

“Mission Possibility”
February 4, 2024

Isaiah 61:1-4
Mark 6:7-13

Protestant Christians often use these weeks between Epiphany on January 6 and Ash Wednesday, this year on February 14, to lift up the mission of the church—our going out into the world around us, into the world beyond us, with the good news of God’s love that has been revealed in Jesus. The Epiphany story of the Magi seeking and finding the infant Jesus is, after all, the story of the love of God being made know to all people.

The twentieth century mystic and theologian, Howard Thurman got at this in his well-known poem, “The Work of Christmas.”

When the song of the angels is stilled,
when the star in the sky is gone,
when the shepherd and the magi have found their way home,
the work of Christmas is begun:
 Find the lost
 Heal the broken
 Feed the hungry
 Release the prisoners
 Rebuild the nations
 Bring peace among brothers and sisters
 Make music in the heart

Most of the work of Christmas happens beyond these four walls: in homes and neighborhoods, in offices, stores, and classrooms. The work of Christmas occurs in our daily efforts to do what is right, to live with purpose, to follow where Jesus leads as he heals the sick, announces God's forgiveness, and calls people to a new way of life.

So, our Mission Board generally leads the Sunday morning adult education events in these days, exploring our response to hunger in Iowa City and the larger world, racial justice, and climate change among other issues. I’ll come back to what the Mission Board is up to this year in a few minutes.

While these weeks seem to be an especially good time to focus on mission—the work of Christmas—we are involved with feeding the hungry, sheltering the homeless, welcoming the stranger, and healing broken lives and broken communities all year long. The light of God is always dawning upon the word.

The dawn...

We watch as the days slowly lengthen once more, leading us toward Lent. I’ve especially noticed the sunset slowly coming later in these weeks.

But it’s still dark when I wake in the morning.

In that darkness, I recall that story about the rabbi who asked his students: “How is one to know the precise time when night ends and day begins?”

One student volunteered, “It is when one can distinguish between a dog and a sheep in the far distance, that is when day begins.”

Another said, “It is when you can tell the difference between a fig tree and a date tree, then night is fully gone.”

A third offered that “It is when you can distinguish a purple thread from a black thread.”

“No, it is none of those things,” said the Rabbi. “It is when you can see your brother or sister in the face of a stranger. Until then, night is still with us.”

Seeing a brother or sister in the face of a stranger.

This gets at the heart of mission—relationship, connection, seeing the common bond that we have with others as people made in the image of God.

When Jesus sent his followers out to announce the good news of God’s love and to heal the broken, he sent them out into relationship. They went out in pairs—which some find as an indication that it was both men and women who were those close followers of Jesus. And they were sent out to discover who their neighbors were, to connect with their daily lives. “When you enter a house, stay there...” Eat and drink with new people. Talk with them around tables. See how they live. Watch what they do. Learn who they are.

This is work that takes time. It takes a kind of openness to others. And it is not always easy. Some, Jesus suggests, will not be welcoming, will not want what is offered.

But relationship, connection, is the calling of those who follow in the way of Jesus Christ.

This, I think, is the key to our mission in Iowa City and in the world.

We do a good job of giving to organizations. We are generally well-off people in a well-off congregation. We share some of what we have with others. And this is a good thing. It makes a big difference in the lives of others when we give \$20,000 to help build the Coralville Food Pantry or \$25,000 to help build the new Domestic Violence Intervention Program shelter.

The children and youth of our congregation have been watching you and learning as well. Over the past decade they have sent thousands of dollars to the Heifer Project to provide livestock and training in agriculture to families around the world. When you give, you are encouraging a new generation of people to live generously.

There are times when our money can do more than we can do ourselves.

So, we send money.

And that is good.

At the same time, our calling is to the even greater good of relationship and connection.

Howard Thurman explored the possibility of this in his mid-20th century classic, *Jesus and the Disinherited*. “It is necessary,” he said, “for the privileged and the underprivileged to work on the common environment for the purpose of providing normal experiences of fellowship.” Writing primarily about the broken relationships between Black and White people in our nation, he said

that a primary reason that segregation is “a complete ethical and moral evil” is that “it poisons all normal contacts of those persons involved. The first step toward love is a common sharing of a sense of mutual worth and value.”

When we worship God, we create a place that can provide this sense of mutual worth and value. And we do so as well when we go into the world to bring signs of God’s love, justice, and compassion. In doing so we discover our common humanity and show that to the rest of the world. We make real the proverb: “The rich and the poor have this in common: God is the maker of them all.”

Here we are getting closer to the deeper motivation beneath all of our giving and all of our actions—the common humanity that we share as children of God compels us to care for one another. We most likely will not end hunger or homelessness but our mission is to be a sign to the hungry and the homeless, to those in danger and on the margins that they are seen and known and loved. By being in relationship with others, we affirm their worth and they affirm our worth as human beings. And as this happens, together we are transformed into people who can bring the realm of God that much closer.

Such transformation happens as people hand out food at the food bank or drive trucks picking up food for Table to Table or serve a meal and talk with others at the Free Lunch Program. Such transformation happens when adults as well as the youth of our congregation help with the work of Open Heartland.

Which brings me back around to our Mission Board. This year they are doing important work by helping us connect in a more personal way with some of the organizations that we are supporting and have supported for many years. The CommUnity Food Bank, Inside/Out, Shelter House, the Domestic Violence Intervention Program, Open Heartland, and United Action for Youth are familiar names to many in our congregation—and the Mission Board’s goal is to make them familiar names to all of us. Even more, the Mission Board is helping us to put faces with those names, to get to know the people that work through these organizations, and ultimately to help us, well, strengthen our relationships with them and the people they serve.

These Sunday morning gatherings have been very well attended. And there are still two more opportunities in the coming weeks.

I encourage you to be a part of them.

Even more, I encourage you to live up to your calling to be the people who can see a brother or sister in the face of a stranger.

What might you do to help the light dawn around us?