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Sermon Title: Go Where?
Pastor: Rev. David Johnson Rowe
Scripture: Acts 11:25-30

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Then Barnabas went to Tarsus to look for Saul, and when he had found him, he brought him to Antioch. So it was that for an entire year they associated with the Church and taught a great many people, and it was in Antioch that the disciples were first called 'Christians.'

At that time prophets came down from Jerusalem to Antioch. One of them named Agabus stood up and predicted by the Spirit that there would be a severe famine over all the world; and this took place during the reign of Claudius. The disciples determined that according to their ability, each would send relief to the believers living in Judea; this they did, sending it to the elders by Barnabas and Saul.

Introduction:

Today we are going on a whirlwind tour of the world of *mission*, one of the most misunderstood and much-maligned parts of Christian life. We'll look at terms, Bible verses, stories, and tie it all to us in this little Church on top of the hill that does so much mission so well.

Let's start with terms. The word "mission" all by itself just means "purpose." Businesses have a "mission statement." Soldiers are set off on a "mission." Google "NASA and space launcher," and you will see the word "mission." Mission is purpose, the job you do, even how you do it and why.

When Christianity came along, mission took on religious significance. Mission, in Christian terms, is what we do for others. Church is what we do for ourselves. Sunday School, keeping the property up, youth groups, choir, new bathrooms in the narthex, air conditioning, heat, staff—that's all Church. Mission is what we do when we step outside our doors: helping others. Foreign mission is what

we do for others overseas. Home mission is what we do in our own country. And what we do is based on the fairly simple teachings of Jesus. Jesus revolutionized religion by creating a worldview with no boundaries. "Go ye into all the world," Jesus said, his last words on earth. "Go into all the world." Later, the Bible adds, "Jesus said, 'You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, to the ends of the earth.'" (Acts 1:8)

In other words, here, there, and everywhere—no boundaries. This is revolutionary in world history. Up until then, religion was always localized: a specific religion for a specific people in a specific place. The Jews were in Judea with their Jehovah-God. The Greek gods were in Greece. Quetzalcoatl was in Mexico with the Aztecs. But then Jesus comes along with a universal message for everyone, near and far. That's what gave Christianity its evangelistic thrust, beginning with the Disciples. Off they went, one by one, around the Mediterranean, up into Europe, across Asia and Asia Minor, with a simple message: God is love. You are forgiven. There is an eternal life. And you get there by being as loving as Jesus. We call it "Christlikeness."

What happened with Christianity is a fairly simple story, not easy, not always in a straight line, but simple. Christianity started in Israel where the Jewish people believed in the life and teachings and miracles of Jesus; believed strongly enough that they wanted to share it. In fits and spurts, the Christian story spread around the Mediterranean, up into Europe. Later, spurred by enthusiasm, persecution, war, trade, and commitment, the Gospel of Jesus Christ made its way to every nook and cranny of the earth. It wasn't always pretty, it wasn't always good, it wasn't always Christlike. But the miracle of mission is that enough of God's love in Christ came shining through that the most vibrant Christianity today is around the world where some pretty great missionaries did their best.

The question of whether Christians should export our religion around the world has always existed. The Roman Caesars didn't like Christians encroaching on their Caesar-worship. Modern China is not too keen on Christianity. Try opening a Church in Saudi Arabia. And many countries would be happy if Christianity stayed home and cleaned up our own backyard. In fact, listen to this amazing quote from Mark Twain. Yes, Hartford, Connecticut's, Mark Twain, responding to the epidemic of lynching of black Americans in the Jim Crow era. Twain wrote:

"Let's import American missionaries from China and send them into the lynching field," he slyly advised.

We implore them to come back and help us in our need. Patriotism imposes this duty on them . . . They have the martyr spirit; nothing but a martyr spirit can brave a lynching mob, and cow it and scatter it. They can save their country, we beseech them to come home and do it . . . O kind missionary, O compassionate missionary, leave China! Come home and convert these Christians.” (Westbrook, Robert. “Global Mission Boomerang: What American Missionaries Brought Home. *Christian Century*: September 26, 2018. P. 26.)

Of course, the simple truth is they both need what true Christianity offers, both China and America, and everywhere in between. Today we’ll look at mission: what we do, how we do it, and why it is still so vital.

Last Sunday, we had a Christian visitor from India telling us about our mission work in that ancient land far away. A few days before that, many from our Church attended a big dinner celebrating the work of the Bridgeport Rescue Mission, quite literally saving lives, transforming lives, about six miles from our own front door. And the night before that we had a presentation here about the genocide against Christian Armenians a century ago in Turkey. Armenians who had become Christians 1,700 years ago because missionaries went there. The professor told about a pastor from this very Church, who in the 1850s was allowed to leave for six months on a mission trip to Turkey and the Holy Land. And he told about the start of a modern missionary movement among students at Williams College in 1805.

