

This Sermon Delivered By
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“Where is Your Mission Field?”
II Corinthians 5:16-21

In the fall of 1903 my great-aunt Flora, my grandfather’s older sister, left her home in Wartrace, Tennessee, traveled across country, and on November 17, 1903, set sail from San Francisco. Six weeks later, on January 1, 1904, she arrived in Suzhou, China to serve as a nurse at the Elizabeth Blake Southern Presbyterian Mission Hospital. She was 29 years old at the time. Earlier that previous summer she had attended a Young People’s Missionary Conference in Lookout Mountain, Tennessee and, at that conference, had offered herself for missionary work.

In those days, if you felt called to be a missionary, that’s what it meant. You left your family and your friends and you traveled off to exotic lands, often at great danger to yourself. Sadly, in my Aunt Flora’s case, she contracted malaria in May, just five months after she arrived, and she died about two weeks later.

At about the same time in the early 1900’s, young Presbyterian men and women were leaving their homes in Scotland and traveling to an exotic area known as East Africa, reaching out to share of the gospel of Jesus Christ in this far off British colony known as Kenya.

They were missionaries, and that’s what it meant to be a missionary. You traveled off to some unknown world to share the love of Jesus Christ.

After all, virtually everyone you knew at home already knew the love of Jesus. At least you assumed that was the case. I can assure you that for my Aunt Flora, growing up in Bedford County, Tennessee, she would have naturally assumed that everyone she knew was a Christian. Oh, there might be a few Jewish families in the county seat, but other than that the only question was whether or not you were a Baptist, a Methodist, or a Presbyterian.

To be a missionary meant to go somewhere far off, somewhere you had only heard about in geography class at school, somewhere exotic and out of the ordinary.

But the world has changed in these 100 plus years. Now the fastest growing churches in the world are in Africa and South America and Korea. And Presbyterians in places like Kenya and Korea are sending missionaries to the places like the United States.

The very definition of what it means to be a missionary has changed. To be sure, there are still exotic places in the world where the good news of Jesus is unknown, but for the most part, to be a missionary now is to build bridges, to empower indigenous people, to reach out across the barriers which divide us and to share the love of Jesus Christ by building relationships and fostering reconciliation.

Today we have the wonderful joy of celebrating a partnership between our congregation and the Nakuru West Parish of the Presbyterian Church of East Africa, a partnership which is embodied in the life and ministry of Zablon Kuria.

But even as we celebrate Zablon's call to be a missionary, I want to invite us all to consider what it means to say that God is calling each of us to be missionaries. I often refer to this church as a vibrant, mission minded church. Let's talk about what that means, and to guide us we're going to take a look at a passage from Paul's second letter to the Corinthians, the fifth chapter, beginning at verse 16. Listen now to the Word of God.

-- Read II Corinthians 5:16-21 --

I hope you heard the powerful word of good news Paul proclaims in that passage. "God is reconciling the world to himself, not counting our trespasses against us." Wow!

When we get to heaven, God isn't going to pull out the scales and put all our bad deeds on one side and our good deeds on the other while we sit and wait to see whether or not we've been good enough to get into heaven. God does not keep a list of our sins. That's Santa Claus who makes the list and counts it twice to find out who's naughty or nice. God, in the person of Jesus Christ, wipes the slate clean.

"If anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!" We're forgiven. We have the opportunity to start over, fresh and new.

God sees us in a new way, and furthermore, he invites us to see others in a new way as well. "we regard no one from a human point of view." What does it mean to regard someone from a "human point of view?" It means to look at you and wonder what you can do for me. It means to judge people on the basis of where they live or what color their skin happens to be, or how large their bank account may be, or what contacts they may have that can help me along the way.

Now, Paul says, we see people the way God sees them, as men and women, boys and girls, young people of eternal value and worth, regardless of where they are from or what language they may speak. We are of eternal value simply because we are all children of God.

That's part of the message we celebrate as a nation tomorrow on Martin Luther King Day. God challenges us to view people not based on the color of their skin, but to experience each person as a child of God, a person of eternal worth and value.

God is about the work of breaking down barriers, Paul says, of drawing us together in a new way. Just as God has reconciled us with himself, just as God in the person of Jesus has invited us to be in a relationship with God himself, so also is he inviting us to be in a relationship with each other.

And in fact, he tells us, we have a responsibility, a calling in this ministry of reconciliation.

Here's the deal. God has reached out on the cross and forgiven us. Jesus' death on the cross has enabled us to be in a relationship with God. We talk about that all the time. God is with us every step of the way. We can experience God's peace and God's joy and God's strength right now, right here, right in the middle of the struggles and the pain of life. I hope you know that in your own life.

There are incredible blessings that come our way because of our walk with Jesus.

But then Paul turns around and reminds us. With those blessings there comes a responsibility. It's not enough just to experience God's presence; we are called to share it with others around us.

In fact, Paul says, "we are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us."

Did you hear that? Paul doesn't say that you and I should be ambassadors, or that we can become ambassadors, or that if we work hard enough and study enough we can learn to be ambassadors. Paul says we are ambassadors. It is who we are.

What does it mean to be an ambassador? It's very simple. An ambassador lives in a foreign land and represents his or her homeland.

