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Texts: Isaiah 54:2 & 3, Matthew 25:31-40

The First Congregational Church of Old Lyme

## **Toward a Theology of Mission:**

### **The Big Tent, the Long Pole and Ever-widening Circles**

As many of you know, our Senior Minister, Steve, is away right now with 7 of church members and friends, visiting Cuba. And he's there because, over the last 4 decades, this church has developed a "theology of mission" that is unusual – perhaps nearly unique.

In his absence we who are left behind are going to undertake to do a puzzle together: a puzzle we'll call "a theology of mission." I've gathered on the communion table some pieces of this puzzle. And our challenge is to try to fit them together. The New York Times puzzle master, Will Short, will be impressed.

Spread out upon the table you'll see a old crazy quilt, an aged doll, and a crocodile carved from the tusk of an elephant. And up here next to me you'll see the "long pole" we'll wrestle with later on.

The crazy quilt was made by the women of a large and prosperous Baptist Church in downtown Philadelphia in the first years of the 20th century. Their church had a "mission outpost" in Burma for which they raised money. A bold and stoic woman named Miss McAllister was one of the missionaries who periodically came to visit Philadelphia; to find respite, to share stories of her work, and to enlist further support.

Having seen photographs of Miss McAllister, I imagine that she and Ernesto Cardenal, about whom Steve preached last Sunday, were very different one from another. Whereas Cardinal was joyful and spirited and fun, Miss McAllister was strict, exacting and puritanical.

But let me try to keep the focus on those dedicated women stitching their faith and their stories into the cloth.

In the late 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> centuries a zealous movement in Christian mission was taking root all across the globe. Many of our churches here in New England were part of a this missionic fervor, which was born in London; a fervor we'll call a "holy passion for the gospel." In 1795, in Great Britain, a coalition of church leaders took upon themselves the name "The London Missionary Society." They believed *passionately* that the work of the Christian church was to carry the gospel to the farthest reaches of the world, in order to convert the "heathen" and win all souls to Christ. Today, those very words send shivers up and down my spine.

The Industrial Revolution coincided with this missionary zeal in a way that intensified both industrialization and Christianity. For there ensued a rabid fever for conquest: conquest for the sake of raw materials and new lands where new resources could be found. And, for missionaries, conquest for new

souls to win for Christ. That passion, that fervor, had begun almost a hundred years before those women created the quilt you see before you. But they became a part of its story.

The well-intentioned women of the Philadelphia church became very fond of Miss McAllister. And while I never met her, I have conjured up a picture of her in my mind as a petite, humorless woman with a backbone of steel. That might be unfair. But I have a journal in which she chronicled her days, and I think my image is fairly accurate.

One of the things she asked the women of the church to do was to create “appropriate” garments for the children of Burma. “Appropriate” by her standards. Which meant that the children of Burma should wear clothing that looked something like the clothing on this doll, which Miss McAllister named “Rosemary,” Rosemary was used as a demonstration tool to teach young girls how to dress. Layers of pantaloons and petticoats, with no consideration for how the hot and humid weather in Burma might call for very little clothing at all! She insisted that all children should be modestly covered.

It remains one of the challenges of mission work to this day: how do we introduce the essential teachings of Jesus Christ into a new culture without promoting our own values: value that well might run counter to theirs? Values that often *are*, as a matter of fact, **destructive** to their culture.

The ivory crocodile on the table serves to remind me, and all of us, that the cost of imperialistic Christian conversion is often degradation. While most of us now recognize that the slaughter of elephants is too high a price to pay for art like that crocodile, in the early days of the 20<sup>th</sup> century trophy gifts like that were all too common. Miss McAllister gave that crocodile to the church in Philadelphia.

The history of the imperialistic theology of mission is laden with tragic consequences. To other cultures. To other traditions. To other family structures. To the natural world.

