

*Lydia Neufeld Harder, November 17, 2013*

**“Why I still want to be in rhythm with the mission of God in this world”**

Our series on why I am still . . . a Christian, a Mennonite, and so on have challenged those of us who speak on Sunday mornings to move deeply into the convictions that we hold and that guide us in our life. My task this week is to speak about the mission of the church. I have entitled this message:

“Why I still want to be “in rhythm” with the mission of God in this world”.

As I was preparing this sermon the words of the 1960’s song by Sydney Carter, “Lord of the Dance” began to ring in my ear. It describes for me what mission is all about: dancing in rhythm with Jesus, the human face of God; it reminds us that the leader of this dance is Jesus and that we are invited to dance in rhythm with him in his ministry of healing and serving and confronting the powers that dominate and oppress.

So I want to begin this sermon by asking us all to sing this song reflecting on the words as a reminder of what the mission of the church is all about.

“Sing Lord of the Dance”

Today I want to explore several traditional approaches to the church’s mission based on well-known scripture texts. At various times in my life I have been disillusioned with each of these approaches because what I saw in the church was not part of the “dance” that Jesus taught us. Yet I continue to believe that God is at work in this world and that God invites us to participate “in rhythm” with the approach that was embodied in Jesus Christ. I want to describe to you why I still pray, “Your kingdom come on earth as it is in heaven” and why I am still ready to speak, act and live into the mission of God in the world.

I. Being a witness

I want to begin with a model that is very familiar to us, the model of being a witness. This model is based on the words of Jesus just before he ascended to heaven as recorded in Matthew. We often name these words the great commission.

**Matthew 28: 19-20**

The followers of Jesus had been learning and living with Jesus for three years. They had experienced his loving, his challenge, his healing and his teaching ministry. They had experienced the crisis of his death and the wonder of his resurrection. They were his closest followers and though they had sometimes doubted, they were now convinced that Jesus was their Lord, their teacher. But they had also glimpsed something else. They were convinced that Jesus was more than an ordinary human. In fact, they believed that Jesus, as the Son of God, had revealed to them the very secret of what abundant living was all about. They believed that now that Jesus was resurrected from the dead he would inaugurate a new kingdom or commonwealth on earth as promised by the prophets of old.

But Jesus leaves them, this motley crew, to carry on his mission. He gathers them on a mountain and gives them their mission, the purpose that will guide them in their further life together as a fellowship, as a church. And with that mission he promises them the gift of his presence with them, though he will be absent physically. He will empower them through the Holy Spirit so that they can be “witnesses”, that is so that they can speak of what they have seen and heard.

And when the Holy Spirit comes, they discover that this is enough. The 4 gospels that we read today are retellings of the story as told by these early followers of Jesus. These followers find themselves scattered here and there, moving from Jerusalem to Judea and Samaria and then to the ends of the world—and the story spreads by word of mouth to many people.

Throughout history the church has understood this to be their primary mandate. The focus has been on telling the story, on words, on sharing our own experiences of God’s grace and on inviting others to also come and follow Jesus. Preaching, teaching and baptizing become central modes of being for a church in mission.

We can enter this model only if we are convinced that the good news for us is also good news for others. I remember that this took me a while to learn. I had grown up in a Mennonite church and was convinced that what I had received was good for Mennonites. I had traditional words that I had inherited that described for me what God was doing in my life. But when I moved beyond my community into the larger world in my elementary school teaching career, I was not so sure that Christ was also good news for persons in the secular sphere, persons who seemed comfortable with their own lifestyle, with whom I interacted in my daily work. And so it was easy to keep this world separate from my faith in God, to think and work in the secular world as if God were only in the church. It took many years to bring these worlds together and to find the ease to speak of my faith in a realm where reason and facts are the gods. My scholarly work in theology was my attempt to bring these worlds together and to discover that God was God in both the church and in all of society.

But perhaps most of us find it hard to speak of our faith because we have seen how individuals and churches have confused the gospel with their own ideas and their own need for power. For example, during the time of the Roman empire, the church began to force baptism on all so-called barbarians, thus making them citizens of the empire. They had forgotten that the kingdom of God was not to be equated with their own kingdom. During more recent times, missionaries have brought not only the gospel but also western ways of thinking to people, confusing their own lifestyle with God's good news. The colonialism of our mission efforts has often been dominating instead of freeing, oppressing others instead of pointing them to the God who brings life in all its fullness.

Yet the church is called to witness, is called to use our words to bring good news to a world that longs for a new authentic way of being. And as we enter the rhythm of the dance that Jesus invites us into, we know it is good news to a hurting world. Our words can begin the large task of confronting the powers that oppress, freeing those who are held captive, healing those in pain.

However, we are learning slowly that it is not only our direct words about Jesus or about God that impact our witness to Christ's kingdom, but all of our words. Particularly in our day when we realize the power of words to stereotype, to label, to dominate and oppress, we know that the temptation to use words to hurt rather than heal is very real. Our reluctance to speak of our faith comes out of our own self-knowledge that we have not yet embraced the dance fully ourselves and that too often our words reflect our own needs and fears.

And so we can only pray: "May the words of our mouths and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, Oh God our Strength and our Redeemer!" And it is this vulnerability before God that opens our hearts for the Holy Spirit to empower us to be "in rhythm" with the witness of Jesus, the human One who lived openly and vulnerably, speaking words that invited others into the rhythm of God's love.

## II. Being a servant

Matt: 25: 31-40

In this approach we are challenged not so much to preach the good news but to live it in relationship to others. In this model the focus is on responding to the needs of others as if they were the needs of Jesus himself. It is out of our love for Jesus that we would give him food if he were hungry, give him clothing if he were naked and visit him if he were in prison. It is about following Jesus in his ministry of healing the sick and confronting the powerful so that justice is done. It is about a sense of responsibility for others and their well-being and using every resource we have to fulfill these needs. It is about acknowledging the gifts we have been given and then using them to bring about peace and justice as a servant of our Lord Jesus.

