

IFL231126 sermon distribution

Title: That which you do for the least of these my brothers, you do for me.

Matt 25:31

I give thanks to God that we live in a country that prizes freedom. You never really appreciate, that freedom, until you experience not having it. Back in 1992, I went to Cuba, to bring bibles to a needy church in Havana. Cuba was a communist country. The Soviet Union had just disbanded the previous year, and Cuba was not doing well economically either. We stayed in the Itabo hotel which was a converted Hilton. However, it was a far cry from the luxury of the original. One of the interesting things we experienced was that there were armed guards everywhere. Now, don't get me wrong, they were very friendly, but in the back of my mind, they were not carrying the automatic rifles for MY protection. Tourists are allowed to enter only certain parts of the country. In fact, I didn't realize how tense this made me until I got home. We got off the plane at the airport. a policeman came out of a door and crossed my path. I remember tensing up for just a moment, until I realized, "Oh He's on my side." It was then I realized that in America every policeman every fireman, every soldier, every politician is on my side... here to help me. I was free to go where I pleased. We are truly blessed to live in a country of such freedom.

You might ask, why did you go to Cuba on a mission? "What's so important about mission trips?" The purpose of mission trips is to help keep us focused. focused on "why we are a church." "Why are we here on Earth." There are only two reasons for being a church. We worship as a church because we have received God's grace and love. We work as a church to reflect that love to others, that others come to know Jesus. You might ask, with all the problems in the U.S., or even in the local area, why send people out there - far away. Why not just focus on the local problems? Well, there is a reason. First of all, Christ commands it. In [Acts 1:8] Jesus said

"you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and **Samaria**, and to the ends of the earth."

Christ wants his word to go out into the world. Christ wants the world to know his love. And Christ uses us to do that work.

It is important to know that when WE go out into the world to do mission something powerful happens. A long time ago, I went on a trip to build a house in a village called El Florito, in Mexico. The people there lived in houses made of old garage doors. They were very poor. There were no roads. When it rained there was mud everywhere. Our cars had a lot of trouble getting in and out, to bring the construction materials. On the last day, I remember thinking to myself, "why did we come here?" "Wouldn't it have been easier, and cheaper to simply send money and have the locals build houses?" It took a lot of sacrifice in time and money to get us out there. Why did we come all the way out here? Weren't there places nearer to where we lived who needed help? It would have been easier.

But then, as we were gathering with the family, the mother said something very profound. She looked at us, and after thanking us, she said: "Now we know that we are not alone." "We are

not alone!” I didn’t realize the import of her comment until much later. “We are not alone.” She knew we were volunteers. She knew of the sacrifice it took to get here. She was grateful for a new house. But the most important thing was that there were people who were willing to sacrifice the time and effort and money for her well-being. The magnitude of their sacrifice emphasized the fact that we cared about her. She was not alone. And the more important point is if THESE people cared enough, then maybe, just maybe, there was a God who cared about her too. She was not alone. This is why we do mission.

The late Mother Teresa was well known for her compassionate work amongst the poor in India. Among the people there was an elderly man who lived in a cave. He was completely ignored by everyone. His home was disordered and dirty. In her compassion, Mother Teresa would offer “Please, let me clean your house,” “Let me wash your clothes, and make your bed.” But he would shake his head and answer “I don’t care about the mess... Let it be.” Day after day, she would offer. Finally after much nagging, he relented. As she was cleaning, she discovered a beautiful lamp covered with dust. From the looks of it she could only guess how many years had passed since he last lit it. She said to him, “Don’t you light your lamp?” “Don’t you ever use it?” His answer broke her heart... “No,” “I never light it.” “No one ever comes to see me.” “I have no need to light it.” “Who would I light it for?” How very sad... “I have no need to light it.” “Who would I light it for?” Who knows how many years the man simply sat in darkness, no one to talk to... simply waiting... waiting in silence... nothing to do Simply existing... no purpose in life. “I have no need to light it.” “Who would I light it for?”