Think of the young Native Americans rounded up and sent to “Christian” boarding schools to be taught the language and ways of the dominant culture? Just think of the ways in which those kinds of actions decimated indigenous cultures and tore families apart, leaving children laden with insecurities and confusion and resentment.

Think of the eradication of the Incan culture in South America, sacrificed upon the altar of riches for the Holy Roman See and the Kings of Europe.

Think of the rise of the slave trade; and the unquenchable thirst for *labor power* that drove it. It was William Wilberforce, a dedicated politician and philanthropist in England, who, in about 1810, led the movement that *began* to dismantle the slave trade. But by then, and in the ensuing years, the damage done to humanity was incalculable.

All of this is not to deny that there was a great deal of good that came from the work of missionaries in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. Hospitals and medical clinics and schools were built. Nelson Mandela, and others, were educated in Methodist Schools in the hinterlands of South Africa; an education for which Mandela often expressed deep gratitude.

Through the work of missionary’s communication and transportation between countries was strengthened. And we began to learn and understand more about other cultures. But all of that “*good*”

came with a subtle and not so subtle hidden cost. The diversity of cultures was threatened. Natural resources were pilfered. Ultimately many indigenous religions (valuable and beautiful religions) were demeaned and denigrated on the high altar of Christianity.

And the missionaries carried with them an understanding of fiscal economy that radically transgressed the more equitable sharing of resources on which many indigenous societies thrived.

Imperialism and colonialism are now seen by sociologists as the foundation upon which all of Africa's nation-state upheavals and civil unrest began. Africa's natural resources had great value to Portugal, France, Spain, the Netherlands and Great Britain. And so, the arbitrary national lines that were drawn to capture Africa's wealth, in complete disregard for social or geographic or tribal consequences, tore Africa apart. Do you remember what is the shortest sentence in the Bible? "Jesus wept." He wept over Jerusalem, but I think he wept again over Africa as imperialism, often under the banner of Christianity, seized the continent.

Some forty years ago, this church began to embark on a theology of mission that was vastly different from the one I have sketched before you, making critical use of Miss McAllister's good intentions.

On our Board of Missions at that time was a woman named Ramona McNamara who grew up in South Dakota. And when the mission board began a conversation about how we might be more *involved and invested* in the monies we were giving to others, they laid the foundation for our Green Grass partnership. They formed a relationship with a little United Church of Christ parish on the seldom visited and often ignored Cheyenne River Sioux Reservation in South Dakota. Exactly how that partnership has developed and morphed over the years would be the subject of an entire sermon in and of itself – but for today, I'll just say that over the past forty years we've learned from the Lakota people. We've celebrated their indigenous religious practices with them, we've shared in their celebrations and their sorrows, and we've made friendships that are life-sustaining for both us and them. And we are all the richer for it.

I think if we asked someone on the Green Grass reservation today what the partnership has meant to them, I am quite sure their first answer would be "You have been our friends. You have accompanied us in life. You've stood by us. You've shown us your care."

Over these past forty years we've developed a theology of mission that can aptly be called a "theology of accompaniment." We seek to walk with people – not change them – not solve their problems in the manner in which *we might like to solve their problems*. But rather we seek to accompany them in life: learning, seeing, appreciating, helping, being "fed" ourselves by wisdoms different from our own.

That is true for our relationship with the people of South Africa.... it was true for our friendship with the children of Harlem back in the days when we had a partnership with the Storefront School... and it's true now for our partnership with the people of Haiti and the people of Israel and Palestine.

These friendships (these partnerships) have always been mutually beneficial. And they have been sustained through a measure of time; by which I mean that there's been an on-going commitment to reach deeper into issues and to seek truths that forge justice and sustain us all. Our "theology of mission" is a "theology of accompaniment."

The map you see below the pulpit today is a representation of the many partnership, refugee and Habitat engagements and learning excursions this congregation has nurtured – and been **nurtured by** - in the last forty years. Our thanks go to Tom Sherer for creating it.

