

“World Mission Sunday”

Today has been designated throughout the Anglican Church in North America as World Mission Sunday. Jesus commanded the church, *“Therefore go, and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.”* (Matthew 28:19-20) That is known as the Great Commission – but I like to say that it is the Great CO-Mission, in that we are doing it with Him. He said, *“I am with you always, to the very end of the age.”* (Matthew 28:20) He gave us three action words - GO, Baptize, and Teach – and then He gave us an action word to everyone who would teach – and that is ‘Obey.’ Obey is not always easy, sometimes it is painful and sometimes it is a wake-up call – a check-up from the neck-up as they say. He left us with the knowledge that we do not do these things alone, but with His presence to lead, guide and encourage us for all eternity. By Jesus using the term ‘nations’ His followers would know that He was now telling them that it was not just for the Jews, but for the Gentiles as well, the ‘nations.’ The ‘nations’ was a term used for all non-jews. The mission field was now clearly defined as Jews and non-Jews. They should be treated equally as ‘the world’ that ‘God so loved’ that Jesus referred to in John 3:16

Today's Holy Gospel begins with the words of Jesus as He said, *“But I tell you who hear me: Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you.”* (Luke 6:27) He went on to say, *“bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you. If someone strikes you on one cheek, turn to him the other also. If someone takes your cloak, do not stop him from taking your tunic. Give to everyone who asks you, and if anyone takes what belongs to you, do not demand it back. Do to others as you would have them do to you.”* (Luke 6:28-31) These words are so opposite to how our human nature usually leads us to react. We usually want to strike back, and not turn the other cheek, as His words have been interpreted as saying. The world had been trained to think of wanting to take *“an eye for an eye.”* This, from the law of the land, was also acknowledged by Moses in Exodus, *“If men who are fighting hit a pregnant woman and she gives birth prematurely but there is no serious injury, the offender must be fined whatever the woman's husband demands and the court allows. But if there is serious injury, you are to take life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot, burn for burn, wound for wound, bruise for bruise. If a man hits a manservant or maidservant in the eye and destroys it, he must let the servant go free to compensate for the eye.”* (Exodus 21:22-26) Jesus was now taking this a step further, by teaching compassion and mercy to His followers, as opposed to the ancient laws that they knew so well. For example, *“If a man bites the nose of another man and severs it, he shall pay a mina of silver.”* (From the laws of Eshnunna, 2100 BC) and then, *“If a builder constructed a house for a man, but did not make his work strong, with the result that the house collapsed and so caused the death of the owner of the house, that builder shall be put to death.”* (The Code of Hammurabi, 1700 BC)

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Jesus' fulfillment of God's Law was very different from the historical law of the land. In today's world there are countries and leaders who make up the law as they go. I am not talking about the USA, but there are places in this world where in some cases torture and persecute people who think differently than they do, even to the point of putting Christians to death, who in obedience to their Savior, teach the words of Jesus to people in the domains in which they reside. Do you know that there are some places in this world where it is illegal to have a Bible? One of those countries is hosting the Olympics. I am not trying to get political, I never get political, but cherish your Bibles, we need to cherish them always! Many Christians think that Christians are only being persecuted by Muslims, but sadly there are many more people who are doing the devils work. There are examples after examples of others in countries like Afghanistan, North Korea, Somalia, Libya, Yemen, Eritrea (bordering Ethiopia), Nigeria, Pakistan, India, and Iran to name a few. The organization named Open Doors USA, has compiled a world-watch list of 50 countries that we should be watching out for, and praying for. You can access this list at their web site, www.opendoorsusa.org. Another organization dedicated to helping persecuted Christians is Voice of the Martyrs. Check out their website. The name says it all – www.persecution.org. You will be shocked at some of the accounts and the history that takes place there. It is hard to think the numbers are so big, but not much has changed, as Satan has targeted God's people since the beginning. It has just gotten worse and more sophisticated.

Did you know that ---

In just the last year, there have been:

- Over 360 million Christians living in places where they experience high levels of persecution and discrimination
- 5,898 Christians have been killed for their faith
- 5,110 churches and other Christian buildings were attacked
- 6,175 believers detained without trial, arrested, sentenced, or imprisoned
- 3,829 Christians were abducted

These numbers are heartbreaking. And yet, they do not tell the whole story. When we pray with and for persecuted Christians, we stand with them in solidarity, and remind them they are not alone. We need to join in God's mission to provide them a place of safety through our support, knowing He will not leave them or forsake them—and neither will we. I am not asking for donations, but I am asking for something you know how to do very well. PRAY!

