

The Rev. David Copley – April 12, 2018

We will all be changed- **mission as mutual transformation.**

1 Cor 15:51-52

"...we will all be changed in a moment, in a twinkling of an eye...."

Given the state of the world today, there has rarely been a more important time to remind ourselves that as Christians we are a global community and we are called by God to engage with God's people from around the whole world.

When we engage globally we remind ourselves that our faith is one where we strive to see one another as sisters and brothers in Christ, as children of God; no matter our skin color, our nationality, or our faith belief.

Our mandate for this ministry is from God, and can be seen throughout the whole of scripture.

We engage in mission because, as we read in Genesis... God created humankind in God's image, in the image of God, God created them, male and female God created them. God blessed them and God saw everything he had made and indeed. It was very good.¹ .. (more about this passage later.)

We engage globally because...

- We are our brother's keepers²
- Because God has told us, what is good: and what does the Lord require of us?.. to do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with our God?³
- and we are called by God to love God and to love our neighbor, and Jesus was clear who that neighbor is.⁴

As Christians, we are called to reach out across borders, across walls, across divides and to always put family first, and our family is the whole of humanity.

There is no America first, , or New York first or even England first in the Bible, there is only love, and love knows no boundaries.

We are called to relate to those in the world around us, and especially the poor, the needy, and the disenfranchised.

¹ Gen 1:27

² Genesis 4:9 Cain speaking to God

³ Micah 6:8

⁴ Matthew 22:37-40.. on these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets. Luke 10:29b-37 Good Samaritan

Not just because we are called to compassion, but because those in need are just as much **our** children, **our** sisters, **our** brothers, **our** parents, as our own flesh and blood.

So, thank you for being here, you all have a lot of work to do.

The question that I want to reflect upon today is

What exactly is this mission that we talk about?

What is God calling us to do?

And how do we engage in these activities in a sensitive, and mutual supportive way that respects the dignity of all?

What exactly is this “mission” that we talk about?

I have spoken and preached about mission for many years, and I would often begin with the definition of mission and its Latin roots coming from the word *mitere*, which means to “**be sent**”, a word used in the Latin Vulgate translation of the Bible, written in the 4th century. I focused on the concept of **being sent** as the core of mission.

My thinking has changed a little over the years, in part as I realized that the word “*mission*” is actually not in the Bible, and that the word “**sent**” is only one of many descriptors used in scripture that illustrates how God is calling us to participate with God in this world.

The challenge in focusing on mission as being “sent” is that it often shifts the centrality of mission to movement and travel; and on doing something for someone else. This paradigm can potentially disassociate ourselves and objectify the people with whom we are called to be in relationship with.

If Mission is about being sent, the idea of being sent needs to be more broadly interpreted.

There are so many definitions of mission out there, and there is no absolute right answer; however, I would strongly argue that the foundation of all Christian mission is that we are primarily being called to engage in God’s mission of reconciliation; reconciliation with God and reconciliation with one another.

Or to put it another way, we are being called to love God and to love one another, to be in relationship with God and with one another.

We all need to know that we are loved by Jesus, and beloved of God.⁵

All other definitions of mission, all other mission activities should grow out of this foundation.

⁵ Heuertz, Christopher L.; Pohl, Christine D.. Friendship at the Margins: Discovering Mutuality in Service and Mission (Resources for Reconciliation) (p. 11). InterVarsity Press. Kindle Edition.
Under pinning

When love is the foundation of our mission activities then we will all be transformed

While on sabbatical this summer I looked through my Bible and wrote down all of the Bible verses I felt referred to my understanding of mission. While one can argue that the whole of scripture points to mission, I chose a few highlights and ended up with 7 pages of quotes, which began to reflect for me a wide range of understanding of mission.

Ranging from

Gen 1:27 So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them, male and female he created them. God blessed them... 31 God saw everything he had made and indeed. It was very good.

Gen 4:9 (Cain to God).. Am I my brother's keeper? (after he had killed Abel).

Deut 22:4 you shall not see your neighbors donkey or ox in the road and ignore it: you shall help to lift it up

1 Chron 29:14 (KJV) for all things come of thee, and of thine own have we given thee.

Micah 6:8 He has told you, O mortal. What is good: and what does the Lord require of you, but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?