And Paul, in this powerful way, says that you and I are living in this land representing Christ and the kingdom of God to the world around us.

Well, if I'm going to be an ambassador, several things need to be true. I need to know my homeland. I need to know all about the country I represent.

If you want to go to work for the United States Foreign Service and represent our country by serving in an embassy around the world, there is a rigorous test you have to take which examines all sorts of things about your knowledge of United States history and politics and government. If I'm going to represent my homeland, I need to know and understand my homeland.

And furthermore, I need to remember that my ultimate allegiance will always remain with my homeland. I may be the American ambassador to Bolivia, but I'm still an American first, and my ultimate allegiance will remain with America.

But if I'm going to go live in Bolivia as the American ambassador there, I'm going to need to learn about Bolivia and the people and history of land in which I live. I won't be of much use if I just plow in and try to turn them all into Americans without learning and understanding who they are and where they are from.

And as I live in that land and get to know the people, I'm going to develop a genuine love for the people. If I'm going to be an ambassador I can't have contempt for the people with whom I live. I need to get to know them and love them.

But no matter how long I live in that land, no matter how long I serve as the ambassador to Bolivia, I need to remember, my ultimate allegiance, my ultimate commitment is to my homeland.

"We are ambassadors of Christ," Paul says. He doesn't say we might be or we could be or we should be. We are ambassadors of Christ.

Back when I was working with Young Life, a long time ago when I was a lot younger, we used to say all the time, "you might be the only Bible some people ever read." Listen, given the world in which we live, that's more true today than it was thirty years ago when it was said to me.

We are ambassadors for Christ. Men and women, young people, boys and girls, living in this foreign land representing the One who to whom we owe our lives.

This morning we are thrilled as a congregation to celebrate God's call in the life of Zablon Muraya Kuria. Zablon came to America seven years ago following God's call but with no idea where that call would ultimately lead. The reality is, we still have no idea the full scope of God's plan for Zablon's life and his work. We continue to be amazed at all God is doing in and through this amazing man of God.

But today is an opportunity for us to celebrate God's call in his life.

It is also a time for us to be reminded that there are others among us whom God may be calling to full time Christian service. We have a responsibility as a congregation to be encouraging and supporting and prompting particularly young people and young adults who we feel God may be calling into service as church pastors or educators or youth workers or musicians or perhaps, like Zablon, as missionary bridge builders. God may be calling someone here today into that full time work.

But the fact is, we are all called to be ambassadors. Whether or not you get paid as a church worker, we are all in full time Christian service. And the reality is, God uses lay people as ambassadors in ways that those of us who are ministers can never be used.

I learned that lesson in my first year as a minister serving a small church in Perry, Florida. We used to have about ten new members a year, so it was a big deal when a new family would visit with us. I went to see one of those new families, and we had a good visit, and not long after that they joined the church.

I remember talking with them some months later about what prompted them to join. I was expecting them to comment on the very personal attention I had given them when they moved to town. But what they said was something much more truthful.

They said, "It was nice that you came to see us, and we appreciated that. But what really impressed us was when two elders, Jake and Dave, came to see us. You were the minister. We knew it was your job to come. But they came just to welcome us. That really made an impression."

Listen, I'm a minister. People expect me to act a certain way or to say certain things. People don't think ministers are normal people. Sometimes we confirm their stereotype that we aren't normal. But when normal people, regular, ordinary, out in the real world people stand up for Christ, or speak a word of hope and reconciliation, or reach out to serve in the name of Christ, when real, ordinary, regular people do that, it makes a difference.

"We are ambassadors for Christ," Paul says. "God is making his appeal through us."

In the work place, in the market place, in the classroom, on the athletic field, we have the opportunity to bear witness to the love of Jesus Christ in a way which catch people off guard.

It begins as we see ourselves in a new way. Forgiven and renewed and reborn.

And it continues as we see others the way God sees them, as people of eternal worth and value.

And then, as new people, we hear God's challenge. "We are ambassadors for Christ," God's representative here in the world. We have the opportunity to help others know what we know, that they also are of eternal value and worth; that they are freed and forgiven and loved.

It may be that being an ambassador takes you to Suzhou, China or Nakuru, Kenya or Chichicastenango, Guatemala. It may be that God is calling you to be an ambassador by attending seminary and serving in a church setting as a minister or youth worker. It may be.

Zablon is headed off to be used by God to build bridges between Kenya and America. But where is your mission field? Where is God calling each of us to be ambassadors? In some exotic remote place in the world? Perhaps. In some church pulpit across America? Perhaps. But it may be, even more exciting, it may be just this week at work, at school, in your neighborhood, in your home.

I want to invite us all to take just a moment and to reflect on where God is calling us to serve this week. Perhaps there is someone at work in need of a word of encouragement. Perhaps there is someone in our own family with whom we need to be more patient. Perhaps there is someone who needs a visit, a call, a listening ear. Take a moment and think about the people you will interact with this week.

This week, God is calling each of us to be ambassadors, to be the people who through our words and our actions will share the forgiveness and the hope and the peace and the patience and the joy that is ours in Christ.

"We are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us." AMEN.