The morning before that, Alida and I were at the Bridgeport Council of Churches meeting to meet our mission projects leaders there: the ones who intervene with troubled youth, the one who runs a kitchen training poor women to become chefs and bakers and go forward in life, the ones who bring religious groups of many types together who have been at one another’s throats for centuries of hostility.

Two days before that, some 15 people from our Church were in a hot kitchen at Calvary-St. George’s Church near Oakwood Cemetery cooking up a chicken dinner and serving 85 people, hungry and lonely.

The Sunday before that, five girls from our Church were up here telling about making a teenage girl’s dream come true by furnishing a room for her to grow up in, proudly.

Next Sunday, the Pivot House Gospel Choir will be with us, singing their hearts out about the God who took them out of the gutter, off the streets, shook them

loose from alcoholism and drug addiction, and planted their feet on higher ground to start a new life.

In two weeks, Alida will be the keynote preacher down in Tennessee as ASP celebrates 50 years of blessing the poor of Appalachia and the teenagers of America, including a couple of thousand people from our Church community.

Mission, mission, mission, and mission—all of that is mission. Some of it six miles away, some of it 700 miles away, some 10,000 miles away. Some foreign mission, and some home mission, some in our own backyard. Every time our faith drives us to do something good, every time our Christlikeness puts us in the company of someone hurting in any way, every time the words of our faith inspire us to roll up our sleeves, well, that's mission.

Now, I didn't come by my zeal for mission naturally. The Church I grew up in never mentioned the word. I don't ever remember a mission offering or meeting a missionary, ever. I went to a wonderful Christian boarding school founded by America's greatest evangelist, D. L. Moody, and I never heard the word "mission" in four years. I went to America's oldest seminary that nurtured the great missionary movement of the 1800s and never met a missionary or took a course on mission or heard the word uttered.

I got my wake-up call on Wednesday morning, January 9, 1974. I was pastor of a little Church in upstate New York, Mechanicville, and as was my custom, I went out early, got my newspapers, went home to my office, opened up *The New York Times*, and read the front pages, read the sports pages, then got to the editorial pages.

There I found this article that changed my life. I still have it right here. An op-ed piece titled "West Africa: Neither Rain Nor Fast Relief." It was a scathing indictment of the world's apathy toward famine in sub-Saharan Africa. If you read the article today, is rather mild, wonkish. About a topic nobody knew anything about in a part of the world nobody cared about. But God used that article like a cudgel, as if the Holy Spirit had rolled up that day's *New York Times* and beat me over the head with it until I woke up. And I did.

In fast order—and it really did happen just as I'm about to tell you—boom, boom, boom, just like that. In fast order, I started researching world hunger that got me invited to a United Nations conference at the U.N. Church Center on "Famine and Apartheid in Africa." That led me to go to Africa in 1975, and soon I was president of Habitat for Humanity International, building homes all over the world. I found myself preaching and teaching and leading mission trips in Mexico, Nicaragua, Peru, Haiti, India, Uganda, Zaire. I got my doctorate in African Studies. We began "Friends of Christ in India" 35 years ago, and 21

years ago this Church wanted a pastor committed to mission, and you've been stuck with me ever since.

I think the reason you put up with me is that we agree: we agree with the Bible that, yes, "we are our brother's keeper." We agree with Jesus that we should spread out from here "to the ends of the earth." We agree with St. Paul that we should "weep with those who weep and rejoice with those who rejoice." We agree with those early Christians we heard about in our Scripture lesson who responded to rumors about a world famine by taking the first mission offering in Church history. We agree with looking at a world of need and a world of hurt beyond boundaries; we agree with our own sense of Christlikeness that real love has no limits.

McDonald's sells burgers. Why? Because it's a burger place. IKEA sells Swedish stuff because it's Swedish. Christians do mission because, well, that's what Christians do. We are outward thinking, outward going, outward doing.

By the time Jesus finished his earthly life, he had laid out a fairly straight-forward worldview. The world is our oyster. In a spiritual sense, when it comes to faith, there are no boundaries. Jesus isn't opposed to towns, villages, cities, nations. He's not opposed to being a fan of your hometown team or loving your country or hoping we beat the Russians in everything.

That's how we think. We are all kings in our own castles, loving our own kingdoms. That's our human side. Go, Yankees! (Well, next year, anyway.)

Jesus's perspective is different. Jesus actually said, "My kingdom is not of this world," which is another way of saying that his map of the world is different. Our maps show boundaries, borders, limits. Go here. Don't go there. Jesus's map shows needs, opportunities, people. No boundaries.

