

Pentecost 4, Proper 6  
Church of the Good Shepherd, Silver City, NM

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Rev. Paul Moore

## **Both Here and There**

Many years ago I was going through customs at the Houston airport. I was coming home from a Honduras Medical Mission. The kind official inside the glass box asked me what we had been doing in Honduras. I gladly shared with him the good we had done with doctors and medicines in a needy corner of a very poor country. His answer was one I have remembered ever since. "Why do you go so far away? We need you here more than there."

It frames the question I have heard with frequency whenever Christians begin to discuss overseas mission work. Why do we go so far away? Is there not need in our own back yard? If we cannot take care of our own how can we pretend to take care of another? They are all good questions, and they are sincere questions asked from a heart troubled over the trouble in our own towns and cities. This morning I would like to answer that question from a point of view that is grounded in Scripture and in the tradition of our faith.

We can begin with today's lessons. In the lesson from Second Samuel Nathan confronts King David about the issue with Bathsheba. There is no need to go into the story here, you can read it on your own, starting at the beginning of the 12th chapter. What is significant for us here is the message Nathan brings. He tells the story of a poor farmer and a rich neighbor. The rich neighbor takes away the one source of joy for the farmer for a trifling need he could have supplied from his own means. The fact still remains that we have four times as many doctors as Honduras in relation to the population, and medical care in Honduras commands an exorbitantly greater share of their income than ours.

At the root of Nathan's parable to David is the nature of the soul. Are we going to be caught up in self-preservation to the point of blindness to the needs of others, or are we going to have a kind of godly generosity of spirit that reaches into one's own resources for the sake of others? One is the spirit of fear, the other the spirit of love.

In the Epistle lesson Paul argues for the power of grace over law to save us. Salvation by law is salvation by works. It is earned, it is merited, it is an achievement, and it can rightly become the source of ungodly pride. This is exactly what was happening in Galatia about which Paul writes. People had come claiming that to be a "real" Christian you had to obey all the requirements of the Law. When we start setting up lines between

who is a "real" Christian and who is not invariably we draw that line in such a way that we end up on the right side of it. These lines do not reflect the heart of God, they reflect our own egos. Bingo, we've lost the high moral ground we claimed and didn't even see it coming! Paul argues instead for grace that is unmerited. When salvation is a gift rather than earned the criteria for receiving it are safely concealed in the heart of the Giver, not the receiver. No one is more or less "worthy" of God's grace.

Jesus tells us in the Sermon on the Mount to love those who persecute you because God loves all equally, sending rain on the just and the unjust. This standard of unconditional love is our call. Under grace all are welcome, all are accepted, all are equally forgiven. There is no distinction, then, between mission work in our own back yards and mission work in foreign lands, for all are in God's back yard.

Finally, in the Gospel lesson we read about Jesus having his feet anointed by a woman at the house of an inhospitable Pharisee. The Pharisees were known for their detailed and rigorous following of the Law. In spite of what we read in the Gospels, in the eyes of the general public they were seen as the good guys, who were serious about their religion and close to God. On the other hand, the woman had three strikes against her right off the bat. 1) She was a woman in the company of men. Women could not worship with men in the Temple or Synagogue. They could not hold office, vote, read lessons or otherwise participate in public worship. Women were considered to be an adjunct to their man without whom they had no meaning or standing. 2) She was known to be of less than stellar moral character. An unconnected woman was inherently morally dangerous to a man. Here was a loose canon, a problem waiting to happen. 3) She touched the feet of a man in public. OK, so she shows her true colors. She was, in the mind of the day, hardly a person who was close to God.

In the end Jesus commends the one who is "far away" from God, and chastises the one who is "close." The outsider, the foreigner, the woman, the leper, the crippled and the lame, these are the ones to whom Jesus goes. Jesus goes to where the need is, not to the close, convenient or conventional.

