

Passion for Mission and Justice:

A Context for Mission Today

Good morning! I'd like to do three things in the next few minutes:

First, share a bit of my own story, my own passion for mission;
Second, share a few observations on the ecclesial landscape in Latin America;
And finally, share a few comments on encountering folks from other cultures:

I was raised in a Conservative Baptist church. It was a large church, mission-oriented, innovative, dispensationalist. How well I remember, as a child, longing for a personal encounter with God. Sitting in that pew, up front, on the right, desiring something special, some touch of mystery, some revelation.

I came to know Jesus Christ personally, vitally. I learned to discern the flow of emotion in worship: its rhythms and cadences. But I also remember being taught not to trust my senses, my emotions. Spiritual maturity, I was taught, is shown by affirming sound doctrine. The noisy chaos of the Pentecostals, they said, was not a legitimate manifestation of Holy Spirit.

In time I discovered that God is bigger than I had suspected. Perhaps, just perhaps, God was not subject to my rules, nor to the dogma so carefully articulated by my church. As I grew up I read Kierkegaard, T.S. Eliot, e e cummings. I sensed the presence of mystery, the mystery of presence. I began to understand that I understood very little.

I went to Wheaton College in Illinois. That particular environment worked for me and confirmed my vocation in education and communication.

Every weekday at Wheaton we had chapel. One morning, Bob Webber, a Bible prof, spoke the unspeakable: he spoke of the silence of God. God's silence, said Webber, showed that God had gone missing. God had left **us**, God's chosen people. And the absence of God, he said, was more terrible than his presence.

Job had come to the same conclusion; as had so many prophets. This was Jesus' cry in Gethsemane. How can anything mean anything if God is not present?

So if God had gone, or if we had left God, we had no choice but to seek God out. Where is God present? How to discern God's presence?

I first went to Guatemala in 1974 as a volunteer sponsored by First Pres, Evanston, Illinois. I began work as a mission co-worker in 1977. Back then I was still a romantic. Quickly I learned the lingo: the nobility of the poor, the perversity of the powerful, the purity of the popular.

There were moments of immense clarity. I remember visiting a home in a remote village. The dirt floor of this home was swept immaculately clean, as was the courtyard. The woman of the

house served me an egg. It was, clearly, the only egg of the only hen in that courtyard. I had not asked for food, nor expected it. The egg was offered with the dignity and grace of true hospitality. I received it understanding that at that time, in that place, this was a sacrament, this was true presence.

Guatemalans and other Latin Americans unveiled for me a different Bible, a Bible that shared the faith stories of the people of God: Hebrew midwives that saved the lives of Israel's children; Naomi discovering that the Exodus didn't seem to apply to her as a woman, a widow; she had no promised land. The astounding thunder of Ezekiel, chapter 34. The passion of Amos, of Haggai, of Nehemiah.

And who was this Jesus, anyway. I had spent most of my time learning about Paul.

I discovered a Jesus who never mentions the name of the rich young ruler and loves him so much that he sends him away, demanding that he sell everything and give it to the poor. I discovered a Jesus who **names** Bartimaeus, son of Timaeus, the blind beggar, and **asks him what he wants**, (he makes no such offer to the rich young ruler) then invites him to join him on the Way. No questions asked. No strings attached.

Then there is Jesus' disturbing encounter with the Syrophenician woman. "It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." "Yes, lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table."

Just exactly who evangelizes whom here?

Was this a different Bible? Why had I not heard these stories before?

In the years to come, my world became less simple. I witnessed the depth and complexity of human pain, of courage, betrayal, honor, a certain divorce between discourse and practice, simplicity, violence, corruption.

In Guatemala I came to experience, as never before, human love.

No one emerged from the war unscathed. Was it indeed less violent to have responded with violence to the violence of the system? Were we left with no alternative but to fight fire with fire? I don't know. I'm fresh out of certainties. But this I know: the violence violated us all. 200,000 dead; more than a million displaced people; 440 villages wiped off the map.