You know, the old man in the cave is not the only one who lives in darkness. There is a whole world of people living in darkness... Jesus speaks of them - the sick, the hungry, the lonely, the poor, all those in need; and he is calling His people to have compassion. He is calling His people to help these people, to help these people living in darkness.

You know early on I used to wonder - why do I need to help out these people? What I mean is - why me personally? After all, God is omnipotent. What can I do to serve the Almighty, when He can do everything with a snap of His finger. What’s He need me for? This is true. God could physically do everything himself. But there is a reason why “I” need to be involved. There is a reason why “I” need to be involved, and interestingly enough it’s not for the sake of the person “being served.” The reason why I need to be involved is for “me.” Jesus said “Whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me” When I do things to help others, Jesus takes it as if I were serving him. Whenever you help someone who is hungry, it is as if YOU gave Jesus something to eat. Whenever you help someone who is thirsty, it is as if YOU gave Jesus something to drink. Whenever you are nice to a stranger, or give clothing, or help a sick person, or visit a suffering person, whenever you serve another in need, it was as if you did it to Jesus. Serving others, is an opportunity to serve God. Serving others, is an opportunity for ME to serve God.

John Strasen, a Translator in Namibia tells a story which illustrates this. He tells a story about a young girl named nDapan-dual. She was born extremely deformed and has been bedridden for 25 years. Her parents knew from the beginning that she would need constant care for her entire

life and so they gave her the name Ndapan-dual. The name “Ndapan-dual” means 'I thank you.' It symbolizes her gratefulness for the care she receives from all. and in receiving care and love from all, she receives care and love from God.

Paradoxically, despite her need for constant care, she does not see herself as a burden. She is not seen as a burden by the village. The people who live in the Dhimba culture, where high-tech hospital facilities are not available, view life a little differently from those who live in the U.S. You see, in the Dhimba culture birth defects are not seen as defects at all. They are seen as opportunities, opportunities for the rest of the family members to help support the helpless ones. Opportunities to love. Opportunities to love as God loves. These opportunities are precisely what Christ calls us to when he says “that which you do for the least of these my brothers,” that which you do for the helpless ones, “YOU do for me.” Service to others is not to be a burden. Service to others is an opportunity, an opportunity to help the helpless, and in doing so, an opportunity FOR ME to serve Jesus, an opportunity FOR ME to love, to love as God first loved me.

Furthermore, physical deformity is NOT the only type of helplessness in this world. In fact, world we live in, is full of “helpless ones.” These “helpless ones” are not physically deformed. Rather, they have the spiritual deformity of sin. They have the spiritual deformity of blindness, blindness to God blindness to Jesus. And they are helpless to overcome the deformities of sin. They are helpless against the injustice. They are helpless against suffering. They are helpless against all the bad things which naturally occur in this world. Without help, they are doomed to death. Without help, they are doomed to eternal death. And there is only one cure: Jesus Christ. And there is only one carrier of this cure: US, You.

There are helpless ones all over the world. God have given us “opportunities,” to serve these “helpless ones.” And in serving the helpless ones, we serve Christ himself. Our missionaries have sacrificed the material world of the U.S. for an opportunity to directly serve Christ himself. They sacrificed to serve Christ himself. What a great trade. But they do not serve alone. We too serve with them. Any time we go on short term outreach; any time we support missionaries; any time we commission missionaries to go out in the name of Immanuel First; any time we pray for those in mission; we serve WITH them.

There are those who sit in darkness, not in the darkness of a cave in India, but in a darkness which is in their hearts. On the outside they seem normal. Some are constantly busy. Some simply sit. They are seen by dozens of people. But because they never really connect with anyone, they exist in a relational silence. There is no light within them. It is only cold and dark. They have no need to light the lamp of their hearts. Who would they light it for? God is calling you to help the helpless, to light the lamp of those sitting in darkness. They need to know “they are not alone.” The darkness into which YOU were born has been banished. You are part of the family of God and you live with a purpose, a purpose given to you by God. You can light their lamp! Christ tells us. “That which you do for the least of these my brothers you do for me.” Do not fear the sacrifice required to share the Gospel with those dying to hear. Share Christ! Serve the Lord! Amen.