

July 15, 2007

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MERIDIAN STREET UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

MISSION POSSIBLE

Romans 12:9-21

We did not watch much television in our home when I was growing up. My father was of the opinion that children should do their chores and then play outside for hours on end. Though I might not have fully appreciated that at the time, I now have great memories of bike races and kickball games and my favorite game Rover, Red, Rover played with a host of the neighborhood children. It forced all of us to get along, because if any one went home angry, we would not have enough players for two teams. In the summer, we played outside all day long and well into the evening. All this is to say, I am terrible at playing those trivia games that ask questions about television shows from the 60s. I don't have a clue! Fortunately, when my parents were out on a "date," my two older brothers turned on the television and that is how I became acquainted with Mission Impossible. You may remember Peter Graves, Barbara Bain, Martin Landau. What a great cast. If they are unfamiliar to you, you may know the newer movie versions starring Tom Cruise. Either way, I imagine you remember the melody of the theme song. (Peggy Macke plays the first few bars of the theme song on the piano.) In the show, the mission is always impossible, and yet, it always seems to be accomplished.

On July 1, 2007, we stepped into a new chapter at Meridian Street United Methodist Church and took as our foundation a passage from 2 Corinthians 5:20. From that passage, we find our identity as ambassadors for Christ. Last Sunday, Rev. Danny Walker spoke beautifully to the effect of our ambassadorship on our sense of community. This week, we consider that as ambassadors for Christ, the mission before us is always possible.

We prayed it this morning, "Thy Kingdom come, thy will be done." It is an earnest prayer that we offer over and over again in our lives. I read an interesting commentary on The Lord's Prayer by a man named Alan Redpath. He writes, "Before we can pray, 'Lord, Thy Kingdom come,' we must be willing to pray, 'My kingdom go.'" I certainly prefer the former to the latter. Yes, bring on the Kingdom of God. Let kindness, compassion, and integrity reign, however, in so doing, please leave my life untouched, leave my little "kingdom" alone. It is sometimes true for me and for so many Christians that when we gather to worship God, to celebrate life each Sunday morning we carry the sad expectation within that we will leave much the same as we came. We want to be "good people" but are unsure about being transformed by God's love and grace. We may not be the person we hope to become, but most of us feel "good enough." In the culture in which we live, transformation seems unsettling and unwelcome.

There is a growing mentality in much of Christianity that we are a people entitled. We are righteous, we are responsible, we are God fearing and God faring, therefore...we have earned our blessings; we deserve prosperity. Taken another step, such a mindset moves us toward an understanding of entitlement. We are entitled. That attitude creates a sense of exclusion. We are in, and others, you name that other--the poor, the refugee, the hungry, the homeless, the young

unmarried pregnant teen, the financially challenged elderly, neglected children--the long list of "others" are not deserving, not entitled.

Phillip Kenneson, a professor at Milligan College wrote a book in the late 1990s entitled, "Life on the Vine." In that book, Kenneson writes and I quote, "Most of us do not see ourselves as dependent on or responsible for our fellow brothers and sisters. Rather, most of us regard ourselves as autonomous individuals and as members of one another only in some derived sense. If you are honored, I may try to muster a congratulations, but I do not feel honored myself. Similarly, if a tragedy strikes your life, I may feel sorry for you and I may offer to do what I can to help, but I likely feel none of your pain. Your life is your life; my life is mine." I believe that statement will ring true for most of us and we have grown comfortable with living at an arm's distance from our neighbor, certainly our neighbor who is different from us and at times even our own family members. The quick, "good for them" or "that's sad" is about as much as we can muster in interest for the life of another.

However, Kenneson goes on to say, "Our story" and by that he means the story of the followers of Jesus, "Our story is not one of impressive accomplishments achieved by our own talents, our own abilities, our own hard work; rather ours is a story about receiving what we did not deserve, what we in no way earned, what we could not secure for ourselves. We are and always will remain recipients of God's good gifts. As a result we are free both to offer and to receive acts of kindness without having this threaten our identity or self understanding." (*Life on the Vine*, p.147, Intervarsity Press.)

As ambassadors of Christ, we acknowledge deep within that we are the beneficiaries of grace. Yes, we work hard. Yes, many in this sanctuary have accomplished much. It is not my intent to take away anything from that truth. But ultimately, when all is said and done, life in abundance is not about material goods or titles, it is about living in and sharing with others the love of God. As we mature in our faith, we grow deeper in our ability to be compassionate toward others, not as an obligation, but as a response to God's love within us.

In the passage in Romans, the word "honor" is used. An ambassador for Christ honors not only his/her own life, not only the life of loved ones, but an ambassador for Christ sees in others, even those others who are very different from us, one who is another child of God.

In a culture where we are critical about every one and every thing, in a culture where an entitlement mentality has taken root, we are asked to grow mature in our faith and realize that we have been served by Jesus and are now asked to serve in the name of Jesus.

It seems a mission impossible as we look to the needs of our own city, this nation and of the world, and yet with the understanding that we are fully empowered to live with a mentality of abundance and a spirit of generosity, we can see ways in which our life can make a difference in this world.

That reality is the very reason we get out of bed each morning. Within each one of us is the need to make a difference. As ambassadors we first embrace the love that God offers us and then allow that love to move through us in words and acts of kindness.

