

**MISSION MEANS SENT; ACTS 17: 22-31; EASTERTIDE VI, MAY 21, 2017;
THOMAS H. YORTY; WESTMINSTER PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH**

Last January, on our first day in Israel, we visited the Church of St. Peter in Jaffa, an ancient seaport, next to Tel Aviv at the eastern most tip of the Mediterranean Sea.

The Church of St. Peter is important because it marks the spot where the Apostle Peter stayed in the house of Simon the Tanner and had a dream, a vision of a sheet being lowered from heaven with all kinds of creatures in it and a voice from heaven that said, "Take, eat. Nothing I have made is unclean." Peter had been summoned to the house of Cornelius, a Roman military leader, to baptize Cornelius and his whole family but Peter was conflicted because at this stage of the infant church the question of going outside the Jewish community to preach the message of Jesus was hotly debated, so the dream gave Peter permission to baptize a gentile.

Here's what makes the Church of St. Peter so intriguing: the sanctuary doors face west, not east to Jerusalem as most church doors do; and the reason the doors face west, away from Jerusalem, is because this moment in the life of the primitive church – Peter's dream and travel to Cornelius to baptize his family – is regarded as the first sign of the early church moving away from its Jewish origins out, into the Gentile world, into the rest of the world.

The summons of the gospel to go into the world finds full expression in St. Paul's life and ministry; indeed, some say there would be no church at all if Paul hadn't carried the good news to so many towns, villages, cities and regions.

The obsessive compulsive persecutor of Christians became the obsessive compulsive planter of churches. God used not only Paul's talents but his flaws to spread the gospel of hope, justice, and peace.

If Peter, a Jew, going into the house of a Roman military leader, a pagan gentile, took hutzpah, then Paul's marching into Athens, the capital of the classical world, to the Areopagus where Stoics, Hedonists and Epicureans met to debate – that took a giant leap of faith.

You see, the church from its very inception was founded upon and defined by the willingness of not just its leaders but its members to risk, to step outside of their comfort zones. Without this willingness, the days of any church are numbered.

Paul's speech to the secular philosophers and pundits at the heart of classical culture is brilliant. It is organized not like a sermon using scripture but a philosophical argument referring to nature, the passage of seasons and quotes from the poets to make his case.

The Book of Acts itself reads like the diary of a Che Guevara or Dorothy Day. It depicts a church whose witness is beyond the control of the imperial authorities, out of bounds of the established classes and socially assigned orders of Roman culture, a church out of control even of its own life and death as the gospel rips like wildfire through Asia Minor.

Will Willimon writes that the results of this gospel spreading like wildfire are: people set free, let loose, and saved – Roman army officers, sons and daughters, old women and men, upstart maids like the one in Acts 12; people no one thought could be saved, whom few in power wanted free, nonentities who were never noticed, but who were being jailed, beaten, or told, in vain, to shut up.

New social arrangements are pioneered, and the hungry are fed by people who are not their kith and kin. The church, fragile and fledgling, is dragged all over the empire by the imperious Holy Spirit – hauled kicking and screaming into harms way, even into Rome where testimony would be given and Caesar would be defeated by a single speech.

All this done by a God who refuses to stay neither dead nor quiet, a God who makes revolution through the testimony of witnesses. That's who we are and what going out in mission is – the gospel crossing some boundary, moving out beyond its first hearers from one generation to the next.

It is interesting that the Sunday lessons from now until July are all about the church in mission – a Latin word that means 'to send.' After the seven Sundays of Easter, celebrating resurrection, comes Pentecost, the gift of the Holy Spirit, the birthday of the church on June 4th; then more mission, more being sent into the world. There is almost no other way to talk about the church on the day of Resurrection and for a long time after except by talking about its thrust into regions of the world's despair and darkness with healing and hope.

What would it take to get you out of your comfort zone, to take a chance, to risk being criticized, or worse, and go into the world to proclaim some message of hope and opportunity for those who live in darkness?

Entrepreneurs do this all the time; building some business, expanding their market – the motivator may be the product itself and most certainly there are economic drivers as well. Politicians, activists and change agents, convinced their platform, ideology or cause would be good for a city or community take risks proclaiming their remedies. It's the program they believe in that motivates them.

But what about us, the church? Here's an analogy: one of the things I fondly recall going to Stone Harbor the day after school was out when our sons were little, one of the charms of being at the beach was seeing the occasional bi-plane flying up and down the coastline pulling a long banner that announced "Bobby loves Jane" or even on a few occasions seeing banners in the sky that asked, "Jane, will you marry me?"

That's what motivated Paul. He was in love and he wanted to tell the world, so much in love he was willing to risk shipwreck, imprisonment, beatings, and crucifixion. His sublime meditation on love 1Corinthians 13 is Paul's banner proclaiming God's love for the world.

