

One Great Hour **February 21, 2010**

Often you will hear someone start out a story or an account, and they will say, “There is good news and bad news. Which do you want to hear first?” Today there is good news and bad news. The bad news is that our other ministers are away doing various things for the church. The good news is that I have wanted an opportunity to speak with you concerning the work and experiences I have had in the past few months, especially concerning missions.

Here is an example. The good news is that on Wednesdays, about 100 children come to our church after school for It’s Elementary and Tweens. Our fourth and fifth graders went to our computer lab, and looked at Westminster’s mission programs on our web site. They chose two projects to focus on for the school year, one local, and one international. They chose to spend the year making tray favors for Meals on Wheels, and friendship bracelets for children in the Dominican Republic. Now, for the bad news. No matter how many projects our children make, there can never be enough. Each day, Meals on Wheels sends out 1500 meals. In the batey’s or villages in the DR, there are 15,000 people. We can never meet the entire need.

I think you get the “good news, bad news” formula. Today I want us to first use this formula as we look at our Bible passage from John. Next, we will use it to look outward to things that are happening in our denomination and in the world. After that, we will look inward and think about ourselves and Lent, and then have some final thoughts from the Gospels. As a note, this, of course, is the written copy of the sermon. When I delivered the sermon, I let the congregation tell me if they wanted to hear the good news or bad news first. For this version, I have just had to choose which one I will write about and in what order.

Let’s look at the Bible passage from the Gospel of John where Jesus tells Peter to “feed my sheep.” This passage has been chosen by the Presbyterian denomination as a verse for us to examine together during Lent. I guess I will start with the good news. This is the first Sunday in Lent, which can be a really serious time, but luckily, we know how the story ends. During the Ash Wednesday worship service, I taught the children. I gave each one a purple cross and a sticker sheet of pictures in the life of Jesus. I asked them to find the picture of Jesus as a baby in the stable, and the one of him in the river being baptized, and so forth. Finally there were only two stickers left, one of three crosses, and one of a smiling resurrected Jesus. When I got to the one with the three crosses, a little five year old said to me, “Oh, don’t tell that story!” The reason we can tell that story to small children is because we know the happy ending in which Jesus is alive after his Easter morning resurrection.

The bad news of this passage is that even after the joy of the resurrection, we cannot simply sit back and breathe a sigh of relief. In this passage in which Jesus meets the disciples in Galilee after Easter, he asks Peter if he loves him, and then he gives him a task, “Feed my sheep.” There are two different words for “love” used in this passage.

Jesus asks, “Do you love me unconditionally?” and uses the word “agape.” Peter answers, “You know that I love you,” and uses the word “philiis,” meaning more of a brotherly love. It reminds me of junior high school where someone asks, “Well, do you like them, or do you like-like them?” Jesus asks Peter, “Do you love-love me?” and Peter answers with an imperfect love. Even in the face of this, Jesus still commands him to “Feed my sheep.”

So now, as we have heard the verse for the Lenten season, let us look outward to our denomination and to the world. First, let me give you the bad news. In January, I was privileged to be able to take a two week class at the United Nations about the UN and children. This class was sponsored through our Presbyterian Office at the United Nations. We learned about the state of children around the world, and the amount of poverty and suffering was overwhelming, and worse than you can imagine. We learned about sub-Saharan Africa, where a child dies every five seconds from Malaria, and about a lack of schools in Nepal. We heard about child soldiers in the Ivory Coast, and exploited children in Honduras. In Tanzania, we learned, almost 50% of the population is 18 or younger, and of those young people, almost 40% have suffered such malnutrition that they are “stunted.” Their bodies and their brains have been so deprived that they will never grow to full size or to full intellectual capacity. In country after country, we heard about how bad the conditions were.

While we were there, of course, the earthquake in Haiti occurred, in which about 200 UN aid workers were killed, along with hundreds of thousands of Haitians. The scope of the disaster is unbelievable. We learned that even before the earthquake, in this country of 10 million, about 340,000 children were without an adult to care for them, and about an additional 170,000 had been sold into servitude to act as servants or sex workers. This was before the earthquake. Recently, when I was teaching the phrase, “Give us this day our daily bread,” to Westminster’s children, I decided to see what the basic subsistence food was for various countries. Was it bread, or rice, or cornmeal mush? When I researched Haiti, I found that there was so little food that mothers would take dirt and mix it with water until it had dissolved into a paste, and then set out circles of that mud to dry in the sun to make “dirt cookies.” We watched a You-Tube video of the process. These dirt cookies were sold in the market for a nickel, and were used by mothers to fill the stomachs of their hungry children. This was before the earthquake! When you look at the state of many around the world, the UN tells us that there are billions living below the international poverty level, which is \$1.25 per day. The problems are huge.

Now for the good news. We Presbyterians and others are able to do some wonderful things for the world’s people. We learned that the UN has set up “Millennial Goals” that countries are trying to meet by the year 2015. Not all goals will be met, like the ones calling for universal primary education for all the world’s children, and a reduction in maternal and infant mortality rates, but progress is being made. We heard from leaders from UNICEF, Save the Children, and from our own PCUSA offices in Louisville. I found out that Presbyterians are respected around the world because of our large history of missions and giving. We Presbyterians are doing good work. Let me

give you an example. Did you know that in Malawi, where we have a mission, there was a terrible famine in 2006? Here is what our Presbyterian Disaster Assistance program did in response. Because people were starving, they immediately brought in a grain mixture to feed people. Next, they brought in special seeds for drought resistance crops, and gave many families a goat so that they had milk and fertilizer. They introduced soybeans as an additional crop for food. Finally, they set up a school, and you could send one person from your village to come and learn about good farming techniques, and even how to build a treadle pump to irrigate fields. That person came back and gave farming lessons. People in the villages had plenty to eat, and sometimes even enough to sell a little. Each family shared one bag of grain, and the village used these to feed the elderly and vulnerable children who were unable to farm.

