

The Church: At Work in Our World

Pastor Jim Cords

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This Sunday's texts:

Isaiah 25:6-9

Acts 1:6-7

Luke 24:44-48

The holy gospel for today comes to us from the gospel according to Luke, the twenty-fourth chapter:

[Jesus] said to them, "This is what I told you while I was still with you: Everything must be fulfilled that is written about me in the Law of Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms." Then he opened their minds so they could understand the Scriptures. He told them, "This is what is written: The Messiah will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day, and repentance for the forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations, beginning with Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things.

The gospel of the Lord.

Some of you may know the story of Marilyn and my meeting. I had started to think about global missions when my youth group began to do mission trips down to Mexico. While I was at college studying Christian education, I discovered that our church at the time was going to be sending a lay person to do Christian education to the island of Madagascar. I was very interested in that. I was getting my major in Christian education, so I thought I would be a good candidate. Even in my cultural anthropology class at the time, I convinced them that instead of writing one 10-page paper on different countries, I would write one 30-page paper on Madagascar. I began to dream and think about what it would be like to go and serve there on a 2-year stipend doing Christian education. Naturally, the church decided that instead they would send a pastor and so I was disappointed.

I took a job at the Augsburg Publishing House in Los Angeles where I ran the audio/visual department. After a few months, the parish education person came excitedly up to my desk and said, "Hey, Marilyn who's working in my office, grew up on the island of Madagascar," to which I jumped up, walked into her office, and said, "Hey, we need to get together! I need to hear about Madagascar!" And that was the beginning of our relationship. It turns out not a lot of males in the United States had a great interest in Madagascar. The truth of the matter is we, in our lives, have been very much a part of global mission ever since. Our understanding of the role of the church and of Christians as a global reality with a global witness has been a part of our heart and souls now for a very long time. I am grateful that's only been enriched because of our walk together. Here's this video and think about its words [musical video "All the World" by Point of Grace plays].

Marilyn's dad, before he decided to go in the mission field, was a concert pianist, and could have easily had a career doing that, but gave his life in ministry and mission, largely to the island of Madagascar. When he arrived there in the 1940s, most of the music sung by the churches was music that was brought to them, largely by the Norwegian missionaries. So they would take those Norwegian words and translate them into Malagasy and very often leave it in the tunes it had been in from Norway or the United States. But in his last call, Marilyn's dad was able to, with the support of his sponsoring church, Immanuel Lutheran in North Hollywood, California, build a radio station that got an antenna all the way from Ethiopia. His job then which he dearly loved, would be to go out among the churches and record the music, especially the Christian worship music that the Malagasy people were singing in their own language to their own music. He would record that and then begin to broadcast that across the island which did a massive job of elevating the native music of their own as a part of their ability to worship.

Very often we are centered on our own selves and our own experience. Especially at the first service, it was really interesting to take these soaring harmonies of this last song we sang. Point of Grace was here just a few weeks ago up at Mount Hermon and we were able to go to their concert and be reminded. We've loved their music for a long time, especially that song and the idea of these soaring harmonies, communicating the idea that we bring this peace and love of Christ to all the world. Again, a fairly contemporary sounding song at our traditional service this morning. Maybe something you're a little bit more familiar with at the contemporary service. The reality is often we think that we come from the center place. Whatever our language, whatever our custom, whatever our expression of faith is what ought to be shared before we even know to who we're speaking and from where they come. So this the act of listening, the act of seeing others as children loved and created by God so that we can begin to speak the word of hope in a way and give an example that they can comprehend and understand is a part of this thing that God desires in bringing hope to the world.

As you read through the scriptures, you see that the peoples of the world are divided. They're divided between Jews and Gentiles. What that really means is Jews and everybody else. All the rest of the world gets thrown into the one box, Gentiles. If you're not a Jew, then you're a gentile. The thing that we sometimes forget is that we too often see those differences in each other. We too often also put people in boxes. Iraqis. Russians. People of color. People of a different language. We, of course, living here in Silicon Valley, are surrounded by all kinds of nationalities of people, all of whom are created and loved by God.