Matthew 25... Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me.... Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.

Mark 16:15 And he said to them, "Go into all the world and proclaim the good news to the whole creation.

We can take our pick on our definition of mission, but loving God and loving one another, desiring to be in relationships with those whom we do not yet know should be at the center of that thinking.

I see within all scripture the story of humanities relationship with God. In the beginning we are created by God, in God's own image and we lived in a perfect relationship with God in the garden of Eden. The rest of scripture is, in short, a story of how our relationship with God had its ups and downs throughout history, ending in God sending his Son, Jesus Christ, to show us all what God's love is all about. But the theme running throughout is that we were, and we continue to be, beloved children of God and that God is present amongst all peoples.

When we enter into a meaningful relationship with another, then we see the God in the other, and we are all mutually transformed into what God has called us to be, we live into our full potential as children of God.

This is a transformation that calms the soul and enriches the spirit.
A transformation that reminds us that we are not forgotten,
that we are loved,
that we are precious in God's sight,
that we are all children of God and created in God's image.

What is God calling us to do, and how do we engage in these activities in a sensitive, and mutual supportive way that respects the dignity of all?

Perhaps the first step in this process of reconciliation, in loving others, is knowing and loving ourselves.

For a healthy relationship, self-knowledge, self-understanding is essential. If we do not know what we believe, if we do not know who we are, our culture, our history, our story, then how will those who are traveling a different path from us begin to get to know who we are?

Thomas Merton in his book, *The Wisdom of the Desert* said.

*"What can we gain by sailing to the moon if we are not able to cross the abyss that separates us from ourselves? This is the most important of all voyages of discovery, and without it, all the rest are not only useless, but disastrous."*⁶

It is so important to engage in self-reflection before we engage in any mission activity. We need to be asking ourselves questions such as

- What is my motivation, how does this relate to my faith journey?
- Am I doing this because I care deeply about a people, a community that I want to be in relationship with?
- Am I doing this because I want to make a difference?
- Am I doing this because I want an adventure that will make me feel good about myself?

Outside of the theology and scriptural imperatives for us to engage in mission, the motivations for why each one of us engages or wants to engage in mission is complex and a little different for everyone.

⁶ Merton, Thomas *The Wisdom of the Desert* (New Direction) Kindle Edition revised ed. 2012

I know that for me, there is a strong instinct to want to fix things, to make things better, whether that is repairing a bicycle, fixing a leak in the church sacristy's bathroom, to wanting to make a significant difference in the world, in helping to feed the poor, to build a school, or volunteer for working in disaster relief. (so Matthew 25)

It is easy for many of us to want to jump into a cause that will help the immediate physical needs of others, and in many instances, this is a good and right thing to do. Currently, we need to be helping Puerto Rico, the Virgin Islands and other parts of the Caribbean after the hurricanes, as well as supporting so many other places in the world where immediate need is a life and death imperative. When there is an emergency, we are called to act, to give, to help out, to respond immediately.

But outside of an emergency situation, how can we respond to our sisters and brothers? What is God calling us to do, and what is our motivation?

Short term mission is still the norm for many church groups in how many of us engage in global mission, with well over 2 million Americans estimated to travel outside of the US every year on a short-term mission trip of one to two weeks. These are great opportunities to engage in a mutually transformative mission, unfortunately we do not always do a good job in how we structure these activities.

For many years our understanding of a mission experience, for the most part, has been stuck in a rut and without a great deal of critical reflection. In 1963 there was an Anglican Congress in Toronto, Canada, which produced a document called Mutual Responsibility and Interdependence in the Body of Christ. This was very much a post-colonial conference and part of the document stated

'It is now irrelevant to talk of "giving" and "receiving" churches. The keynotes of our time are equality, interdependence, mutual responsibility.'⁷

This is a great ideal, and one which, after 54 years, we still need to work on to reach towards these lofty goals.

Now don't get me wrong, we have done some great work and we have made a difference in the world. But we can do so much better.

Part of the challenge that we have is that we can often be a little hazy as to our starting point in the discernment process for mission engagement.

We want to do something; we know that there are needs around the world, and with our enthusiasm we just jump in to action. We want to save the world.