The war left no room for romantic notions. Within me grew a sense of the mystery of goodness and of grace, but also a sense of the mystery of evil. I came to distrust words and easy solutions. The recipes just didn't work.

The recipes promised us freedom and security. But we don't feel free. We don't feel secure. Mostly, we feel kind of numb. And deep within us we still long for meaning, for mystery, for

forgiveness.

A comment: in a place like Guatemala to forgive is not to forget. One must not forget generations of horror. Rather, forgiveness is a function of remembering. Forgiveness brings with it a solemn commitment: never again. We must build a way of living together in which the past never again is repeated.

We still live in a culture of violence and impunity; creative, competent leadership has been hard to come by. Since the Peace Accords were signed in December, 1996, we've had eight years of mostly broken promises and failed dreams - three steps forward, two steps back - and people are tired. Even good, God-fearing people get stuck in the past. They get mired in the bitterness produced by a culture of violence and of impunity.

Here is what some of us are beginning to suspect in Guatemala: We've tried killing each other. We've tried hating each other. It doesn't work. We are less secure than ever before. Trust has been shattered. We are beginning to suspect that our security must be built on one fundamental fact: We belong to each other because we all are bought with a price. We all belong to God.

This is what we are trying to remember these days in Guatemala. Our security is in our relationships. In our ability to care for one another. In our capacity to nourish tenderness in our midst. In our ability to build institutions that protect widows, orphans and strangers.

Secondly, a few comments on the ecclesial landscape in the world today. First of all, today, most of the world's Christians live in the South: Latin America, Asia, Africa. When immigrants show up in your presbytery, this is the context many of them will be coming from. The details and actors will vary, but the general landscape is similar for many, many countries these days:

Once upon a time, the churches of Latin America wielded enormous cultural power. Traditional churches had the power to set the acceptable limits for public religious practice. One could be Roman Catholic or one could belong to the tiny, but generally tolerated, Protestant minority. As of the 1920's, if one were poor and living on the margins of society, one might also choose to be Pentecostal.

For centuries the churches had sufficient cultural power to force those of other faith traditions to seek refuge in the institutional space provided by the dominant churches. Witness, over the centuries, how Guatemalan Mayans or Afro-Brazilians reached, in their particular contexts, strained accommodations with Roman Catholicism. The dominant churches had sufficient cultural power to suppress a wide range of alternative spiritualities ranging from Spiritism to millenarian sects.

With the globalization of consumer culture and the consolidation of global commercial media systems in the nineties, the cultural power of the traditional churches began to wane. Sociologists in Latin America began to speak of a global religious supermarket that competed with traditional religious institutions by eliminating the intermediary and directly offering individual religious consumers a broad variety of symbolic goods.

This coincided with the explosive growth of the Neopentecostal megachurches. By the late eighties, these groups had begun to stage and broadcast elaborate religious spectacles on radio and television. Such churches offered spiritual catharsis to thousands in an attractive theater setting with high production values. They provided high drama in the form of exorcisms, powerful personal encounters with transcendence and the promise of material blessing.

Today about 80% of Latin America's Protestants are either Pentecostals or Neopentecostals. Add to this numerical dominance the overwhelming pentecostalization of liturgy in both Roman Catholic and Protestant traditions, their increasing political activism and the widespread presence of Neopentecostal programming on radio and television stations throughout the region and one begins to understand the growing cultural power of these groups.

In the current context of global consumer culture, the concept of material blessing merits special comment. Classic Pentecostals tend to be churches of the poor: people on the margins of society, often rural, who find in their faith groups a space where they can seek community and petition God for healing and forgiveness. It is a space where the silenced come to find their voices. God's blessing, to a community living on the margins of consumer culture, is found in healing, a sense of community and a general sense of well-being.

