

A Mission Sermon

Colleagues,

After over a decade of Mission Volunteer tours of duty for the ELCA, Marie and I now and then get invited for Sunday mission events in area congregations. That happened on October 7 and 14 this month, first at Peace Lutheran Church in Washington, Missouri, where Robin Morgan is pastor, and the next Sunday at two congregations (St. John's and Peace Lutheran) in southern Illinois.

The usual routine is that I deliver the Sunday homily and Marie does show-and-tell with digital photos from our mission gigs. [I won't tell you who gets the better ratings.] Here's the homily from October 7.

Peace & Joy!

Ed Schroeder

The Revised Common Lectionary texts were:

HABBAKUK 1:1-4; 2:1-4. Key: "The righteous shall live by FAITH."

II TIMOTHY 1:1-14. Key: "Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, for the sake of the PROMISE of life that is in Christ Jesus."

LUKE 17:1-10. Three Missions Impossible

Today is Mission Sunday at Peace Lutheran Church here in Washington, MO. It's Mission Festival, in old Lutheran language. But from the Gospel just read (Luke 17:1-10) it sounds like . . .

MISSION IMPOSSIBLE.

Did you hear those three impossible missions Jesus gives his disciples?

FIRST ONE.

Forgiveness 7 times in one day for the same "BROTHER" who sins against you. [English translation fudges a bit. There is no MUST in the Greek text, it's just "You forgive him." Natch. No sweat. You just do it—even without a must.].

Mission impossible.

So the apostles tell Jesus "Increase our faith," for we can't do that.

SECOND ONE

Then comes a second mission impossible. "If you just had a smidgin of faith—just a tiny bit—you could order that big walnut tree shading the parking lot to jump into the Missouri River and it would do it.

Mission impossible.

THEN COMES #3.

You've been slaving away all day for the boss. You come home pooped and then the boss says: "Hey, there's lots more stuff for you to do, this and this and this...." And you don't get thanked for it either. Just doing what you ought to do still leaves you a "worthless slave." How to be a happy camper when you get treated like that?

Mission impossible.

And now, since this is Mission (Festival) Sunday, I've got one more.

NUMBER FOUR

How many of you are baptized? Hands up. Ok, here's the zinger: "If you are baptized, YOU are a missionary."

Who me? Me a Missionary? Impossible!

But you've heard it before, I bet. Even from Jesus himself. E.g., on the Sunday after Easter it was: "As the Father sent me, so I send you." The word MISSION, as you may know, comes from the Latin word for SEND. As the Father sent Jesus on a mission, so Jesus sends his folks on a mission too. If you're baptized you're connected to Jesus. He is God's missionary to us. He sends us out on the same mission. If you're Christ-connected, you're a missionary.

Gulp!

OK, let's take this foursome again from the top.

For if we could get those first three Mission Impossible's turned around, the last one might not be so impossible.

And to do that I'm going to pull out two key terms from the other two readings this a.m.

- From 2 Tim: The PROMISE of life that is in Christ Jesus.
- From Habakkuk: The righteous shall live by FAITH.

Here's the mantra:

Everybody lives by faith, faith in something. By trusting something or someone. Something, someone, that has PROMISE. So the real question is not: Do you have faith? Everybody does. But the question is Faith in WHAT promise? Faith in WHOSE promise? Discussing different faiths always winds up in discussing different PROMISES. Which PROMISE finally holds up, and which ones don't?

There are three key words in the first three impossible things that Jesus says. They all start with F.

- Forgiveness (for the multi-sinful brother),

- Faith (for tree-removal), and
- Freedom (for working hard, but NOT as a slave).

First let's take them in the negative, which is what Jesus is doing in this text from Luke. It's Diagnosis—putting us under the X-ray. What the X-ray shows is: UNforgiveness, UNfaith, UNfreedom—for they are all one ball of wax. All linked to trusting the wrong promise. Unforgiveness grows out of UNfaith that grows out of UNfreedom. And the deep root of that UNfreedom is disconnect from God's own forgiveness promise. Unforgiven sinners show all three symptoms.

Diagnosis

#1, Not trusting forgiveness, but trusting that—when forgiveness fails—retribution will work for me.

#2, Trusting the strength of my faith—and not God's promise that Christ offers.

#3, Trusting that I really am a slave—and acting that way in everything I do. Never trusting that I'm one of God's "free" kids, freed by Jesus telling me "You'll be glad to hear this: Your sins are forgiven." [Matthew 9:2]

Now how do you get those un-words un-done? I've already said it: Jesus telling us "You'll be glad to hear this: Your sins are forgiven."

With this same Jesus comes the positive side of those F-words.

Prognosis:

#4, He is God's FORGIVENESS for folks like us. His forgiveness is a promise. Promises are spoken in the present tense, but they have a future payoff. The present tense is that God is now on our side, no longer "counting trespasses." The future tense is

that there will be a payoff. We will survive judgment day!

And, of course, it costs him his own life to be able to say to us: "You'll be glad to hear this: Your sins are forgiven." But he does it and says: "Here, it's all for you." That's Jesus the missionary: "Here's God's promise. It's for you. Trust it."

#5, That offer is what faith trusts. The mere offer invites us to trust it. Faith is nothing more than trusting that promise. Faith is not believing as hard as you can. It comes by first hearing Christ's promise as the Good News that it really is, and then hanging on to it, trusting Christ's forgiveness promise—from here to eternity.

#6, Which leads to FREEDOM. To living your life no longer as a slave—to anybody. First of all not in any slave-relationship with God, but as God's beloved kids. Nor slave to any other person (spouse, family member, boss, whoever), nor slave to the American way of life (which is really a way of death, according to Christ), nor slave to any ideology, or personal life plan, or whatever.