⁷ Project Canterbury: Mutual Responsibility and Interdependence in the Body of Christ. Toronto Anglican Congress, 1963. Transcribed by the Right Reverend Dr. Terry Brown. Retired Bishop of Malaita, 2009 Section 1

So, we need to step back and reflect theologically as to our motivation, and we need to reflect on our own spiritual journey and our own personal desires and motivations.

One transformative book that has influenced my understanding of mission with regards to self-reflection, is one that I read a number of years ago with a group of ecumenical mission directors. The title of the book is “The Ego Boom; Why the world really does revolve around you”.⁸

The reflection of our group was about how much of our motivation for mission is fed by our ego. While we all want to say that “God is calling us to this ministry, or that we are responding to a biblical imperative, the reality is that we are also influenced to some degree by our ego and our desire to feel good about ourselves.

We have to be honest about ourselves, our motivations and what makes us feel good. While we may feel good about getting our hands dirty, building a wall or painting something, logic might dictate that it is better stewardship to send money or hire a local person to do the work that we would have volunteered to do ourselves.

I understand that a work project can be a vehicle through which we work alongside a partner and grow in our relationship, but sometimes there are better ways of doing this.

We should all strive to be honest about our motivation and be pragmatic about our programing; always returning to the foundation of God’s mission as one of reconciliation.

We can never take our ego out of the equation, we all feel good about helping someone else, and that is OK. But sometimes our ego can cloud our judgement and be an overwhelming driving force in our decision making. Especially when we have not fully reflected alongside our partner as how best to live in to God’s mission together, in love, and in mutual understanding.

When our egos overtake our discernment process without critical thinking then we risk doing harm to our relationships and to our partners. The risk of unintended consequences is real, and creating a dependent relationship is all too common in a church’s global mission activity.

We need to seriously reflect on whether our missionary endeavors and work contributes towards a mutuality in mission that is respectful of the dignity of all of those concerned.

When we get this right, we will see a powerful and mutual transformation as we grow in our understanding of God and one another.

It is good to remember in our reflections that we are all broken people, and getting a sense of who we are, will better allow the Holy Spirit to do its job.

⁸ Maich Steve, Lianne George The Ego Boom: Why the World Really Does Revolve Around You. Key Porter Books 2009

To repurpose a Leonard Cohen song
*Ring the bells that still can ring
Forget your perfect offering
There is a crack, a crack in everything
That's how the light gets in.*

Acknowledging our weaknesses, our vulnerabilities, the cracks in our lives, and entering into this process in humility allows the Holy Spirit to do its job within us.

Sometimes it is easier to address the problems of those living with different realities than our own. Jesus has an answer to that too, as we read in Matthews Gospel (Matt 7:5)

You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your neighbor's eye.

Knowing ourselves emotionally, psychologically, spiritually, as well as placing ourselves in our own historical and cultural context is an important starting point for transformation and for sharing of ourselves with those who live in a different reality; those who have a different story.

When we enter into a new partnership, when we engage in a transforming missional relationship, then we need to do so first and foremost in humility and with open hearts and minds. We must learn more deeply the story of those with whom we seek to walk alongside.

There is a Ted Talk given by Chimamanda Adichie entitled “The Danger of a Single Story”. David Brooks of the New York Times said of this talk.

It was about what happens when complex human beings and situations are reduced to a single narrative: when Africans, for example, are treated solely as pitiable poor, starving victims with flies on their faces.

Her point was that each individual life contains a heterogeneous compilation of stories. If you reduce people to one, you're taking away their humanity.⁹

Chimamanda's experiences illustrate that when we read a single story, experience a single focused cultural journey, we end up having a single story in our own minds of those whom live outside of our own story.

We should be careful not to fall into the rhetoric of classifying a group of people with certain traits or ways of being. While we all have our unique cultural and social history that helps define who we are, we should never assume we know the struggles of another.

⁹ David Brooks, The New York Times https://www.nytimes.com/2016/04/19/opinion/the-danger-of-a-single-story.html?_r=0 accessed Sept 25th 2017

One of the first tasks when we engage in mission, is to take a deep breath, pause a little, sit down with our new family, share a meal, swap those family photos, share the joys and the challenges of life, and to at least get a taste of how it might feel to walk in another's shoes.

Just as an individual is never a single story, neither is the activity of mission engagement always a single story. Mission is not always about a mission trip, traveling overseas to build an orphanage, and helping the "poor", in doing so we risk objectifying a people.

