

"Of Shamrocks and Passports"

Matthew 28: 16-20; Acts 16: 6-10

When you think about a missionary, what do you think? Do you imagine someone going to Africa, or an island in the Pacific, to teach and preach about Jesus? Especially to people completely unaware of Jesus?

Well, that's always been my image. It would be someone very brave, and adventurous, and devout to be a missionary. Last week a missionary, Juliet Sherman spoke to the women's group. She was a missionary. So was Gracia Burnham, the lady in that tragedy in the Philippines a while back. There was also Albert Schweitzer.

So, imagine my surprise to find that I was one—officially even.

What happened is that when I went to England in 1994, with my three children, it was part of a work-study program called the British Residency program. I was admitted into England as a missionary—that's what they put on my passport.

It sounded kind of strange to me. I was there to serve as a preacher in four different Methodist churches, which were all long-established. In fact, one of them, Mottram St. Andrew, celebrated its 100th anniversary while I was there.

Missionary? To a country with plenty of churches? To a country with an official state church, the Church of England?

Still, who was I to argue with the government of Great Britain? Wouldn't want to make the Queen mad or anything.

The thing is, there have been and there still are missionaries, of the Christian faith, as far back as the Bible, and they go from country to country, back and forth. In the passage from the book of Matthew, one of the 4 stories of Jesus' life, ministry, death, and Resurrection, the Risen Jesus Christ commanded his disciples to be missionaries. His words here are called the Great Commission.

In a more modern version (the Message) here they are again, in verses 18-20:

"God authorized and commanded me to commission you: Go out and train everyone you meet, far and near, in this way of life, marking them by baptism in the threefold name: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Then instruct them in the practice of all I have commanded you. I'll be with you as you do this, day after day after day, right up to the end of the age."

Those are the marching orders, from Jesus himself, after he had risen from the dead. Get out there and be missionaries!

Then, we have another incident in the book of Acts. The book itself is about how the Christian religion as it was getting started, and beginning to spread throughout the world.

It's a great book, full of lots of adventures of the earliest Christians. There's Peter, there's Paul and his dramatic conversion to the Christian faith, there are persecution and martyrdom. And, there are missionary travel and work.

Paul had a strong call to missionary work. He was driven by God to travel all around the Mediterranean area, preaching and teaching the gospel of Jesus Christ.

In the particular passage of Acts, chapter 6, Paul was called by God, through a dream, to go to Macedonia, a part of Greece. His dream, or vision, went like this:

“That night Paul had a dream: A Macedonian stood on the far shore and called across the sea, “Come over to Macedonia and help us!”

The dream gave Paul his map. We went to work at once getting things ready to cross over to Macedonia. All the pieces had come together.

We knew no for sure that God had called us to preach the good news to the Europeans.” [the Message]

From this, Christianity was spread and it grew and grew. It went from a small band of Jesus’ followers in Israel, to the countries around the Mediterranean Sea. That’s three continents: Africa, Asia, and Europe.

Now, fast forward a few centuries, and move west and north to the British Isles.

I’ll have to read you this part.

“The Irish were Celtic people and their conversion is traced to Patrick, early in the fifth century. From his brief autobiography we learn that, when the Roman legions were withdrawn for the defense of the Continent [of Europe], the Irish, then called Scots, began swooping down on the English coast, sailing up the rivers, raiding the settlements, and carrying off plunder and slaves. Among the captives was Patrick. So Ireland’s patron saint was not Irish! [Do they know that?] He had been reared a Christian. His father was a deacon [named Calpurnius], but Patrick’s religion sat lightly until, as a swineherd [he took care of pigs or sheep, the books differ], he prayed ardently for his freedom. He managed to escape [after six years] and found his way to the coast where a ship carrying a cargo of hounds was about to sail to France. Patrick was taken aboard to look after the dogs. Once in France he went to a monastery on an island of the Mediterranean Sea. Here he might have stayed, but he was eager to see his family again and after many hardships reached home once again.

He would gladly remained in England had he not had a dream one night in which the babies of Ireland pleaded with him to come back to their country and tell them about Christ. [just like with Paul in the Bible!] Patrick decided to return, but first he had to learn more about Christianity. For that reason he returned to France and studied for a number of years in a monastery. At length he was sent out . . . with the approval of the pope, to be a missionary to the people among whom he had once been a slave.

