

“Tikkun Olam”

Luke 9.1–6

The Rev. Hal Chorpensing, Plymouth Cong'l UCC, 21 February 2010

Emil Brunner, a renowned 20th century Swiss Reformed theologian made the comment that “the church exists by mission as fire exists by burning.” Think about that for a moment...if burning ceases, the fire goes out. If mission stops, the church is extinguished. And I think in a lot of UCC churches, the fires of mission are getting very low indeed.

This sermon deals with mission, and if you remember nothing else, I hope that you will store these two terms in your memory bank that pertain to this sometimes elusive concept called mission: “God’s regime change” and “healing God’s world.”

The gospel reading this morning is one of my favorites, referred to as the Mission of the Twelve. I wonder if the nascent Jesus movement was starting to lose some of its mojo – some of its fire – when the master sat the twelve disciples down and said, “Right, lads, here’s the plan: go out in twos, bring the bare necessities with you (no backpack, no credit card, no extra shirt, no means of self-defense). And if people don’t welcome you and the message you bring, high-tail it and let them eat dirt.”

Now, it would have been easy for the disciples to bask in the self-satisfied glow of their own spiritual enlightenment. (You know people who do that, right? You may even know some here, but I kind of doubt it.) Can you imagine how good it must have felt to be in the presence of Jesus himself? But, the master claimed that they couldn’t horde the good news of the kingdom for themselves: they had to share it. They couldn’t just say, “I’ve got mine” and say that they had attained enlightenment, they had to go and share it with someone else, and more than that, they had to extend the healing ministry of Jesus to the people they encountered.

It’s really pretty basic what Jesus told them to do: 1) proclaim the kingdom of God and 2) heal. We use that phrase, “the kingdom of God,” twice in the Lord’s Prayer each Sunday, and there are a lot of ways to explain it, but here are a few shorthand notes: one way to describe it is “God’s liberating reign,” which is in contrast not just to the Roman Empire of Jesus’ day, but the empires of our own time...Sharon and I once decided that a good way to describe it in contemporary parlance was “God’s regime change.” Healing can mean bodily healing; it can mean restoration of a sense of wholeness (and you can experience Plymouth’s service of healing and wholeness on Wednesdays during Lent at noon), and a third way to understand it is healing God’s world, and I’ll discuss that a little more in a few minutes.

But the key idea behind mission is in the Latin root of the word: *missio* means *to send*. And just as Jesus sent out his disciples in teams of two, we are to be about the task of sending and being sent to proclaim the kingdom of God and to heal. “Sending” is the third element of our mission statement at Plymouth, and it is an essential part of who we are.

But “mission” means different things to different people. We have had some discussions over the years in the Mission Committee about what really constitutes “mission.” The way I define it is that it looks a lot like ministry, but that it happens beyond the four walls of this church building. So, is Our Church’s Wider Mission – the \$37,500 we give to keep our denomination functioning each year – mission? Of course it is! Even though it may be used to advocate for GLBT rights in Washington or to support a mission center in Biloxi or to develop a curriculum in Cleveland, it is definitely mission. Our Church’s Wider Mission also supports Global Ministries (which the only kind of mission many of us think about when we hear the term). But, our giving supports missionaries in places like Angola (with cooperation of the Evangelical Congregational Church of Angola)

and South African (with the United Congregational Church of Southern Africa) or in the Philippines (with the UCC of the Philippines). and in numerous places throughout the world.

I wish I could tell you that this network is growing, but it's not. Local churches' giving to Our Church's Wider Mission has been dropping precipitously over the last 25 years, and I'm sorry to say that our conference office is doing little to encourage a reversal of that trend.