Some people find it helpful to talk about and experience mission as being pilgrimage, where one sees mission as about encountering the Christ in ourselves and in the sisters and brothers whom we do not yet know.

In my experience of many groups that engage in mission, there is such a desire to "help", that we do not do our homework, we do not know enough about the cultural and often colonial background of the peoples we are hoping to relate to. We do not know the history of the relationship that already binds two peoples together in the shadows of our mutual historical contexts.

When we know ourselves and know our partners, then we begin to take the first tentative steps in a mutual and life changing ministry

When we are in relationship with God and one another, we move from where we are, to where God wants us to be, this is the journey of transformation that God is calling us into.

And

if this journey is not about walking alongside in mutuality,
if we are not seeking to find that presence of Christ within our sisters and brothers, and vice versa,
if both partners are not being transformed by that presence of God,
then perhaps we need to re-evaluate what we are doing.

My personal transformation began while I was working in Liberia as a UN volunteer.

I still remember clearly the last day my wife and I were in Liberia. We stood in the courtyard of a dilapidated three-story building on a hot and humid day. It is always hot and humid in Liberia, except when it was hot and rainy such is life in this tropical West African nation. The year was 1994, 4 years after the start of the civil war and there had been an uneasy truce for a year or so. When we arrived, there were still dead bodies on the streets. During our time in the country we had been held up by rebel soldiers, taken in for questioning numerous times, we had given out medications, food and water, acted as ambulance drivers, and played with children in refugee camps.

On this particular day, Susan, (who was very pregnant with our daughter), and I were leaving the country, to return to the safety and security of the United States for my wife to give birth.

Our housekeeper and our support for much of our time in Liberia came to say goodbye. She thanked us for our support and our love.

The phrase I will always remember was that she thanked us for just being there.

In being there, she said she knew that she was not forgotten, that there were people praying for her, that there was a church that she had not seen in a country she could hardly imagine, was praying for her and her country. She was grateful that there were people who realized that we are part of a global community, brothers and sisters in Christ, and because of that, despite years of civil war there was hope. For her, our presence reminded her that she was not forgotten.

I was transformed in Liberia.

A nominal Catholic, I encountered people for the first time, who, from the very depths of their being, their soul, recognized that we are all **children of God** and we have a responsibility to care for all of our brothers and sisters, mothers and fathers, cousins, nephews and nieces, no matter what the cost.

I met five North American Roman Catholic sisters from the Order of the Precious Blood, who were teachers and nurses and who in protecting their extended family, all died at the hands of rebel soldiers.

I met Brothers of the order of Don Bosco, who spent the war talking their way through military checkpoints to deliver food and medicines deep into the rural areas of an active war zone.

To many, if not most of us, these are heroes and saints; in their minds, they were just living out the gospel, caring for their family; the Christian, Muslim and Liberian part of their family, all children of God.

I was transformed in Liberia in recognizing who I was, to whom I am related, and, in part, how I might fit into God's calling for us all.

- A ministry of presence,
- a ministry of sharing God's love as sister and brothers in Christ,
- of being with one another,
- of breaking bread with one another,
- of understanding one another's journey,
- walking alongside one another in our joy and in our suffering.

This is the core of transformational mission and one that is often forgotten when we engage in

the busy work of “project centered” ministry.

We can sometimes be too busy building physical walls, to engage in a relational ministry that breaks down the walls of social, cultural and theological misunderstandings.

We so often enter into relationships from a position of power and control because of our financial strength and educational opportunities, and we often want to maintain that control (even if that is subconsciously) as we engage with those who are so often disempowered for a wide range of reason.

There are too many mission activities that have moved from colonialism to paternalism and seem to have stuck there. With paternalism, we maintain control, we maintain the power and decision making, we maintain our comfort levels while looking with empathy on those who have so little, and yet “always have a smile on their faces and seem so happy”.

But this cycle can be broken when we know ourselves and have taken the time to know our sisters and brothers.

There is much wisdom out there, but just a few quotes for you to reflect upon for now.

Joanne van Engen, In her article "The Cost of Short Term Missions" (2000), she says

"Third world people do not need more rich Christians coming to paint their church and make them feel inadequate. They do need more humble people willing to come share their lives."