Neopentecostals, on the other hand, insist that blessing must be material. If your God isn't big enough to grant you a better job, a new car or a bigger house, they say, try mine! As children of the King, you have the right to expect the best! They insist that material blessing is documentary proof that one enjoys God's favor.

The symbolic goods offered by the Neopentecostals have proved attractive to several constituencies. Some traditionally Roman Catholic urban professionals have felt betrayed or abandoned by that church's dramatic embrace of the poor and the liturgical reforms introduced after Vatican II. These urban elites have found in Neopentecostalism a new belief system that justified their position of relative privilege within society. Neopentecostalism also offered the elites a renewed divine mandate for their ongoing exercise of political and economic power.

At the other end of the social spectrum are the precarious urban masses who have fled rural violence and poverty to seek survival in the cities. As they confront the *anomie* generated by life in the city, these people have found in the megachurches a sense of personal empowerment, discipline and self-esteem that has helped some to survive in a hostile economic and political environment.

People in the North frequently find the religious intensity that is prevalent in Latin America to be intimidating or incomprehensible. Those of a highly rational bent sometimes mistakenly dismiss such vibrant spiritual sensibilities as a sign of weakness. One cannot understand Latin America's history or culture without taking into account the universal immediacy of religious devotion in the region. Clattering about in Latin America's collective subconscious is a rich

diversity of symbolic systems and religious traditions: African, Amerindian, European, Asian. Secularism has had only limited impact on Latin American culture.

Thus, you will find in the region thoughtful, educated individuals in moments of need who will call in their prayer requests to a radio preacher, then respond with earnest expectation to the preacher's call to place their hands on the radio and receive the answer to their petition. Yes, people **are healed** in this way; individual lives **are** transformed.

A new generation of religious entrepreneurs has understood how to tap into the collective spiritual resources of the region, package them in drama, and cloak them in authority and mystery. Then they offer them to a populace mired in permanent crisis and hungry for meaning, hope and a sense of transcendence; a young populace that has been taught since the cradle that all of human experience, including ethical values, intimate relationships and encounters with the numinous, can be commodified, packaged, and sold as consumer goods.

The Neopentecostals market individualized consumer religion. Pursuing the supermarket analogy, consumers, whatever their social class, enter the marketplace and take from the shelf those symbolic goods they need to get them through the week: an ounce of self-esteem, a packet of hope, a portion of pardon, essence of encounter with the divine. All this is mixed according to one's personal recipe and used as needed.

As systems for marketing new spiritualities and mediated symbolic spaces become broadly available, the traditional churches are losing their historic monopoly on dispensing sacraments. Simultaneously, their power to stigmatize "unorthodox" religious belief and practice has been weakened.

Finally, a few comments on engaging with folks from other cultures and other religious traditions:

First, we need to name our discomfort with Pentecostal rowdiness. Are we going to give folks from another part of the world permission to express their encounter with God in different ways?

Frankly, this is not just about Pentecostals. Most young people these days have lost faith in written texts as authoritative sources of meaning and values. People do not look to sermons, a reasoned reflection on a written text, to tell them what to believe. People today acquire meaning from relationships, and from their encounter with symbols and images. If you want to look at the recent research in this area, look at Peter Horsfield's excellent CD, **The Mediated Spirit**. Peter is a pastor with the Uniting Church in Australia and a communication researcher. You can find it at www.mediatedspirit.com

But if you are encountering Christians from other parts of the world, even Presbyterians, you will be encountering Pentecostal liturgy and leadership styles.

Classic Pentecostals might be rowdy, but their instincts are good. They are, usually, poor folks deeply committed to pastoral accompaniment of the poor. One academic famously noted in the nineties that when the Roman Catholic Church expressed a preferential option for the poor, the poor expressed a preferential option for Pentecostalism.

With Neopentecostals, my sense is that you need to discern how much folks are deeply, legitimately longing for an individual encounter with the divine, and how much the leaders are on a power trip as purveyors of symbolic goods.