We in the UCC have an amazing history of mission activity that goes back to 1806 when a group of undergraduates at Williams College in western Massachusetts were discussing the spiritual welfare of peoples in Asia when a storm blew in, and the young men took shelter in a haystack out in a field. It was this Haystack Meeting that led them to conclude that they needed to be part of a movement to translate the Bible into other languages and to help proclaim the good news of the Kingdom of God and to heal. In 1810 these young men helped spur the founding of the ABCFM, the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Mission, which sent Congregational missionaries from New England first to India, then to China, and Hawaii. The ABCFM continued to evolve and it is now called the Wider Church Ministry of the United Church of Christ.

It is easy for us to look back at from a distance of two centuries and condemn them for their religious and cultural superiority, but that would be to judge 18th century men by 21st century standards. Understood in their historical perspective, their accomplishments were amazing. In their first 50 years, the ABCFM sent more than 1,250 missionaries abroad.

I need hardly say that our ideas of mission have evolved significantly over the past 204 years. One of the most influential voices in that shift was Scott Libbey, who was executive vice president of the United Church Board for World Ministry (now Wider Church Ministries). Scott fully enunciated the idea of mission partners: that UCC missionaries do not go into a country unless we are invited and sponsored by a local church. That is why I was emphatic in telling you about the Evangelical Congregational Church in Angola and the United Congregational Church of Southern Africa. (Once when I was preaching in CT, a young woman from Zimbabwe came up to me after the sermon with tears running down her face thanking me for mentioning her home church, the United Congregational Church of Southern Africa.) And I have to tell you that Scott's daughter, Joan Langer, is a member of Plymouth, so his legacy continues not just among the frontiers of mission around the world, but right here at Plymouth.

So, what is mission supposed to be today? It still goes back to those two elements: proclaiming God's liberating reign and healing God's world. Here's an example. A few weeks ago, people at Plymouth responded to an appeal for emergency aid in Haiti by contributing over \$6,000 in one weekend (awesome!), but you all already supported two Global Ministries missionaries there through our giving to Our Church's Wider Mission. Kim and Patrick Bentrrott. Patrick (a graduate of the Iliff School of Theology) was teaching at a divinity school of CONASPEH (Le Conseil National Spirituel des Eglises d'Haïti), and Kim is an M.D. and was working to train nurses in Port au Prince. In other words, Patrick and Kim were proclaiming the Kingdom of God and healing. Many denominations do a lot of proclamation and do very little healing, and I'd say that in the UCC we err of the side of doing the reverse. Both proclamation and healing are important.

In a larger sense, all of our missionaries (whether involved in education, economic development, medicine, civil rights, or serving in local churches) are doing the work of *tikkun olam* – healing God's world.

So, is anything Plymouth does beyond its four walls mission? I'm not so sure, and I think we need to be a bit self-aware and even self-critical of the energy we put toward our efforts. It isn't enough to say that we should do something because we are good citizens and responsible members of the community. That thinking went out with the Eisenhower Administration. It is important for us to examine why we are involved in certain efforts. We need to ask ourselves what our motivations are. Doing good things for the wrong reasons is a very good way to spin your wheels and dissipate your energy, and that means that core work won't get done.

Two questions I ask are

- 1) Do we do the mission work or giving in Christ's name and are we motivated by Christian conviction (not because we have a well-developed sense of civic responsibility? I volunteer at Olander Elementary School, and it's not mission.)
- 2) Are we healing God's world – not putting a band-aid on a problem to salve our conscience? Are we making a sustainable, systematic shift in peoples' lives and helping to address the root causes of distress? Angolan girls' schools are a great example: We are motivated by our Christian faith; the schools an underserved and oppressed population (so doing justice); they help heal society; they address a root cause of poverty in Angola.

That's a lot to digest, and you may not agree with all of the criteria I proposed, so please come to sermon talk-back tomorrow morning and let's discuss it some more!



Each of us is on a journey of faith. You have been invited; if you allow yourself, you will be transformed in this place; and then you need to discern how you will be sent forth from this church to proclaim God's liberating reign in every aspect of your life and to help heal God's world.

May we kindle the flame of mission here and carry the church's flame into the world together.

Amen.