The church through the ages has interpreted this to mean that we need to be involved in serving the social, emotional, and physical needs of others. The church has led out in various social ministries such as services for refugees or hospital visitation or prison ministry. Missionaries have understood this to mean that they need to share the gospel in a holistic way by building schools or hospitals or giving aid when there has been a flood

or earthquake. In more recent times we have begun many types of social ministries trying to get at the underlying causes of homelessness and hunger.

Mennonites have emphasized this model of mission, particularly the mission of peace making. They have understood that hunger, lack of clothing and imprisonment are often the result of systematic oppression, of war and of violent political relationships between people. They have taken Jesus' words to love the enemy literally. So their emphasis has been on working together to create social conditions that lead to peace and well-being in a community instead of leading to war and violence. They have felt that killing another person even in war is not honouring another person made in God's image.

We enter this model when we realize that Christ is also in others and that as we serve others we are serving Christ. We encounter each person we meet as made in God's image and therefore we respect that person and do everything we can to alleviate his or her need.

However, the danger in this model is that we give only out of duty or responsibility or in order to gain some secondary status out of our giving. For example, companies who give to charity only in order to boast of this in their ads.. Giving to others is often not a sacrifice but rather something that is done primarily to make us feel good. We give because that will put us lower in the tax bracket or because we will receive some benefit out of our giving. Not going to war can become a matter of pride and a putting down of others who sacrifice a great deal for their country.

The servant model has sometimes also created barriers between people rather than bridges of understanding. Being a giver can create a status difference between us and others. We are always the givers, they are always the receivers. Sub-consciously those in need are made to feel inferior and those who give superior. Sometimes this creates dependence by the receivers and resentment by the givers.

Real servanthood, as exemplified by Jesus, does demand self-denial and sacrifice but this comes out of a grateful heart and a recognition that we are first of all needy

ourselves, that we are who we are because of what we have received. Only then can we share of who we are with others.

This kind of service is learned within a community in which mutual love is the governing principle of all interactions. This kind of mutuality is difficult to learn---ask anyone who is married, ask anyone who works closely with colleagues, ask anyone within a church where needs vary a great deal! When do we give and when do we receive? And how are these related?

The song we sometimes sing, “Will you let me be your servant. . .pray that I may have the grace to let you be my servant too” expresses this kind of mutual relationship in which givers are also receiver and receivers are also givers. It is this kind of relationship that God demonstrated through Jesus when Jesus washed his disciples’ feet, challenged them to wash each other’s feet and then said: “I no longer call you servants but I call you friends.” To be in rhythm with Jesus and God’s mission here on earth, we need to enter a dance of giving and receiving and then receiving and giving again!

This brings us to the third model;

### III. Salt and Light

#### **Matt: 5: 13-16**

This third approach to mission does not rely so much on words or on actions but rather on the integrity of one’s whole being. These images of being salt and light suggest that the church can be a kind of catalyst in society that brings about change and transformation in the world through its very being. Salt when it is added to a meat or vegetable dish changes the taste of the whole meal. Light, when it is turned on, creates a completely different vision of the space we are in. Mission in this model focuses on the integrity of our whole being. It suggests that as Christians we can model something of abundant living that will change the community around us. It suggests that the church can be a change agent most effectively not by being larger and powerful but rather by its very humble presence within the larger society.

To enter this model Christians need to realize that they are not extraordinary beings who are perfect and therefore are like lights in the world. Rather, it is exactly because we are part of all humanity, having the same needs as others, that our lives (when transformed by God) can make a difference to the society around us. The integrity and honesty of individuals and communities is inviting to others, because they play hockey with us, they are our colleagues at work, they see us as their friends and neighbours.

However, even this model can move into a wrong direction. It is only a small step from trying to live with integrity to feeling that our superior moral lives will point others to God. This leads directly to hiding our real selves from others because there are often darker sides to us that we are unwilling to own up to. Then church becomes a place of pretence and dishonesty instead of a place of healing and forgiveness.

Again it is within a faith community that we learn to be vulnerable and trusting, knowing that forgiveness is there for us when we fail. It is within our church fellowship that we do away with pretence and become honest with each other. It is the community of the forgiven that creates safe places for people to drop their masks and become real to each other. And so we pray in the words taught to us by Jesus: “Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us. And lead us not into temptation”

In each of these models, we can easily forget our purpose, our mission because our own status and ego needs get in the way. This can be true of us as individuals and also of us as a congregation. Our need to feel that we are superior either in our faith language or that we have superior status or that we are superior morally can make us forget the reasons that God has called us into mission. In each of these models the temptations are essentially the same. We want to do our own solo dance without hearing the rhythm that God has set through Jesus.

But the good news for us today is that the mission is not ours, nor is it really the church's. Rather it is God's mission; it is God who is working within the world, within our society and within this area of Montreal. Our role is to open ourselves to God for our own

healing and then to open our eyes to see what God is already doing here in our sphere of relationships. And when our eyes are opened to that, we will hear the invitation to dance in harmony with Jesus, participating in words of good news, in actions of service and in the integrity of our whole lives.

My reflections on mission have taken me to a place of prayer, a place of opening myself to God for healing and for forgiveness and for new wisdom and strength. And so I want to end these reflections by inviting you to pray with me—to pray the prayer that Jesus taught his followers when they realized that they didn't know how to pray—that is, they didn't know how to enter the rhythm of the dance that Jesus was leading.

Let us stand and pray together:

Our Father. . .