What changed his life from a self-inflated, angry persecutor of Christians to the greatest evangelist and theologian the church has ever known was meeting Jesus on the road to Damascus in blinding light, then being taken in, mentored and nurtured in the faith.

Paul knew if Jesus changed his life, Jesus could change anyone's life. He knew the social, political and economic barriers that oppressed day to day living. But now he had a treasure that changed the way people see and relate to each other, that transformed systems and opened people to the the image of God within them.

That's why the early church was essentially a commune – everyone was treated equally, everything was shared as anyone had need. But over time this human institution, the church, became a large, sprawling organization subject to the biases and prejudices that afflicted the culture. Men took over before the end of the second century; then the state under Constantine established "Christendom" – an empire that required faith rather than invited people to choose faith; by the Middle Ages the Holy Roman Empire wielded total religious authority over the western world, but had lost touch with Jesus.

In the 1500s after reading their bibles the Reformers realized how far astray the church wandered; and they protested and brought change. The motto of the Presbyterian Church is 'the Church Reformed, always Reforming.' There is never a time when the church does not need to reform and redirect some part of its life. The examples are too numerous to mention. So too schools, businesses, hospitals.

But the light, the energy that kept the church alive, even in the dark ages is the willingness to risk going to some dangerous place to tell the story of Easter.

The church taps into its power to grow and impact the world for good when people carry that message beyond the walls where they gather and the comfort of their own community.

So that's the question. It may be the first and most important question we ever ask ourselves as a church: What would it take to get us to take a chance and share the treasure of life we have outside these walls?

Here are two examples right from our pews: Carol Greetham and Pam Pollack. Carol is retiring as director of our ENERGY after school program. And Pam is retiring after more than a decade first as a teacher then as the chief cook for ENERGY. Carol transformed what was always a good program into a magical three hours, three days a week for 35 grade school children of new immigrant families.

You should see the picture on Carol's facebook page, it's the whole gang, black, brown and yellow kids of all sizes, shapes, and facial features representing tribes and clans from Africa to Sri Lanka to Myanmar. They are standing, waving, smiling in front of the yellow school bus that brings them here.

The Easter story, the treasure of life we have here finds expression in Carol's and Pam's concern that these kids each have a good shot at a decent life; it's what keeps Carol up at night checking in with kids and their families like Sisi for whom we prayed today; and sends Pam shopping, looking for deals then back here to unload, prepare and serve the food with the other kitchen volunteers. It's the love of God that grabbed Paul and turned him around that grabbed Carol's and Pam's attention and gets translated into what they do for children.

Pretty amazing really. Everything you see here, the land, the buildings, the person next to you is here because the Easter story found expression in some practical, tangible way in someone's life and they were willing to unsettle their routine, to write a bigger check for their time or their treasure than they would ordinarily have written; some even took a chance knowing that what they chose to do would meet with disapproval.

Like the forty people who paid for and build this thousand-seat sanctuary in 1854 because they knew the city was growing and people would soon be moving to this part of town. At the turn of the century, when German immigrants were living in poverty and squalor on the East Side members of this church built a settlement house that became a beacon of hope and help in a neighborhood they otherwise would have carefully avoided.

You've heard these stories before – standing with our friends from TBZ when their synagogue burned down, inviting them to consider this sanctuary theirs until they built a new one. In the 1960s going on record protesting the red-lining of neighborhoods to prevent people of color from moving into all white neighborhoods. Opening the doors of this Presbyterian church to gay and lesbian people in the early 1980s when few others were doing so, thereby taking the entire Presbytery out of its comfort zone. Establishing the first and longest running Muslim/Christian partnership immediately after 9/11 – continuing to support Muslims especially in these times.

You've heard these stories but it's good to hear them again because they are, in a way, our sacred stories.

As your pastor, I'm saying it's time to create some new stories. You don't have to look far to find situations or relationships or organizations or persons who could benefit from some Easter-inspired outreach.

We get in our work-a-day ruts and it's hard to break out. But that's a sign that we're on to some outreach where we're needed.

And don't forget, God has a sense of humor. Mike Reynolds, our leader of this year's great annual giving campaign said the other day after he got more active in the church several years ago and was looking around for some way to give back, he thought to himself, the last thing he wanted to do was raise money.

Then we invited him to lunch to ask if he'd be the co-chair with Jeff Renzoni then take over the following year. That was two years ago. Mike just finished his third year as chairperson for raising money at WPC.

A friend he consulted with about whether to accept or not simply said, "Good things can happen when you do something you'd rather not do." Peter, Paul, the church through the ages, Carol, Pam, Mike. How about you? Where is the Easter story causing you to reach out in some tangible way to those who live in darkness? Amen.