In Philip Hallie book, *Lest Innocent Blood Be Shed: The Story of Le Chambon and How Goodness Happened There*, Hallie distinguishes between giving things and giving oneself. He explains,

“When you give somebody a thing without giving yourself, you degrade both parties by making the receiver utterly passive and by making yourself a benefactor. . . . But when you give yourself, nobody is degraded— in fact, both parties are elevated by a shared joy. When you give yourself the things you are giving becomes fertile. What you give creates new, vigorous life, instead of arrogance on the one hand and passivity on the other.”¹⁰

Jean Vanier founder of the L’Arche Community "In the end, the most important thing is not to do things for people who are poor and in distress, but to enter into relationship with them, to be with them and help them find confidence in themselves and discover their own gifts."

¹⁰ Heuertz, Christopher L.; Pohl, Christine D. (2010-03-25). *Friendship at the Margins: Discovering Mutuality in Service and Mission (Resources for Reconciliation)* (Kindle Locations 1691-1696). InterVarsity Press. Kindle Edition. *Lest Innocent Blood Be Shed: The Story of Le Chambon and How Goodness Happened There* (New York: HarperPerennial, 1979, 1994), p. 72.

In the book “Les Miserables,” Victor Hugo writes, **“To love another person is to see the face of God.”**

Never forget that mission is first and foremost God’s mission and God’s mission is about the transformative power of love.

My wife Susan asked her grandfather for advice before she was ordained. He was a retired Methodist minister, and she was expecting some deep theological response to her question. His reply was “just love the people”.

Love the people because whether they are your neighbor next door or across the world they are part of your family, part of our family, all children of God.

And right now we need to be in relationship with neighbors near and far for our own good and for the good of the whole family of God.

You see mission is not complicated, although it may not always be easy.

Whether you think that one aspect of mission is more important than another is very subjective, but perhaps the most important thing for us to remember as a community is that, as a community, we are not forgetting anyone; the widow, the orphan, the prisoner, the rich, the poor, the disenfranchised, the homeless and the hungry.

To quote from the wisdom of Walt Disney, “being family means nobody gets left behind, or forgotten”, Lilo and Stich¹¹

It is important to care for the elderly next-door neighbor, to care for the poor in our neighborhood, it is equally important to look beyond ourselves, to look beyond our own cultural and geographic context. To care for those who are in desperate economic situations, those living in war zone, those who are victims of famine, victims of oppression, victims of violence, victims of injustice.

As a community, as The Episcopal Church, it is important for us to participate in mission with all those whom we are able.

There is no such thing as a “mission field” that is “over there”, just as there is no such people as the “other” .. The mission field is all of us, you, me, the rich and the poor, the neighbor and those across the world, and the “other” is just a part of our family whom we do not yet know. We are all in need of hearing and experiencing God’s transformational love from one another.

In summary, to move towards a mission that is mutually transformative.

¹¹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=U37cChUfHk0> Lilo and Stich, Walt Disney Pictures 2002.

- We should have a strong prayerful and theological foundation for our ministry
- We should engage in critical reflection
 - We should strive to know ourselves more deeply; to know our cultural, socio-economic and historical context
 - Learn about our partners culture, economics, history, and how our culture has influenced, interacted, and been a part of that story. We should share our stories and listen to the stories of our distant family
- Be open to the presence of the Holy Spirit' remember that God has been there before us, and will be with us all in our journey of discovery.
- Remember it is not all about us, we need to leave our ego at the door, take of our shoes, and enter into this great adventure with God in humility.

If in doubt return to your baptismal vows.

Will you seek and serve Christ in all persons loving your neighbor as yourself

Will you strive for justice and peace among all people, and respect the dignity of every human being?

Will you proclaim by word and example the Good News of God in Christ?

And the people say

"I will with God's help"

Amen

1. What one Bible story or verse best reflect your motivation for engaging in mission and why have you chosen it?
2. One of the biggest challenges to mutual ministry when we engage globally, is the power differential that is created from economic inequalities. What can we do to help mitigate this potential barrier to be in a truly mutual relationship?
3. For some, mission engagement is a specific action undertaken at events or within a specific time period, whether that is a mission trip or an evangelistic event. How can we live out God's mission in our daily lives?