At this point his account ends, and from then on we have only legends. We know, however, that a century later the entire structure of the church in Ireland was monastic

We also know that Ireland became the base for the evangelization of Britain. The Irish have a habit of leaving Ireland. And the missionary monks were no exception. As we have seen, there were Christian churches in Britain before Patrick’s day, but a century after Patrick’s time an Irish monk named Columba led in the founding of a monastery on Iona, an island off the coast of Scotland. Iona, in turn, gave a new and vital impulse to the preaching of Christ in Britain.

Surprisingly, Celtic monks from Ireland and Britain also became missionaries to the Continent [of Europe]. Their itching feet carried them farther and farther from home. They

established monasteries in Germany and Switzerland and even northern Italy. These became centers of evangelization and devout learning.” [Church History in Plain Language, by Bruce L. Shelley]

So, you see, Patrick was a very faithful and very successful missionary. And as you all know, he is the focus (or is supposed to be the focus) of the celebration on Tuesday, St. Patrick's Day.

By now, you may be wondering why this is such a history lesson. Where's the sermon, the inspiration, the opportunity to get closer to God in this sanctifying season of Lent?

Well, here's the thing. God still needs missionaries. I hadn't really thought so, or maybe I hadn't thought about it at all. I thought that time was over, I guess, and that people had been told about Jesus, and that was that.

But just look at those very last words of Jesus. There's a clue in there.

After Jesus tells his disciples to “go make of all disciples,” he adds something: “And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.”

I had always thought those were just nice closing word. Now, I think they are a clue: this commission, to make disciples of Jesus, to baptize and teach people Jesus' teaching, this is going to take some time. Maybe, even to the end of the age, to the end of time.

I don't know about you but that kind of surprised me. Yes, the English folks said I was a missionary, back in 1994, a long, long time since these words of Jesus. But that was them, maybe they were speaking official government language?

No, they were right on target. I was a missionary, for there was missionary work to be done, in the communities of England where I served, and back here in Missouri. The whole world is a mission field, even now, in the 21st century!

And, we're in this together. It's not just me, it's not just the preachers who are meant to be the missionaries, spreading faith in Jesus. It's all of us.

Not only that, but our mission field is complicated. We're not going to a foreign land, necessarily, to teach and spread the word of God to those who have never heard of it.

No, we're right here in Independence, Missouri, where lots of people have heard of Jesus and chosen to ignore the word of God. They accept the practical doing/helping/giving parts of mission work, just not the telling about Jesus part. Maybe they are postponing having faith until a more “convenient” time.

It's really strange, and kind of sad, too. When I first came here, I noticed a lot of Methodist churches in Independence. But it's not that there are too many churches, it's that not enough people go to church. If everybody in Independence got up and went to church next Sunday, we'd all run out of room in our pews, we'd run out of green ribbons. We'd have to have more services. Wouldn't that be a wonderful problem to have!

So, how about that? You thought you were just attending Sunday worship at this church, and it turns out you are hereby proclaimed missionaries.

And you may not know it, but you actually have some advantages in mission work that I lack. When you tell someone about your faith, or about what Jesus has done in your life, or invite them to church, they can't just say to themselves, "Yeah, yeah, yeah, but that's what she gets paid for, that's what she does for a living." They can if it is me talking.

You have the great opportunity to be a missionary, to tell people what God has done in your own life.

And, people's lives do get better when they are disciples of Jesus and members of churches. In Wesley's time, he preached to the coalminers, and they became shop owners, more prosperous. My husband has seen it himself, in a ministry of 30 some years. He has seen person after person, family after family, have great life improvements as side benefits to their Christian faith. Once they become Christians in a Methodist church, the kids go to school, the parents get jobs, they get enough to eat, they stay out of jail, and so on and so forth. They live better lives, blessed lives.

Of course, the best is yet to come, the world to come. Because when we believe in Jesus, when we accept him as Lord and Savior, we have salvation. We have a place in heaven.

Jesus has saved us a seat at the party called heaven, so that when we have died and left this earth, we'll be with him there, in heaven.

We'll be in a place of joy and love, a place without pain or sorrow or tears.

We want that, for ourselves, and we want everyone in all the world to have that opportunity, too.

So, let's get out there, into that world, into our community, that so badly needs good Christian missionaries, us.

Amen.

(by Reverend Sally J. DeMasters)