

Serving the Least
Matthew 25:31-40
September 24, 2017 – Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost

Those of you who were here last week know that we are spending five weeks considering the Guiding Principles that will lead our church into the future. Last week, we discussed welcoming and nurturing a diverse congregation that becomes our extended family. As promised, this week we'll consider the mission arm of our church.

I've stated before that there are three reasons I'm a United Methodist; and one of those reasons is the United Methodist commitment to mission, to helping those who need help, to serving the lost and the least. In large part, the greater church handles this through UMCOR, the United Methodist Committee on Relief. UMCOR is at the Texas Coast with trained volunteers feeding people, helping people find housing, helping with rebuilding efforts, and providing spiritual support to those who have sustained huge losses following Hurricane Harvey. And, of course, Hurricane Irma hit Florida just weeks after Harvey hit Texas. But the church is up to the task, because there are congregations, or what our former bishop used to like to call mission outposts around the world ready to organize, ready to serve, ready to reach out. UMCOR is currently mobilizing to support the victims of Hurricane Maria and the earthquake victims in Mexico City. UMCOR has responded to disasters around the world; and UMCOR does not leave a disaster site until all the work is done.

Some of you have personally volunteered support to this work by spending a week at the Midwest Mission Distribution Center, a major staging place for UMCOR supplies. Others have served on VIM, Volunteers in Mission teams across the country and around the world. But as strong as UMCOR is, they do not work alone. Working with the General Commission on Church and Society, General Board of Discipleship, and the General Board of Higher Education, our greater church supports pastors and churches in Africa and Asia. The Midwest Distribution Center actually has a bicycle shop where they refurbish bicycles to be sent to Africa. Pastors in Africa will walk tens of miles between their congregations. If we put those pastors on bicycles, they can cover the ground in a quarter the time and spend more time with their flock. (As an aside, I might note that someday I'd love to go to MMDC. It would not be much of a sacrifice for me to spend a week working on bicycles.) The administrative costs of UMCOR and the rest of the General Boards and Commissions are supported through your apportionment dollars, so all contributions go directly to those in need.

Indeed that United Methodist Church is worldwide. As you may know, East Germany is predominately Lutheran, but it was a real joy to be walking across a famous bridge in Erfurt, Germany this May, and look up to the a large flag hanging

from a building predominately displaying the United Methodist Cross and Flame. It turned out to be a lovely Methodist Church right on that town square.

But our Guiding Principles are not about what the greater church is doing. They are about what we, here at North Olmsted UMC are doing. Thus, our second principle states:

We actively serve our neighbors in the North Olmsted community and the wider world. – We support Spirit-led missions that serve the needs of the children of God and that welcome and gather persons into the body of Christ. Major portions of our activity and investment consist of outreach to our community, to targeted missions of NOUMC and to supporting the worldwide reach of the United Methodist Church. We connect with community leaders to identify needs in the community that we can serve best, and we are open to collaboration with other churches and organization to expand and amplify the reach of our mission.

Friends, I strongly believe this is our Christian Calling. Jesus said, “When I was hungry, you gave me food; when I was thirsty, you gave me something to drink; when I was a stranger, you welcomed me; when I was naked you gave me clothing; when I was sick you took care of me; when I was in prison, you visited me.” People asked, “When was it that we did these things?” and Jesus replied, “Just as you did it to one of the least of these who are member of my family, you did it to me.” It’s the call to serve.

Now, just because we’ve placed this in a Guiding Principle for our future does not mean that we’re not doing this already. This church can be justly proud of our service to the community. Our Harvest Partners food redistribution program is amazing. We are a major support to Oxcart Food Pantry both with food and contributions. We have a very dedicated group that prepares a monthly meal for Laura’s Home; and, of course we do our monthly community meal. We also offer our building to three different AA groups, an Alzheimer’s Support group, an exercise group, a Girl Scout Troop, among others. And still, your pastor asks, “Should we be doing more? What are the needs of our community? How can we reach out to serve those needs? What is the proverbial plate of food, or cup of water, or suit of clothing that we are called to give to “the least of these?”

I’m not sure what the answer to that question is. I am sure that some of you may have ideas; and I encourage you to step forward. Put those ideas on the table. Let’s discuss the role of our church in our community.

I also wonder what we should be doing beyond the community. Every year, some of us spend a week on our Youth Work Mission Trip; and many of us that go and work are not youth. The work that happens on these trips is truly wonderful—it’s physical and spiritual all at the same time. On our last work mission trip, we truly made a difference in Seneca Street United Methodist Church. We give the

church a face-lift – floors are refinished, stairs are carpeted, rooms are painted, roofs are sealed. If the church had to pay for this work it would have cost thousands of dollars – dollars which the church could not have afforded. But, more than the physical “face-lift”, there is the spiritual aspect of the trip. 23 people, youth and adults, went to one of the poorest areas of Buffalo, New York to share the love of Christ with the people there. 23 people gave a week of their vacation time to work really hard, to share the love of Christ. 23 people told the Seneca Street Community, “We care about you.” And, the work and the love has breathed new life into Seneca Street United Methodist Church. It’s not an old church on the corner; it’s a happening place. The Spirit is alive in that church; in part because of the work of this church; and I might note that, as we meet here today, a group from our congregation has traveled to Buffalo to help Seneca Street UMC celebrate their 100th Anniversary. So, where else are we called to share the Good News of God’s Amazing love?

Friends, I have a confession to make. I have an ulterior motive in all of this. I want to build the church. Oh, I don’t really care about what numbers we write only our conference forms every year; but I do care about helping other people experience the Good News of the love of Christ. I think that news, and the experience of that love is too great to keep it to ourselves. And I’m also aware that the millennial generation – folks in their twenties and early thirties aren’t so much interested in coming and sitting in a worship service as they are in getting out in mission. They want to make a difference in the world; and to that I say, “Praise God!! Praise God!!”

None of us knows exactly what mission opportunities will arise in the next few years. None of us knows where we might be called. At this point, I ask for your prayers. Pray for our church. Pray that God will use our church to serve the least and the lost. I’ve commented before about one of my favorite prayer responses: “Lead Me, Lord” It works on a corporate basis as well:

Lead *Us*, Lord. Lead *us* in your righteousness.
Make your way plain before *our faces*.

So pray that God will lead us; and pray that we, as both individuals and as a church will be open to God’s call, that we may respond with love and joy and peace.

And I also ask, if God puts something on your heart; follow up. Discuss it with your fellow members of the church. Discuss it with me. Together we will lead NOUMC to still greater things as we serve Christ be serving the least, the lost, and the lonely.

Let us pray. . .

Lead us, Lord.
Lead us in your righteousness.
Lead us in the work you would have us do,
that we may serve the least, the lost, and the lonely,
in your holy name.
Amen.

Rev. Mark L. Steiger, Pastor
North Olmsted United Methodist Church