, yet always rejoicing;  
as poor, yet making many rich;  
as having nothing, and yet possessing everything.*

When we are called to serve Jesus Christ in “the church on the ground,” it nearly always involves using every ounce of courage we have.

Amen.