In the book of Acts, chapter 1 Luke records that before the ascension Jesus gives some specific instructions to the disciples. They are to go to Jerusalem and wait the coming of the Holy Spirit. When the Holy Spirit comes they will be his witnesses in Jerusalem, in Judea, in Samaria, and to the uttermost parts of the earth. That verse has been seen as the charter for Christian mission ever since. The book of Acts traces the witness to Christ first in Jerusalem, then a bit farther out, then farther still, and then Paul's journeys to the ends of the Roman Empire. As you trace the mission of the Church through Church history you see the same pattern. The mission to the Middle East resulted in the Church

being established there. Some of the oldest dedicated places of Christian worship are in Syria, dating to the 1st century. Ethiopia, India, and Germany quickly followed, along with North Africa and England, Ireland and Scotland. The Eastern Church moved into Russia and Eastern Europe while the Western Church reached out to the Germanic tribes, the Scandinavians and the north Islands. In the second millennium the Church expanded into Africa, Asia, and North and South America. Today there are very few places on the face of the planet that have not, somehow, somewhere heard the name of Jesus Christ.

At the same time the mission of the Church reached out locally. Early on it was the deacons, working alongside the Bishop, who reached out to the needy, sometimes to the embarrassment of the Roman officials. Later it was the Monasteries that provided shelter from the storms of life. Church buildings were places of sanctuary for those in mortal danger. Convents often became hospitals for the sick. As missions spread out around the world they always took the practical side of grace with them.

The mission of the Church does not distinguish between near and far. Jesus didn't, the Apostles didn't and the Church hasn't. In the heart of God that knows no bounds, near and far are both equally present. To be involved here is to be involved there, or the mission is incomplete.

But there is another dimension to it that bears explaining. When we work both here and there, both near and far we affirm the common humanity of everyone. We stand against the natural ethnocentrism that drives us to diminish people who are not of our own clan. When we work both here and there, both near and far we affirm the expansive, abundant love of God that knows no limits, and we stand against small-minded, fear driven self-preservation that has nothing to do with the mind of God.

Frankly, Good Shepherd has a pretty good track record. Our Jerusalem is how we take care of our own:

- EfM
- Tuesday afternoon Book Study
- Adult Forum on Sunday morning
- Eucharistic Visitors
- Worship Committee and all the people involved in making our worship experiences honoring to God and edifying to God's people.
- Home Groups
- DoK and BoSA
- All our fellowship hours, gatherings, parties and receptions,
- Children going to camp
- Everything we do that makes our life together something that reflects the heart of

## God

Our Judea is what we do to minister to those around us.

- Spiritual organizations On Campus
- First Saturday Garage Sale and the Bazaar
- 6th Street School Ministries
- After School Program
- Blessing of the Animals, Guadalupe, Parade floats and other things that put us in the public eye,
- And the Priests' Discretionary Fund.
- Coats for the Cold and food distributions to the Gospel Mission and on campus
- And all those acts of godly kindness practiced by each and every one of you that shares the love of God in Silver City

Our Samaria is what we do to minister on the regional level.

- Immigrant Justice Network of Grant and Luna Counties
- Palomas Orphanage, Scholarships and Food
- Columbus Women's Cooperative
- Borderland Ministries
- Tom's involvement with the Brotherhood on a Diocesan level
- My presence on the Standing Committee
- Camp Stoney
- Youth Advisory Council
- And all that we do to share the love of Christ in the Diocese and our corner of the world.

Our Uttermost Parts is what we do far, far away. There are two main thrusts, both overseas. There is the Honduras Mission, and then there is Viet Nam. These are ways we recognize that the love of God extends around the world, and we are to be a part of that.

Wow, when you put it all in one place it's a little overwhelming. You have a little hand out in your bulletin that portrays this in pictorial form. We have our concentric circles of ministry. This afternoon we have a packing party for Honduras. It is an invitation for you. Think about where you best fit, and jump in. It's obvious that there is a place for everyone, and everyone is needed!