So when we ask questions then of how do we see people as Jesus does, how do we have a God-view of people, one of the things that I want to acknowledge is that we often think of ourselves as Christians as chosen people. Of course, we borrow that from the Old Testament, where the people of Israel were the chosen people. Now we figure we've been adopted in. That's an accurate depiction, but we sometimes forget, as the people we see in the Old Testament often forgot, is God's intention for choosing a people. We look at Genesis chapter 12. "Now the LORD had said to Abram, "Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. And I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you and him who dishonors you I will curse, and in you, all the families of the earth shall be blessed."¹ The whole reason for God choosing Abram and the people of Israel and us as the people of God in Christ is so that we can be blessed to be a blessing to others. That needs to be the mindset that the Holy Spirit works in our hearts when we see people that are different from us.

I think we're evolved enough today that just difference in terms of light skin or dark skin may not automatically trigger something. But we make judgments about intellect and we make judgments about morals and we make judgments about language. I can't tell you how many people I've heard throughout the years that expect everybody to speak English. Of course, they don't. And they may even be trying, but English is a really hard language. The point is we often do this judgment thing of separating, of putting people in boxes, of excusing ourselves from needing to look at them or talk to them or see them. From the people sitting in the center of the island on the street with signs up to the people living next door or working with us, we have the same tendency as some of the people of the Old Testament, some of the Jews of the Old Testament, of having this air of superiority. And we are not. We simply are not.

Our theology, as Christians, teaches us this, but we just keep messing it up. The scripture teaches all have sinned, and by the way, in the Greek that means all, everybody. All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. That's us, right? Can I get an amen to that? Okay, so then here's the problem. If we're all sinners, then we're not superior to anyone. Now some people will say "No, no, no, Pastor. You forgot. I'm forgiven in Jesus." Yes, you are and God's intent is through that to extend that same hope, that same love to everyone else who's in the same boat as you were in. So we have no theological right to claim any level of superiority from those who are different from us.

¹ Genesis 12:1-3, ESV

Now you know you need to kind of push this. We're talking about the Russians and the Iraqis. We're talking about the people in jail and the people addicted. We're talking about people whose morals are far from morals we would ever see as acceptable. We're talking about people that typically we would say "you know it would be a good idea to stay away from them." Quite frankly, there are dangerous and immoral people in the world. And here's the truth. Jesus died for them. He not only loves you, but he loves them and he loves and gifts you, so that you can talk to them and be friends with them and share your love with them so that they too might be God's redeemed, forgiven people.

This same promise that God made to Abram, he extends to his descendants. In chapter 22, He says, "I will surely bless you, and I will surely multiply your offspring as the stars in the heavens and as the sand on the seashore. And your offspring shall possess the gate of his enemies, and in your offspring shall all the nations of the earth be blessed, because you have obeyed my voice."² The idea isn't that we take on their morals. The idea isn't that we live their lifestyle. The idea is that we live the lifestyle that Christ called us to, which includes respect and love for those who differ from us.

Then we hear this in our Old Testament lesson for today. "On this mountain the LORD ..." Oh, by the way, I had to go back because when Beth or I prepare the text and cut and paste them from our Bible software into our projection software, one of the things that happens often is the word LORD ends up dropping the capitals, so it becomes Lord, rather than LORD. Why is that important? It's important because the Lord we're talking about here is Yahweh, the personal God who made a covenant with Abraham and who revealed himself to Moses and bless them so that they would be a blessing to the world. It was that one God. Not some generic god, but that one God who tells us here that he will prepare "a feast of rich food for all peoples." He goes on to say "a banquet of aged wine - the best of meats and the finest of wines."³ This elevation of all people to this place of abundance and celebration and God's provision is the beauty, the idea that God, even in the Old Testament, points his people to and works to fulfill it in the new.

