



Reflections by: Rev. Dr. Randy Bush
Text: Luke 10:1-9

July 20, 2025

Our Mission Mandate

I'll let you in on a secret of faith: What you think God is telling you to do is often not the thing at all; but if you quiet down and really listen, God will make sure the real message finally gets through in the end.

During my last semester at seminary, I thought God wanted me to go to Australia. I loved traveling and I thought I could work with the Australian Uniting Church, which was a blend of Methodist, Congregational, and Presbyterian congregations. I wanted to be part of the global ecumenical movement; the World Council of Churches was holding their international meeting in Melbourne the following year. So Australia seemed an obvious choice. I went to the seminary staff member in charge of international mission work and before I could tell him my plans, he handed me a copy of a report from two friends of mine who were finishing up a semester in South Africa. I read the report while he was on the phone, and by the time I left his office, I knew I was going to Africa.

For hundreds of years, Christians have gone out to the world to share our faith in Christ. We call this "mission" work and the people who do it, we typically call "missionaries." We do this because Jesus gave us a mission mandate to go spread the gospel. At the end of Matthew's gospel, Jesus said quite clearly, *"Go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you"* (Mt 28:19-20). In Luke 9, Jesus sent out twelve disciples to proclaim the Kingdom of God and to heal those in need. He told them not to take anything for the journey: no staff, no bag, no bread, no money. Then in the very next chapter, Jesus names 72 others and sent them out in pairs to the villages in the area. To them as well he said, "Don't take anything for the journey: no bag, no sandals, no purse. Rely on the hospitality of strangers." It's this last point that is most interesting.

So there I was about to finish seminary, thinking at first I would go to Australia but now I had set my sights on South Africa. It was 1988. Nelson Mandela was still in prison and the ANC was outlawed. I wrote to the Presbyterian Church in South Africa, offering my services and hoping my mission mandate would take me to that troubled land of apartheid. But God's mission mandate was different from that. No church in South Africa expressed interest in my offer, but a young Presbytery clerk in Zimbabwe saw my letter and wrote me back to see if I'd come to his country instead. I considered his offer and decided my mission mandate could be to a church in the Zimbabwe capital of Harare. God's mission mandate, however, was that I should go to a country

church 70 miles from the capital of Harare. So I was ordained in my home church back in Kansas and flew off to Africa in March 1989.

Why exactly are we sent into all the world to make disciples of nations? I know Jesus said to do that in Matthew 28, but why exactly? Is it because those non-Christians in other lands are outside the favor of God and damned to hellfire unless they learn about Jesus Christ? Some missionary groups believed that, but that's not true. Is it because pagans are uneducated and uncivilized and bringing the gospel to them is part of moving them from being barbarians to being proper ladies and gentlemen? Some missionary groups believed that, but it's also not true. Do we go into the world to expand European empires, to colonize foreign people, and to exert our power over those who look, speak and live differently from us? That may be a motive of some overseas work, but none of that can be found in the scriptures we read today.

Jesus said, "Look, this won't be easy. You'll be like lambs in the midst of wolves. People will reject your message of peace and grace. But go to them without 'things' – without purses, bags and sandals; without weapons, armies and guns; without vanity, prejudice and superiority complexes. Go and see who welcomes you. See who is pleased when you say, 'Peace be with you.' Stay with strangers. Eat whatever is put in front of you. Cure the sick. By your vulnerable, loving presence let them know that the kingdom of God has come near. That's your mandate."