If you can go out to those websites – and if you don't want to go to those websites – just pray for persecuted Christians everywhere. God knows who they are and where they are. It is as simple as that.

We need to be like this because that's what God is like. God is generous to all people, generous to a fault: He provides good things for all to enjoy, the undeserving as well as the deserving. He is astonishingly merciful. How can we, His forgiven children, be any less?

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If you lived in a society where everyone believed in God, there wouldn't be any violence. There wouldn't be any revenge. There wouldn't be any divisions of classes or caste systems. Property and possessions wouldn't be nearly as important as making sure your neighbor was all right. Imagine, if even a few people around you took Jesus seriously and lived like that. Life would be exuberant, different, astonishing.

Of course people did stare when Jesus did it himself. The reason why crowds gathered, was that power was flowing out of Jesus, and people were being healed. His whole life was one of incredible generosity, giving all He had got to give to everyone who needed it. He was speaking of what He knew: the extravagant love of His Father.

Finally, when they struck Jesus on the cheek and ripped the coat and shirt off His back, (which we will be thinking about on Maundy Thursday and Good Friday. He went on loving and forgiving, as recorded in Luke 23:34. Jesus said, *"Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing."*

Jesus didn't show love only to His friends, but to His enemies as well, weeping over the city that had rejected His plea for peace. Jesus was the true embodiment of the God of whom He spoke. It is His desire that we, His Church, would continue to do His work. One way that we can do this is to pray our brothers and sisters throughout the world, who are actively sharing the love of Jesus with the world. When Marilyn and I first came to Saint Andrew's we were actively involved with the New Wineskins Missionary Network. As the then president of the Board of Directors of New Wineskins, we had invited Sharon Steinmiller, the Director Emeritus of New Wineskins, to visit Saint Andrew's and she shared with us about New Wineskins. If you were in the Parish Hall that day, she spoke to you in Chinese for about five minutes and you were sitting there saying – "what's going on?" I asked her to do that because I wanted you to experience what missionaries experience when they go to a foreign country and they are hammered and hit with a foreign language that they don't know or were not prepared for. Sharon, herself was a missionary to China. I am so very glad to say that our Vestry, as part of our outreach, is still to this day, a supporter of New Wineskins.

Every three years, New Wineskins holds a missions conference at Ridgecrest, North Carolina. When Marilyn and I attended for the first time, while we were in seminary, in 2003. It was a life changing experience to see and speak with Anglicans from around the world, hearing how God is working in their lives. That year, we were having lunch in the cafeteria, and the speaker that morning came over and asked to sit with us. She was The Baroness Caroline Cox, of the British House of Lords. She is the founder of an organization called HART – Humanitarian Aid Relief Trust. She is passionate about aiding Anglicans, especially women in the Sudan, she has made many trips there and on some escaped with her life. She is a real joy. As a matter of fact, she said to Marilyn and I, as she gave me her card, that if we plan a trip to England, please call me, we will have lunch at the House of Lords, and I will give you a tour. We were just blessed to see someone who is so impressive – seem so real. She wanted to sit with us. I was not a priest, and I was not yet the president of the Board of Directors. I was just a seminarian who was

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sitting at a table with a sports jacket and a polo shirt. I think she must have liked Marilyn a whole lot because they just kept talking. Baroness Caroline Cox, what an impressive lady. She is still there and she is still doing God's work. This year, we are planning to attend the conference September 22nd to the 25th at Ridgecrest. Maybe you would like to go with us. If you would like to know more, please speak with me, I will be glad to share more about New Wineskins. You can also visit their website at www.newwineskins.org.

The best and most important things that we can and need to do, is to be thinking about and praying for other Christians around the world, many of whom are being persecuted. The most important thing we can do, and need to do is pray. Jesus wants us to be more like the character of God, who He describes in today's Gospel reading. Jesus instructed us to, in verse 36 of today's Holy Gospel, "*Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful.*" (Luke 6:36)