So I have no hesitation about being pro-mission. That doesn't mean I'm stupid or oblivious. I am 100 percent aware of the worst parts of Christian mission all through history. We can call it by soft terms: paternalism, condescension, colonialism. Or harsher terms: racism, mockery, slavery, violence. Christian mission worked hand in hand with conquerors, slavers, exploiters of every kind. We called ourselves the "civilized world" and called the rest of the world savages, pagans, barbarians. We dismissed the whole continent of Africa as the "Dark Continent."

One winter I was in Delhi, India, writing my book, *Consider Jesus*, about our mission partners in India, and I decided to take the afternoon off and visit the World Book Fair. Oh, it was impressive, a building larger than Giants Stadium, filled with books and authors from all over the world. I'm wandering around,

and this author with his own bookstall grabbed me and put the arm on me to buy his book. The title was something like *Why Christian Mission Stinks to High Heaven and Corrupts the Whole Universe*, so I was intrigued and . . . and bought a copy . . . and read it.

Worst of all, his book was full of Xeroxed copies of missionary letters and reports sent back home to headquarters and donors in England and America, describing in detail the missionaries' loathing for all things Indian: the people, places, cultures, food, music, and, yes, their religion.

Part of the problem, I'm sure, is that's how we in the mission-sending world, Europe and America, that's how we were brought up to think. There wasn't much over "there" (wherever "there" was) worth saving other than souls.

I can still remember a song I was taught in Vacation Bible School 60 years ago:

*Untold millions are still untold
untold millions are outside the fold,
Who will tell them of Jesus's love
and the heavenly mansions awaiting above?*

Our hymnbooks gave voice to that urgency:

*Rescue the perishing
Care for the dying
Snatch them in pity
From sin in the grave
Weep o'er the erring one
Lift up the fallen
Tell them of Jesus the Mighty to save."*

And another:

*There's a call come ringing o'er the restless wave
Send the light! Send the light!
There are souls to rescue, there are souls to save
Send the light! Send the Gospel Light!
Let it shine from shore to shore.*

There's something very noble about that, even beautiful, but it's hard to love people into heaven if you treat them like hell. Or, as a better writer put it, it's hard to look someone in the eye if you're looking down your nose at them.

And I say that as one who has met some of the greatest missionaries ever, men and women, so loving, so very loving, and courageous, sacrificial, humble, visionary, and the very epitome of the Christlikeness we treasure.

But there's a lot we need to make up for in the world of mission. The truth is, most important things have had a rocky road to excellence: medicine, surgery, space exploration, democracy. The good things learn to do what's right the right way. And I'd like to think that would be us.

As you can imagine, I have a thousand mission stories, and you've read many of them in my books. In the narthex, I've put copies of my book, *Church*, which has a whole chapter devoted to mission; and my book, *My Habitat for Humanity*, which really is all about mission, including separate chapters on India, Africa, Nicaragua, and the U.S. of A., but I'm going to tell you just two before I send you home to your own mission field.

One year, I took a large Habitat group of teenagers to Jersey City, rehabbing a decrepit six-story apartment house. Midmorning one day, I went to a nearby convenience store to get junk food for everyone, when I was confronted by a neighborhood person. "Are you a Christian?" I was asked. "Yes. Why?" I responded. "Because the only strangers who come here are either Christian or crazy."

That mirrored an almost exact same conversation I had in the mountains of Nicaragua during their bloody civil war. In a café, an angry young man with a big gun in his holster asked, "Are you a communist?" I managed a very weak-voiced "no." "Then you must be a Christian," he growled at me in Spanish. "Only communists and Christians come up here to help."

The fun part of those stories is that the Christ in us, the Christlikeness in us, the Christian religion in us was doing exactly the same thing in war-torn Nicaragua and blight-torn Jersey City. We were "loving our neighbor as much as ourselves," by helping them to have a simple, decent place to live as a tangible expression of Christlike faith. No boundaries

My closing story is the favorite of my whole life. You've heard it 100 times. You'll hear it till I die. When I went to Zaire in the Congo in 1975, I'd never been anywhere I didn't know anything. I was as raw a rookie as you could find about everything. And thanks to extraordinary Christians—Americans, Canadians, English, Swedish, and the Congolese people themselves—the world exploded before me, an explosion of sights and sounds and colors and people—I literally never wanted to close my eyes.

One day, we flew deep into the bush for several days . . . Well, may I read from my own book?