Presbyterian Disaster Assistance has been active in Haiti as well. Because we had mission partners already on the ground, the second day after the earthquake we were able to send 35,000 baby and hygiene kits to the needy, and we have paid for 20,000 family tents and 15,000 emergency tarps for shelters. There are stories of families who were in despair who now have hope. We Presbyterians helped make that hope possible, and that is good news.

Alright, we have been able to look outward during this Lenten season. Now let us look to ourselves and our commitments during Lent. This time, let's start with the good news. We are incredibly lucky. We have so much in our lives. I don't think that there is any family here today who has had to send a child to bed hungry because there was not enough money for food. When I was leading a Girl Scout troop in Pleasant Valley, I remember the first overnight trip we took. I told the children to eat before we left, but none of them did. That night, a little first grader told me, "Don't worry about it, Miss Barbara. We are used to going to bed hungry." Children in this congregation would probably never have to say that. We all have food and blankets and shoes and coats. We are so rich, that it makes me think of a Paul Simon song where he talks about a rich girl who wears diamonds on the soles of her shoes. We are so rich it is as if we would even use something precious in a wasteful way, without even realizing how much we have.

That leads me into the bad news. We don't keep it in our minds or teach to our children how much we have. When I talk to children about the rich and the poor, they think their families are poor because their parents have responded to their request for a new video game by saying, "We can't afford that now." Of course, it is all relative. Twenty years ago, I had a little guy whose family was going through a divorce. You are always more poor than before a divorce because now the same amount of money has to run two households instead of one. This young boy lamented to me, "We are the poorest family.....in Chanticleer!" We are so rich, we hardly realize it.

During Lent, there is a long history of the image of sacrifice. Sacrifice of animals was a large part of Old Testament worship, and we see Jesus' death as a sacrifice. Lent was seen as a time of sacrifice and prayer in the church for centuries. When Martin Luther began the Protestant reformation, he wanted to stress the gift of God's grace which saves us, and so he discouraged sacrifice during Lent, in order to be different from

the existing churches. It is too bad that we have lost much of this tradition. The idea is that you give up something, or sacrifice something, and use the money you save to give to the poor. You don't want to be like my aunt was when I was growing up. She was Roman Catholic, and on Fridays you were not allowed to eat meat. We always wanted to go to her house on Fridays because most of the week we all ate hamburger, but on Fridays she would cook scallops or lobster! That is not the idea behind what I am recommending.

I am suggesting that you as individuals and families might think of something you can give up, and then you could give something to others. Our denomination takes an offering on Easter morning called the "One Great Hour of Sharing." One third of the offering goes to Presbyterian Disaster Assistance, one third goes to the Presbyterian Hunger Program, and one third goes to a program called Self-development of People. This final program gives grants to communities wishing to sustain themselves. For example, the program might buy your community some sewing machines so that you could begin sewing a project to sell for income. This offering could be something you work toward during Lent. If you are interested, I have placed a display in the Sanctuary Atrium with a devotional calendar and little paper fish banks that you could use. This is not the only place you could share money, and money is not the only kind of sacrifice you could make.

If you are a child, sacrifice does not mean just asking Mom and Dad to give you money to put in the bank. It really means being willing to give up something you like in order to help others. You may not want to give money, but could give time volunteering or helping someone in need. When I was at the UN, they told me about the success of a program at www.FreeRice.org. Our children have played it here at church. What you do is answer questions about vocabulary, geography, or other subjects. For every correct answer, corporations will send rice to the UN to be used to feed people. Millions of tons of rice have been donated, and you could help do this. You may have your own ideas of what you can sacrifice and share. What you do does not matter, but I am challenging everyone here to do something in the seven weeks before Easter.

Finally, I want to look at another Gospel passage. I guess this time I will start with the bad news. Jesus asks us to do the impossible. In a different story of Jesus and the 5000, Jesus is teaching on a hill side, and it becomes late in the day. The disciples urge Jesus to send the people to the surrounding villages since there is no food where they are. Jesus says to the disciples, "You feed them." Without Jesus' help, the task is impossible. For example, as of today, Presbyterians have donated \$2,800,000 to the relief effort in Haiti. That is good. But in the New York Times last week I read that the UN estimates that just to maintain the port-o-potties so that cholera does not spread on Haiti will cost 54 million dollars for just six months. The tasks ahead of us seem impossible.

The good news is that we are not left alone in this task. God demands a lot from us, but then God promises to be with us in our work. You have all probably heard the story of the little boy who went down to the beach. He saw hundreds of starfish which

had washed up on shore, and he started picking them up and throwing them back into the ocean. The father said to the boy, “You might as well stop. There are too many. You will never make a difference.” The boy held up one starfish and answered, “Well, it will make a difference to this starfish!” We can not help everyone with all of their needs, but I think we can do better. With God’s prodding, we can work to help make it better for some. We are lucky. We know how Lent ends. We see the gift of the resurrection. With the disciples on that beach in Galilee, we hear the challenge from the risen Christ. “Do you love me? Do you really, really love me? Then, feed my sheep.”

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