

“Beyond the Tackle Box”

This is a sermon given by Mission Co-Worker Tracey King-Ortega on January 17, 2016 at the English-speaking worship service at the First Presbyterian Church of Redlands

I was the most prepared high-schooler to ever go on a mission trip. I went to the local hardware store, bought myself a tackle box and proceeded to stock it with everything imaginable, Q-tips, wet wipes, rubber bands, duct tape, medicine, you name it, I probably had it. I wanted to be ready for anything. 13 years old, and a freshman at Palos Verdes High School in southern California I was active in the church youth group, and counting down the days for the annual mission trip to Mexico known as “Easter Project”. For months, we worked hard, fund-raising for the trip, organizing the 100+ youth in work teams and family groups, pre-trip meetings with the parents, and packing. Looking back, I had almost forgotten about that tackle box. Nowadays when I travel to another country, I’m lucky if I remember to pack my toothpaste. Decades of living and serving in Latin America have changed me.

Really, though, many of the details of those first mission trips have faded from my memory. However, I can’t shake the memory of returning home after one of those intense weeks of service and learning and feeling so incredibly out of place and uncomfortable when I returned to the comforts of my own home. The stark contrast of the luxury of our home in Palos Verdes was hard to reconcile with the poverty lived by the family staying in a blue station wagon in the Tijuana City dump.

As I try to understand why this moment is seemingly burned into my brain, a few things come to mind. Perhaps this return from Easter Project was particularly poignant because it was when I had made a conscious decision to follow Christ. What sticks with me is not coming back and feeling accomplished for the good works we had done, but rather how this mission experience made me feel and the questions it left me with. I was touched by poverty. In contrast to the wealth and luxury I grew up in, I found it hard to comprehend how, not but 3 hours down the road and across the border, a family of 5 was living in the back of a blue station wagon on the edge of a dump. We spent a week working with the family to build them a house and hear their stories. I remember the father, working harder than we did on the house, emotional to see an unimaginable dream of a dignified living space for his three girls becoming reality. Getting to know that family transformed my perspective.

With the privileges I grew up with, I came close to missing the reality of poverty and marginalization around me and in the world. I am so grateful that my early mission experiences not only exposed me to poverty, but began framing questions about justice, or the lack there of. I do believe that it is what set me on course for a lifetime of asking questions, learning and wanting to work towards lasting change. And now, two and a half decades later, my understanding of mission has matured, it is now more complex and nuanced, but the essence of that first experience remains; *God’s call to mission calls us to step into uncomfortable places*. Mission involvement exposed me to other realities and

opened up my world. The definition of family suddenly got bigger, these were all God's children and we are bound together in Christ.

I continued to hear God calling me, to take these short-term mission experiences and go deeper. In college I spent a semester on a study-service tour through Central America. We traveled throughout the region, spent time living with local families in both rural and urban settings and studied history and current events. My eyes were opened further. What made the learning on that trip go beyond an academic fields study on politics, economics and sociology was the interaction with people, hearing stories of faith and hope. They taught me a new way to see and understand God. I started hearing about Liberation Theology.

Liberation Theology is what put Central America on the map for many social justice-minded U. S. Christians. This contextualized reading of the Bible created a palpable energy, spirit, and hope that in past decades drew so many to come to this part of the world and experience it for themselves, myself included. In the midst of military dictatorships, war, and abject poverty, people were studying the Word and seeing their lives and communities being transformed by it. God is a God of justice who wants to see all people live with dignity. Structural violence and poverty are not inevitable, but the result of sinful structures and systems. This interpretation of scripture pushed me to start seeing mission as much greater than what could ever be accomplished on a short-term mission trip. Doing mission means transforming society, liberating the oppressed and marginalized. We are called to "do justice." This perspective has been enhanced through my now 15 years by working as a PCUSA mission co-worker with partners in Central America.