By the time my plane landed in Zimbabwe, I had stopped trying to insist on what my mission mandate was. It was clear that I had been largely clueless up to this point. But if I shut up for a moment and just listened, allowing others to extend hospitality and tell me what God had been doing in their lives before I arrived on the scene, I just might be of some use in that amazing country. So I had dinner with the Presbytery clerk who'd first written to me months before. Then I climbed into the back of an old Toyota station wagon being driven by the farmer who happened to be the Session clerk of the church I was supposed to serve. I arrived at the church hall where the congregation had already gathered to see this young American minister-candidate. I was grilled by some skeptical American missionaries who worked in that region and who were sure that since I'd gone to Princeton I didn't even believe in God. But in the end, I told my story – I told about a trust in Jesus that had led me to travel to that foreign land and that church, a place where I was willing to serve if they'd have me. And at that moment, the real mission mandate from Christ was finally heard by all in that crowded church hall in Chinhoyi, Zimbabwe. And I stayed.

Did I fully understand Christ's mandate? Not at all. I thought I'd stay for a year, but I ended up getting a 3-year work visa and stayed for all three. There was no typewriter or computer, so I carefully wrote out my Princetonian sermons, which prompted one Dutch immigrant-farmer to comment, "You use a lot of words. Keep it simple when you tell the story of God." I had pastoral situations for which no seminary class had prepared me.

What do you do when a faithful deacon is one of the few non-white officers of the church, but who happens to have three wives? How do you prepare for a funeral when you find out you need to keep preaching until they finish digging the grave by hand in the cemetery behind the chapel? What do you do when you forget that Zimbabwe is in the southern hemisphere, so wearing a black robe and lighting a bunch of Advent candles for Christmas makes the small sanctuary uncomfortably hot because it's the middle of their summer?

Yet over those same three years, I learned so much. By way of analogy, it is like hearing a Phillip Glass etude for the first time. You know that it is music, but its melody is different; the composition takes special attention to appreciate; and the ending comes when you don't expect it. When I was in Zimbabwe, I met wonderful people of faith. I met African families who intentionally sent their children to our Presbyterian Church to improve their English skills and chances in life. I met white farmers who built chapels on their property that would be used on alternating Sundays by Catholics, Baptists, Dutch Reformed, and Presbyterians – and who would go to every service no matter who was leading it. I met people who had a vivid trust in the power of the Holy Spirit, as that aspect of God's nature aligned closely with their traditional religious beliefs. I witnessed communities coming together to grieve loved ones in ways that were far more faithful and vibrant than the impersonal ways we do funerals here in America. And when my three-year visa expired, I discerned it was time to go home; and as abrupt as the ending of a Phillip Glass etude, I found myself packed up and on a plane back to Kansas.

Jesus gives each of us a mission mandate. We then interpret that mandate, which I imagine often gives Jesus a good chuckle as he gently shakes his head before redirecting us, repeating the call until at last, in surprising ways, Jesus' message gets through. When we listen closely to our mission mandate, we discover that evangelism and missionary work are not something done "to" people or "at" people who are different from us. It's not designed to make them like us, to enfold them into our worldview or certainly not recruit them into our economic or religious empire. Mission work is always done "with" and "alongside" others. It involves listening to and learning from others. It is a shared journey, a gift exchange that lovingly goes in both directions.

This insight is right there in Jesus' words to the disciples sent out into the mission field. It may be the subtext behind the literal words, but it is implied in every instruction Jesus gave. "Go on your way" – namely, trust that wherever your steps take you today, it is part of the field in which you are to labor. "Carry no purse, no bag, no sandals" – don't burden yourself with your own baggage, for goodness' sake. Only if your hands are empty can they be of use to someone else. "Whatever house you enter, first say 'Peace to this house!' Remain in that same house, eating and drinking whatever they provide." – Humbly accept others' hospitality. If you're invited into their world, be a grateful guest. In this way, the kingdom of God will come near to you – and your hosts will see this as well. Both you and they will be blessed. Such is the will of Christ.

The famous missionary Albert Schweitzer was once asked to name the greatest person alive in the world at that moment in time. Many people in fact had named him as deserving of that honor. But he quietly replied, “The greatest person alive in the world at this moment is some unknown individual in some obscure place who at this hour has gone in love to be with another person in need.”¹ May that be your mission mandate from this day forth. AMEN

¹ Quoted in Homiletics Online, July 9, 1995.