But then I suppose we should ask the same thing of ourselves!

Here's the key question: Do you believe that God's Spirit is truly present in all places, at all times and among all peoples? Do you believe that she blows where she will and is not in the least subject to our neat little doctrinal box? Our tidy little ecclesial structure dedicated, in good faith, to doing things decently and in order?

Here I also recall a simple little mechanism that my Biculturalism professor taught me back in the dark ages at Wheaton. He called it the Prior Question of Trust. When you approach "the other", persons from a different social or cultural context, ask yourself: "Is what I'm doing, thinking, saying **building** trust or **undermining** trust. Does what I'm doing, thinking or saying have the **potential** to build trust or to undermine trust." Judicious use of this little question can give you insight into the ways that we impose our own stuff on others.

Again, I also want to say again that our own culture is complex, deeply rooted and often invisible to us. You're going to need help to reach out to the mysterious other. In the PCUSA you can call upon Angel and Raafat to give you a hand. In many cases you can also call upon your mission partners and mission co-workers. Figure out who in your community has successfully navigated these waters and learn from them.

Most of all, I invite you to encounter God's presence in other people, other cultures.

Through some mystery that is beyond me Guatemala continues to be a net exporter of hope. And people from places like your Presbytery continue to flock to Guatemala seeking God's presence.

I think of my Presbyterian acquaintance from New Jersey who goes to Guatemala every year to get close to God. I'm convinced that he is absolutely sincere. Their church spends a week each year working at an orphanage. Sure he has meaningful worship experiences, even in New Jersey. But, he says, it's not the same. There's something about the simplicity of life in rural Guatemala. Something about feeling yourself to be a channel of God's blessing.

I applaud his discernment. Why do we go on mission trips? We go for ourselves, mostly. Not selfishly, mind you. But out of our own need. Seekers who are working out their own salvation with fear and trembling.

So come and renew your hope. But come to watch, to learn, to listen, to accompany. Don't come to fix things. What is broken in our part of the world has been broken for at least 500 years and is not subject to a quick fix. Not only that, but for the fix to last, it must be done by Guatemalans.

Build partnerships. Learn from each other. But also learn from more than two centuries of the accumulated wisdom of modern mission endeavors. With the decentralization of mission relationships most presbyteries and many local churches now play the role of mission agency. Inevitably, they fall into many of the traps of paternalism and neocolonialism and encounter all the complexities of cross-cultural communication that have plagued centuries of mission endeavor.

I seldom find churches that consciously set out to impose their will on their mission partners. But it happens. Dependency happens. Systems of mutual accountability are not even discussed, much less implemented. The results can be resentment, corruption, blocked communication. It's never happened to you, right?

For a vital bit of mission history and some practical suggestions on how to set up a mission partnership, I'd recommend Phil Wickeri's little booklet called: **Partnership, Solidarity and Friendship: Transforming Structures in Mission** and also Sherron George's fine new book on partnership. Both are available from Worldwide Ministries Division.

How and where do you discern God's presence once you get home? How do you cultivate eyes to see and ears to hear in your own community.

One thing that Spanish has taught me is that justice and righteousness are the same thing. Look it up. Right there in Matthew 6:33 it says "Buscad primero el Reino de Dios **y su justicia.**" That means "Seek ye first the Kingdom of God **and God's Justice.**" There is no righteousness without justice.

Where justice is weakest, most at risk, there you will find the presence of God. Always. That is who God is.

Reaching out in love to your neighbors who are immigrants will make it easier for you to see and hear human need in your own neighborhood.

People hurt the same wherever you go and people hope the same, too. Some folks, today, wherever you go, are experiencing the mystery of human love as never before. Some folks, today, wherever you go, are mired in failure and self-doubt. Some folks, wherever you go, are feeling today the Spirit of God; are feeling the energy to imagine something new, to build something better for all God's children.

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