One of our partner institutions in Nicaragua is CIEETS, an acronym which stands for the Interchurch Center for Theological and Social Studies. As part of CIEETS' theology school's 30th anniversary celebration, I spent a morning with some of their students as they shared how what they are learning has impacted them. One of the students, Yami, shared her own experience of liberation through studying the Bible. She spoke of her childhood cut short by her parents' divorce and having to take on much of the responsibility of raising her younger siblings. Soon afterward she had her own child at age 15. With that added responsibility of motherhood, coupled with living in a violent relationship, she said that she was "drowning in bitterness." At the age of 17 she joined a Christian evangelical church. You may think that Yami's story of liberation begins there. But it doesn't. In fact, for her, life as an evangelical was worse. Participating in a church that preached a fatalistic message, she was told that the abuse must in some way be her fault and that it was her "cross to bear." Yami's subjugation as a woman continued.

Fortunately, a few years later she participated in one of CIEETS' women's theology courses being offered in her community, and she says, "I opened my eyes." Reading the Bible and contextualizing it into her Nicaraguan reality gave Yami the freedom to seek solutions and to be free in her identity as a woman. She gained a deep sense of gratitude for understanding God's presence in her daily life and in her own country, rather than abstractly in another time and in some foreign land. As she told her story, Yami came across as a truly joyful person, no longer bitter. The joy and responsibility that came with her own liberation has led her to seek a master's degree in women's theology with CIEETS.

Her thesis work entitled “I opened my eyes” explores methodologies to bring this same kind of learning/liberation to illiterate women in rural Nicaragua. Yami, now a leader in her church, is a tangible example of the fruits of the partnership Presbyterian World Mission has with CIEETS to train leaders for community transformation.

Yami’s story strikes at the heart of the gospel message. In the words of Archbishop Romero, *“God needs the people themselves to save the world. . . .The world of the poor teaches us that liberation will arrive only when the poor are not simply on the receiving end of handouts from governments or from the churches, but when they themselves are the masters and protagonists of their own struggle for liberation.”*

In Ephesians 5, Paul writes, “Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children, and live in love, as Christ loved us.” If in discipleship we strive to be like Christ, we need to pay attention to how Christ lived, who he spent his time with, who he loved most deeply and do the same. To imitate Christ means we need to surround ourselves with the outcasts of society.

Pause

Ched Myers is a theologian and activist who has written a lot on Sabbath economics. Sabbath economics is a study which looks at current socioeconomic realities that marginalize and impoverish and contrasts that reality with biblical teachings about the kind of new society that God desires where no one is in need. I heard him speak recently and he gave me new insight into Mark 14:7, Jesus said, “⁷ For you always have the poor with you, and you can show kindness to them whenever you wish; but you will not always have me.” Some interpret this as Jesus saying, “Don’t bother to try to end poverty. The work is futile; there will always be poor people.” Rather, Myers said, *“Christ was reminding his disciples that our social location should always be proximate to those who suffer.”* “The poor will always be in your midst” was Jesus stating the obvious, the disciples were going to be spending their time in community with those who experience poverty and are marginalized. That is where God calls them to be because where we situate ourselves, who we relate to, significantly shapes how we see the world. If we are being church, we will locate ourselves amongst those who suffer.

God calls us to be close to those experiencing poverty and those who suffer. Only when their struggle becomes our struggle, when we really see the pain and marginalization of our brothers and sisters, all children of God, we will be moved to challenge the unjust systems that create poverty and suffering. The purpose of the church is mission. And mission is the work of implementing the vision that God desires for God’s people.

It is important to note that we don’t do mission **for** those who experience poverty, but **with** them. I was part of two similar conversations recently focused on identifying root causes of poverty and how we can address them. Those conversations took place in two very different contexts. The first was in a US presbytery that is more diverse than most, but very few in the room had first-hand experiences of poverty. It was hard to dig deep and grasp

the urgency of working for economic justice. The second setting was in Nicaragua at an International Partnership Encounter hosted by our partner CEPAD, the Nicaraguan Council of Protestant Churches that facilitates long-term partnerships between US churches and presbyteries and rural Nicaraguan communities. At the Encounter, half the room was from the US and half were Nicaraguan. Many in the room live in poverty. Some don't. But because of the established long-term relationship, we understood the weight of our discussion. We met as equals, each person with a unique perspective on how poverty affected their life, their community and the world. The conversations weren't theoretical, but came out of personal testimonies and felt much more significant.