Mission, reaching out to others, is basically an act of kindness. It can happen in the grocery store, at the gas station, in an organized fashion as we serve with others here at Meridian Street, within the

wider community, across this nation and around the world. Kindness. We all know what kindness looks like and when we engage in a kind word or an act of kindness, we engage in mission.

Many years ago, Randy and I had the privilege of spending the night on the Queen Mary. The ship was in dry dock and it was being used as a hotel. While we there we took a tour of the ship. One of the concepts that stuck with me from that tour was the relationship between a rudder and a trim tab on the ship's underside. The trim tab is a small plane attached to a much larger rudder. The trim tab is basically a miniature rudder and though it is small, it has the capacity to turn the much larger rudder. It was Buckminster Fuller who used the metaphor of the trim tab. The trim tab creates great change with little effort. Buckminster Fuller was fascinated with the process of the trim tab, small in size, but able to make great adjustments to the path of the ship. He was so taken with the concept, that the inscription on Buckminster Fuller's tomb stone reads: "Call me trim tab."

As ambassadors of Christ, we act as trim tabs. It has been a long held truth within the United Methodist Church as a whole. Individuals and congregations small and large have throughout our history served as trim tabs to change the course of the world. We have stood together to seek justice, to fight hunger, to offer housing, to provide education, and most importantly to share the love of God. We have traveled far and near to extend our hands and hearts to others in the name of Jesus Christ.

Jesus, Peter, Paul and the disciples who followed were more interested in others than in themselves. They took risks, they sacrificed, they continued to initiate change by loving lavishly. In 251 after the death of Jesus, there are writings about an epidemic that spread throughout the Roman Empire killing thousands, possibly into the hundreds of thousands. Recorded from this time are the words of one named Dionysus, "Most of our brother Christians showed unbounded love and loyalty, never sparing themselves and thinking only of another. Heedless of the danger, they took charge of the sick, attending to their every need and ministering to them in Christ..." A hundred years later the Roman emperor Julian confirmed what had already been claimed by Dionysus and spoke of the "moral character" of the Christians and their "benevolence toward strangers." In addition, in that most difficult time, the Christians offered care for orphans and widows, providing charity and hope.

As ambassadors for Christ, we continue this legacy of mission every time we host Interfaith Hospitality Network. But it is more than hosting, it is the act of seeing in the stranger a child of God and taking the time and making the effort to engage, to converse, to laugh, and to share with another. You will have another opportunity to engage in this ministry of kindness in August.

As ambassadors for Christ, we continue this legacy of mission when members of this congregation travel to Africa, specifically Malawi this summer. Though we are not actually on the trip, we are connected to it. Have you checked on your map to see where Malawi is located? Have you told a neighbor, a co-worker, or a friend about this mission and our participation in it? This mission is a part of our identity both personally and corporately.

As ambassadors for Christ, we continue the legacy of mission as we participate in Operation Classroom which supports supplies for children in Sierra Leone and Liberia.

We continue the legacy when we serve meals at Roberts Park, when we participate with Neighbor to Neighbor ministry, when we build with Habitat for Humanity, when we offer food vouchers,

when we participate with the United Methodist Committee on Relief, when our youth go to Bay City, Michigan to offer their witness and their work all in the name of Jesus.

The legacy lives every time we walk, run, or cycle for charity, every time we speak out for those who live in the margins of our society, every time we extend ourselves to someone in need through words and actions of kindness.

Half the people on this planet live on \$2.00 or less a day. We have a lifetime of work before us and though the very thought may completely overwhelm us, ours is a mission possible. Mission possible because we are not alone, never alone, we carry within us the spirit of God. Yet on a daily basis, we will need to remind ourselves that we are not a people entitled, we are a people empowered.

We live, not out of a works righteous mentality, a sense of deserving, but rather a mentality of grace that is fueled by a need to be compassionate, a need to offer encouragement, a need to make our life matter, to become a trim tab in this world.

Romans speaks to honoring others. From Isaiah, we heard a portion of a servant song. Together, we the passages draw a picture for our life as ambassadors for Christ. We are called and blessed as servants and at the core of that call is an understanding that as we participate in mission and outreach it is not a sacrifice on our part, it is a living out of our faith an opportunity to honor another child of God, an opportunity to find meaning and purpose for our days.

To explore our potential as an ambassador of Christ, we first consider where we have taken on an attitude of entitlement. This attitude actually diminishes us and deters us from living up to our potential as ambassadors, as servants of Christ. This is not the first age that people have considered themselves entitled. Jesus struggled against the same attitude from the Pharisees. The Pharisees were determined to maintain what authority they could and keep a grasp on what little power they had. Jesus consistently challenged their mindset and life stance.

Our life, our faith is in part a servant song. Meridian Street has a long history of singing our servant song loud and clear. Take to heart this day the precious nature of the kindness that is offered to you and the kindness offered by you as an expression of the love of God. For as we are in mission, we become ever more defined as ambassadors for Christ.

Today, we honor the children of God who will represent Meridian Street in Bay City, Michigan as they sing their servant song. [Participants of the Youth Mission trip came forward as the congregation offered their prayers and support for their journey.]