Then Jesus says in our gospel lesson today, "and repentance for the forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things."⁴ Again, here's the problem. Sometimes we're good at remembering that we're forgiven people and sometimes the forgiveness that we've seen has actually, maybe even in some dramatic ways,

² Genesis 22:17-18, ESV

³ Isaiah 25:6

⁴ Luke 24:47-48

elevated our morals so that we lived better lives. You might even say good lives if you wanted to stretch the truth a bit. And we have that sense of having now being in the embrace of God, forgiven and restored and therefore *they* are not. Those people are not where we are because God has made us his chosen people.

Again that's where we mess our theology up. God isn't saying sin doesn't matter. He's saying you're all sinners. You're all in the same boat. The gift we bring as God's people to the world is this. "[R]epentance for forgiveness of sins will be preached to all nations." The hope of forgiveness, the love of God is not based on our goodness, but in his goodness and therefore is to be proclaimed to all the world. So what is God need to do in us? He needs to take away our judgment. He needs to convict us of the sin in our lives of looking down on people that are different, people that are poorer, people that are speaking a different language, people that are involved in different political parties than us.

We need to understand that God's plan from the beginning, after the fall, has been a plan of restoration, where he takes broken, sinful people and calls them to be his, so that through them, he can show the whole world that they, too, can be his. We've got to be able to look past ourselves, from the self-centered worldview that is ours to recognize that we're called to something greater. Matter of fact, we recognize that was the intention of God when he sent Jesus. For God so loved the world that whoever would believe in him shall be forgiven and given eternal life. God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world but that the world might be saved through him.

I dare you to let God move you today. I ask you to watch this and listen [photo slideshow with Switchfoot's "Dare You to Move" as background music]. When Marilyn and I had the opportunity, after we were married and in ministry for a while, to go back to the island of Madagascar, one of those things we discovered at this church in the capital city of Madagascar which, by the way, at the time, was the largest Lutheran Church in the southern hemisphere, reaching between fifteen and twenty thousand people on a weekend for worship, they had 700 homeless families. At the time, homeless children in Madagascar were only able to go back into the public school if they could test in at grade level which was almost never. So this church and the pastor's wife Ernestine and some of the wives and moms in the homeless community built a little shack in the corner of their property. They had 40 students that we walked into that classroom to be greeted by that day. They were tutoring them back up, so that they could take the test back to the public school system and have a second chance at life. Over the course of time, they built the second classroom and elevated it to 80 students. Then they built a four-story

building with parking on the bottom with the cafeteria and two floors of students for 120 students. The top floor was a computer lab for the parents, so that they could get back into the job force, so that they could support their families.

One of our students at our church at the time did a confirmation project, making ice cream sandwiches and selling them to the people at church because she wanted to buy computers for that top floor so that those families could have some hope. She raised money and sent the money to Madagascar. A few months later, we got a call back saying we have fully equipped our computer lab for our adults and there was a little money left and they want to know if it was okay if they used the \$99 that was left to buy a bike for a church that's on the outskirts of the city that's in our synod. We said well we'll have to ask our confirmand. So we called her up and we asked her if it was okay for the little extra money that was left over from her project to be used that way and she said yes. Several years later, Marilyn and I had the opportunity to go with LCMC, as they were creating a relationship with that synod. They toured us all around and showed us various elements of their church and their synod in the capital city. They ended up taking us to a church that was celebrating an anniversary. So we are sitting in the front row, not directly in front of the speaker and we have Malagasy people whispering in our ears because we don't have a clue what's being said from the front. They're reading the history of this church, as they're celebrating their anniversary. They come to that place where the church in a couple of years doubled in size which they attributed to the pastor being given a bike by some church in Arizona. They didn't know we were there. They didn't know that was our church. They didn't know that it was our confirmand and they didn't know that the money that they got to build the bike was just some leftovers from another gift to do something else.

If you don't think we can make a difference in the world, you're not paying attention. It's an incredible experience to be a part of the church of Christ in the world. It's an incredible privilege to be called to be His witness here and everywhere we might reach that God calls us. I dare you to let God move you into the lives of people that are different from you. I dare you to let him let you see them through his eyes, so you can love them who and where they are and offer the same hope of the Gospel that he's offered to you. Christ came for the whole world and we have an incredible opportunity to remember who we are - the church of Jesus Christ in the world. Let's dare to move. Amen.