We need to shift mission involvement from patron/client relationships to partnership. From acts of charity that just respond to the needs created by poverty to actions that through an inclusive and participatory process identify the root causes of poverty and what can be done to address them. Charity has its place, for example when disaster strikes and immediate needs can't be met. But often times, in our desire to do good, we undermine local capacity and perpetuate situations of need and poverty. It is better when we work on responses that promote equality and value the dignity and agency of every person. What would it take for us to make sure those who are typically seen as the recipients of ministries and outreach of our churches have a place in the leadership and planning of that ministry?

As Presbyterians, we "do mission in partnership". Doing mission this way can be powerfully transformative for all involved. I truly believe God calls us to mission not just to transform the world, but to be transformed ourselves. How else will the world change if we don't start with ourselves? If the mission work we are involved in doesn't transform us, perhaps we need to reassess how we are "doing" mission. Mission, when done right, and focused on relationship first, can lead us to whole-heartedness. It can help us understand and experience our humanity. Cross-cultural experiences break us. If we challenge ourselves to go into the other's space, we are vulnerable, and God will touch us and transform us. Oh, but for us North Americans, allowing ourselves vulnerable is so, so hard.

Recently I listened to an interview with Sister Simone Campbell on the radio program "On Being" about "How to be Spiritually Bold." Sister Simone Campbell, a nun, lawyer, activist and poet, said something that resonated and continues to speak to me. She said:

In the '80s I was totally enamored of liberation theology. I thought it was fabulous. It was wonderful. It fit my thing. But then I realized, "Holy moly, I live in the first world. And the reason why third world Latin America needs liberation theology is because of our first world oppression." So what was our agenda? What was the theology we needed to develop? I came to this insight thinking our sin is our obsession with security; our obsession that everything ought to work out perfectly for us.

She goes on to provocatively conclude that security is an illusion. Saying, "We would be better off if we made peace with insecurity."

This is so true. Living my life cross-culturally has helped me to see this obsession with security is in our middle-class U.S. culture. I remember a visit to the US, staying with close

friends who were quite happy to host my husband and me. At the same time, I recall feeling very conscious of the space we took, not wanting to overstay our welcome. You know what they say about what houseguests and fish have in common...

We then flew cross-country to visit my Nicaraguan brother-in-law who lives in Miami. In a considerably smaller home, already filled to the brim with my brother-in-law, his wife, their three children, a cousin and her newborn son, they miraculously found space for us and had no qualms when we asked if my other brother-in-law could stay over for a night as well. They have a saying in Nicaragua, "Al cerrar la puerta, todo se hace cama". When you close the door, everything turns into a bed. There is always room for one more. The values of generosity and hospitality of the Nicaraguan people really shined. Having grown up with less, they just seem to embody that everything they have comes from God, and that in the way God has given to them, so, too, must they share. It is a true culture of gratitude.

What if in the U. S. we practiced radical generosity? What if we sought less security and control? What if we risked letting go, sharing all that we have and relied on God to provide enough? A theology of insecurity could powerfully transform how we live out our Christianity here in the U.S.

Rather than being so focused on what we can do, or what the need is that we must fix, maybe we can start with asking, "What do we need to learn?" "Where do we need to grow and be challenged?" And then enter into relationship with those we serve, our partners, and ask them to lead us in finding the answers so that together we can do the work of Kingdom building.

- Are you called to step out of your comfort zone, to get to know another place or another people, to expand your view of God and God's people?
- Maybe you want to understand more about the injustices of the world and the justice God provides? How is God calling you to "do justice"?
- Is God calling you to love more deeply? Who surrounds you? Are those who are experiencing poverty a part of your faith community?
OR MAYBE
- Do you need to make peace with insecurity? Insecurity so that you may know God is with you, guiding, comforting, and challenging, so that together we can build the kingdom?

Everybody's journey is unique. I've come a long way from the pig-tailed girl who got ready for her first mission trip investing time and money in a tackle-box full of amenities to face whatever needs or discomforts could possibly arise. I can laugh now, but we all have to start somewhere. I began seeing mission as a weeklong adventure and have grown to understand mission as the essence of who we are called to be as the church. Would your life as a Christian be richer if you begin to ask what uncomfortable place God may be calling you?