And that finally also means FREE to be a Missionary. As God sent Jesus, so Jesus sends us folks with our freedom, faith, forgiveness.

But where's the mission field? you ask. It's any place where folks are trusting other promises, and not trusting Christ's promise.

Where are such places? They are everywhere. First of all right here in church—and don't think first about someone in your pew. Think about yourself. Think about this preacher. All of us came to church this morning being bombarded by all sorts of other promises all week long. From people close to us—and from people farther away who have been getting their messages, their

promises to us. Just think of advertising, if nothing else. Or the promises at the workplace, or from our political leaders. You don't have to go to Asia or Africa. Washington MO is a mission field.

Remember the specs:

Wherever people are trusting other promises—that's a mission field. If you are baptized (Christ-connected) you are a missionary. HE said so.

And every day Christ sends you and me to these mission fields—where folks trust other promises. Yes, “other” promises get to us too—and we trust them. But we also know something about the Christ-promise. And Sunday worship is where we come—again and again—to get refocused on the REAL promise—get fueled up on the 3 F's—FORGIVENESS, FAITH, FREEDOM—to go back to our “normal” life in all these other mission fields, workplace, school, backyard fence, wherever.

If it seemed that pitching trees into the Missouri River BY FAITH was an impossible demand, think of the “uprooting” that happens when a person stops trusting the phony promises that bombard us every day and starts trusting “the PROMISE of life that is in Christ Jesus.” Better yet: We Christ-trusters might think of our own uprooting, day in, day out. What it takes to get ourselves unplugged from the phony promises bombarding us, and keep us plugged in to “the PROMISE of life that is in Christ Jesus.” We too say: “Lord, increase our faith.” But the focus is NOT on how “strong” our faith is, but how “strong” is “the PROMISE of life that is in Christ Jesus.” The strength of faith comes from the promise being trusted. Even better said: the strength of faith comes from the trustworthiness of the promissor.

Is Christ trustworthy? Anyone who dies in your place has got to

be.

Trusting this promissor makes you a missionary. Luther called it being a “Christ-pusher.” Hustling Christ’s promise on assignment from him, just as he “hustled” the Promise from his father to us. “As the Father sent me, so I send you.”

And the assignment is really rather simple. Christ doesn’t tell us to convert anybody. All we are sent to do is to offer Christ’s promise, and invite folks to trust HIS promise instead of the many other ones they are already trusting. And the mission field is with folks you already know. Folks you know because they already are living in your own home, your neighbors next door, the people you work with, your school mates, your drinking buddies. Because you already know these folks, and in some cases know them very well, you’ll already know something about the “other” promises they are trusting.

In friendly fashion tell them about THE promise you trust—or at least want to trust—and help them put that one alongside the other ones they are currently trusting. Since you and I know about these OTHER promises, because they grab us too, you won’t come off sounding “holier than thou,” but as a friend who has found a “treasure” and wants to tell other friends about it so that they can have that treasure too. You tell them that you too know what false promises are. And here you’ve found one that rings true. It’s not pie in the sky. It’s good stuff (Good News) for nitty-gritty daily life: the three F’s – FORGIVENESS. When your own engine is running on Christ’s forgiveness of you, you too—wild as it sounds—can indeed forgive fellow-sinners 24/7. Even seven times in one day! And you can talk forgiveness-promise stuff to folks floundering in the deadend rat-race of unforgiveness. FAITH. Trusting Christ’s promise and commending that promise to folks imprisoned by other promises. For with it all comes FREEDOM. First of all freedom to even dare to be a

missionary. To get out from under the slavery that “I can’t do it.” But, of course, we can. For if we are God’s kids, we can tell people what we know about our Abba and our Big Brother. Freedom is not a dirty word in our culture. It pops up all over in public conversation. When you or the neighbor brings up that term—just push the envelope to the “really good stuff.”

One of the bad effects of centuries of thinking that we Westerners live in a “Christian” civilization is that when we hear the word “missionary,” we immediately pull up pictures of something “overseas.” But the mission field is anyplace where folks are hooked on other promises. So that means you and I live right in the middle of a mission field—without getting on a jet and flying someplace.

Yesterday afternoon Marie and I attended the dedicatory service of (I think the first) Chinese Lutheran congregation in St. Louis. Everything was in Mandarin and English—two hour service. One of the choir members, Mr. Lee, is the owner of “Happy China” restaurant just across the street. Which is where we all went for a food feast after the liturgical one. We’d never been there before. As we entered, Mr. Lee seated us himself (“near the buffet, so you won’t have to walk so far”) and then halfway through our repast he came back and sat with us to talk. We weren’t far from the entrance door. Pretty soon a man entered with his two young sons—maybe 7 and 9 yrs old. Mr. Lee recognized them as frequent customers and called the trio over to talk with them.

There was only one available chair, so Papa and one son remained standing. He started talking to the boys. After a couple of sentences he was talking about Jesus! “Do you boys know Jesus? Do you go to church?” They nodded. Papa didn’t pull the boys away, so Mr. Lee continued to commend Christ to the kids. “I have no education,” he said, “but I do know how to cook. And I

do know about Jesus. My life is happy because of Jesus. That's why I call my restaurant Happy China." The testimony continued with all three –better, all five of us–on the receiving end. "Jesus makes your life happy too. Do you believe that?" The boys nodded again. "OK, now I show you to your table."

Happy China the mission field. Mr. Lee the missionary.

You've got the words "GO and TELL" on that banner behind the altar here in church. Sounds like you believe the same thing Mr. Lee does. Washington MO is the mission field. You are the missionaries.