COVID was a huge setback for our partnership model. Not only was travel difficult, but in most cases it was unsafe. In the case of both Haiti and the Middle East, it remains unsafe due to rampant violence. But we're steady at the helm of rebuilding as best we can. When it's possible, I feel sure we will travel to those currently fragile places once again. And in late June of this year, we hope to lead a group to visit the Green Grass community in South Dakota once again.

We in this church believe that Jesus intended us to live in the big tent that Isaiah described. We believe that we are called to drive the tent pegs home in the largest possible configuration – inviting people from ever-widening circles into our tent. People who might well be different from us. People who might understand God differently, or who function with a different model of social cohesion or economics. People with whom we share a precious common humanity. Think about our reading from the gospel of Matthew. Jesus told us that we find **the living Christ** in **all** people. **All people**. So, we do, indeed, need the biggest tent we can construct.

The people with Steve right now in Cuba are exploring the rich traditions of some of the indigenous religious practices that have kept people alive through struggle for hundreds of years. They are practicing the theology of accompaniment right now as we worship together here.

I'm going to switch gears now – but stay with me. We're going to talk about this long pole and why it's important in our “theology of mission.”

Years ago, actually decades ago now, the lower Connecticut River froze so thick with ice that in the months of deep winter one could drive a car from the docks in Hamburg Cove, out across the waterways to attend the movies in Essex. Where Talbot's now stands- that's the old Essex Movie Theatre. I'm sorry to say that the changing climate has made that story one for history's archives.

A good many years ago now, there was a middle-aged woman who often skated on Hamburg Cove. She had an athletic grace, and I loved to watch her. She'd glide long and steady to the right, and then long and steady to the left. It was like a dance in slow motion. Her movements were rhythmically steady and hypnotic. She'd appear from the north on the big inner bay and disappear through what we call “the straits” that lead to the large outer cove.

Adding to the drama and the artistry of her long, elegant, gliding was the fact that she held a pole (like this one) in her hands as she went. The pole, moving from side to side as she glided along, added immensely to the winter drama she enacted so beautifully.

But the pole served a critical function as well. You see, there are springs that feed our ponds and lakes and waterways. And as the warmer water rises from the springs, the thickness of the ice above them is diminished and weakened, sometimes imperceptibly. There are devilishly hidden places where the ice is treacherously thin, even in the coldest of winters. The pole, she explained once, would prevent her from drowning, should she ever unexpectedly fall through the ice. The pole would transverse the hole. And supported on both sides, she'd be able to haul herself back out onto the surface.

I think our mission work has provided this congregation with a kind of long pole; a long pole that serves both our community and the communities we've befriended. We've given our partners a connection to the wider world that reaches out across differences and increases their stability and resilience; very valuable assets in a challenging and changing world. And they have given the same to us; a sense of deep connection to others that makes **us** stronger as well.

In the first hours after the fall of the World Trade Center towers, our family received a call from a family in South Africa that I had surely met in prior years, and they wanted to know if we were ok. Knowing we lived not far from New York City; they feared for our safety. That call was evidence of the long pole of missions. Valuable. Life sustaining. Life giving.

There is a great deal we don't understand about this world and all its complexity. But the world stretches out around us with incredible beauty, and endless wisdoms I have yet to explore.

The verses from T.S. Eliot, with which we began this morning's worship service, ring true for me through time. The older I get, the more I realize how little I really know. For the only wisdom that is endless is the wisdom of humility.

Our theology of mission has helped me to understand that what is most precious in life is what we do not ever actually, materially own. Friendships. Shared experiences. Deeper understandings. Deep appreciation for our common humanity.

There may well be people who think we should draw constricting lines around ourselves, our villages, our state and our country and protect ourselves from the diversity and complexity of the world. But I feel altogether differently. Diversity is enriching. Complexity is real. And, like Rilke, I want to live my life in ever-widening circles that reach out across the world. That would be a worthy theology of mission for an ever-evolving humanity. Amen.

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