“It was Thanksgiving Day, and we were out in “the bush,” not quite jungle but not Kansas either. Our host did a lovely job of preparing a Thanksgiving dinner as near to the classic American feast as they could. At the end, an American Baptist missionary named Gene Gentry asked if I wanted to go for a ride. We hopped on his dirt bike, and thus began my Ph.D.-level course on what modern mission can be. As we rode deeper and deeper into the bush, on paths that weren’t identifiable as paths, heading for a remote village, Gene told me a story. Gene was an agricultural missionary. His calling was to share the good news of Jesus Christ within the context of helping subsistence farmers improve their farming. That could mean teaching the value of crop rotation or planting on a hill in such a way that erosion won’t kill your soil and stop your crop, or changing from the short-handled hoe to a long-handled hoe.

“Or taking care of your chickens. Gene had grown weary of trying to tell subsistence farmers what to do. A subsistence farmer is exactly what it sounds like, a farmer who ekes out just enough from his little land to put enough calories into the family to live another day. Subsistence is a step below existence. It is the bare minimum. When you can’t see past today, it is hard to change.

“Gene stopped trying. He decided to concentrate on farming his own land, trying “best practices” with his own farm, which included chickens. He took care of his chickens, built a coop, fed them, cleaned out the coop. As people walked by the mission compound’s little working farm, they could judge for themselves. Maybe Mr. Gentry was just another pushy American with no respect for traditional ways. Or maybe he knew something.

“Mankwela was a subsistence farmer, lurching from crisis to crisis, trying to survive. He saw Gene Gentry’s chickens, Rhode Island Reds, fat, healthy, meaty. He wanted to buy some. Gene’s offer was too good to resist. Mankwela could buy a chicken for, say, \$1. Or he could have them for 50 cents if he agreed to allow Gene to show him the proper care and feeding for plump, meaty Rhode Island Reds. He knew a good deal and took it.

“This is not as easy as it sounds. The “care and feeding of chickens” was not in the worldview of rural Zairian subsistence farmers. They assumed that chickens exist to serve man, not man to serve chickens! The idea of housing, feeding, cleaning up after—incomprehensible, not the natural order of things. Unless you want delicious and productive chickens.

“That’s why I was on the back of a dirt bike careening through centuries to visit Mankwela.

“One of the paradoxes of mission work is the unsettling combination of beauty and poverty. Eden could not have been more beautiful than the trip to Mankwela’s village. Paradise won’t be more beautiful. A green canopy overhead, gentle hills, idyllic, quaint mud huts with a hint of smoky fires.

“And hunger. Tattered clothes. Distended bellies. The almost-red hair of malnutrition

“We rolled into the village, greeted immediately by Mankwela and his family. The village chief came to formally welcome us, sending a young boy to shimmy up a nearby palm tree to retrieve a gourd of palm wine, a ceremonial toast to thank God for what God was doing through Gene and Mankwela.

“Before we drank our explosive palm wine, we poured an Old Testament-like “drink offering” onto the ground, thanking God for bounty and blessing.

“When I recovered from the wallop of the palm wine, I was taken to the chicken coop as Mankwela told us his story. He had endured a lot of derisive abuse when he started doing things Gene’s way. People mocked him when they saw him bending over to feed his chickens, or climbing into the coop like a chicken himself to clean it out.

“Now there was no mocking. Mankwela was the pride of the village, the chief said. “Bigger than me,” he laughed, truthfully. The chicken farm was now feeding his family, and his kids sold eggs door to door. There was money for more chickens, extra money for school fees and medicines, and nutrition in the bellies. Other farmers took notice. Maybe planting in rows across the hill instead of up and down is not so silly. Maybe letting the land rest for a season, maybe trying new crops, maybe the longer hoe all make sense.

“And maybe the other story the missionary farmer talks about, the story of God’s love in Jesus, makes sense too. Worth a listen.” (*My Habitat for Humanity: the (Mostly) Good Old Days*, p. 70-72)

That’s mission. Doing the right thing the right way with those who let you into their lives. No boundaries.

Let’s turn in our hymnbooks to No. 484, a great old missionary hymn, “We’ve a Story to Tell to the Nations”:

*We’ve a story to tell to the nations,
that shall turn their hearts to the right,
a story of truth and mercy,*

*a story of peace and light,
a story of peace and light.*

[Refrain:]

*For the darkness shall turn to dawning,
and the dawning to noonday bright;
and Christ's great kingdom shall come on earth,
the kingdom of love and light.*

*We've a song to be sung to the nations,
that shall lift their hearts to the Lord;
a song that shall conquer evil
and shatter the spear and sword,
and shatter the spear and sword. [Refrain]*

*We've a message to give to the nations,
that the Lord who reigneth above
hath sent us his Son to save us,
and show us that God is love,
and show us that God is love. [Refrain]*

*We've a Savior to show to the nations,
who the path of sorrow hath trod,
that all of the world's great peoples
might come to the truth of God,
might come to the truth of God. [Refrain]*