

A WITNESS FROM BEYOND

2 Timothy 1: 1-14

World Communion – October 6, 2019

The late D. T. Niles, former Executive Secretary for Evangelism of the World Council of Churches, once stated, “The gospel is never safe in any culture unless there is a witness from beyond that culture.” It is difficult to imagine a more appropriate theme to consider on World Communion Sunday. At first it might seem strange to think that the Gospel cannot be “safe” unless we are in relationship with churches outside of the United States. I mean, our pastors receive excellent training in systematic theology and are accountable to our presbyteries for “rightly preaching the Gospel.” How could the Gospel not be “safe”? However, as we look at what is going on in our society; the sky-rocketing levels of gun violence, discrimination, contentiousness within families, communities, our government and nation—we might wonder if the gospel witness has been suppressed. And when we consider the apathy, even complicity, with which many American Christians respond, we might conclude that the gospel is, indeed “unsafe.” Could a witness “from beyond” help us more clearly understand the Gospel and its implications for a life of faithful witness to our Lord Jesus Christ in these perilous days?

In more than 50 countries around the world, our denomination partners with local churches and faith communities bound by our fundamental unity in our Lord Jesus. Yes, thousands of Presbyterians actively engage in faithful and mutual witness through what we call “mission partnerships” which are based on deep and lasting relationships often spanning decades. The motivation to enter mission partnerships is often to assist church partners as they minister to overwhelming physical and spiritual needs in their midst. That might be addressing prenatal health in places like Niger, where the infant mortality rate is one of the highest in the world, or raising the status of women, reducing the incidence of rape and femicide in Guatemala. While sharing our resources is absolutely vital, it is soon becomes apparent to most Presbyterians engaged in these partnerships that receiving is every bit as important as giving. Our international partners have many gifts to share and much to teach us. In fact, their witness can help us to more clearly see the breadth and depth of the Gospel and help us to save it from being misappropriated for destructive ends.

The first chapter of Second Timothy was addressed to believers who were feeling discouraged. They were finding it increasingly difficult to live as Christians in their culture. In fact, they sometimes even felt ashamed to be identified as followers of Jesus. One of the things which must have been discouraging to them was that there were many who were wandering away from the essentials of the Gospel and were actually driving people away from God. Does this sound familiar? Have we heard ourselves say or think things like, “I’m not like those Christians”? Have we turned a deaf ear or remained silent in the midst of a society that is moving farther and farther away from the teachings of Jesus? In the same way that Timothy and his congregation was exhorted to keep the faith, if we have ears to hear and if we have the humility to enter mutual relationship with our mission partners, we would have much to learn about being faithful to the Gospel in the midst of these discouraging times where the witness of the U.S. Church seems to be compromised. This passage gives us some helpful guidelines for mutual witness and mission in our partnerships with other churches.

First of all, it is crucial that we constantly remember our partners in prayer. As we exchange prayer requests and prayer practices, our own practices of prayer will be deepened. Paul writes, “do not be ashamed of the testimony about our Lord or of me his prisoner.” In order for

Timothy to learn from Paul, he had to have confidence in Paul. But this could not have been easy for Timothy because in the viewpoint of the secular world Paul didn't get it right . . . after all, he was a controversial figure who landed in jail. But, my friends, it is important that we open ourselves in confidence to the stories that we hear from Christians who live very different lives than our own; in societies that may not seem as prosperous or powerful; in cultures that we may not understand. We can learn so much if we listen carefully to how our partner understands God at work in their culture "before the ages began" as well as how an encounter with Jesus, who "abolished death and brought life," has transformed them. Yes, we can be inspired and guided by the stories of how others have suffered in order to guard the Gospel from being twisted and truncated and find out how the Holy Spirit has equipped them to engage their faith in action.

When we hear the voice of Rt. Reverend Peter Gai, Moderator of the Presbyterian Church of South Sudan, who risked his life standing guard at the church compound entrance, refusing entry to soldiers who were after the thousands of people who were fleeing inter-ethnic violence and seeking refuge, our understanding of the Gospel mandate to actively engage in the struggle to combat racial and ethnic injustice in the U.S. is strengthened.

When we learn about the Church of Indonesia's deep involvement in both dialogue to promote peaceful co-existence and responsible Christian witness, it enlarges our view of living out the Gospel in interfaith settings and motivates us to engage in deeper relationships with our Muslim sisters and brothers.

The witness of the Presbyterian Church of Rwanda, which is deeply engaged in the post-genocidal work of justice, forgiveness and reconciliation reminds us to guard a central message of the Gospel, of reconciliation to God and each other, from becoming captive to a current American cultural dynamic which promotes division and hatred.

The women of the Protestant Church of Congo have also borne witness through their Bible-based children's trauma healing program. They have bravely stepped into places of great danger to address the needs of children who have been exposed to horrific violence, and they accompany this with advocacy for their government to end the carnage. Their brave work reminds us of Jesus' mandate to be ready to sacrifice for the sake of the Gospel.

And as we enter into the work of mutual mission, we need to remember that we have something to give as well as receive. The Confession of Belhar's clarion call for unity, reconciliation and racial justice is an amazing gift. The Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa, out of which Belhar emerged, has recognized that we have valuable experiences to share from the American struggle against racial oppression and for civil rights. Our denominations are engaged in a conversation in which we have committed to being "accountability partners" as we live into The Confession of Belhar's vision, not only in exposing and addressing racism and white supremacy, but also issues related to gender, immigration and refugee, LGBTQ rights and dignity, and fair access to health care and education.

Yes, relationships with the global church and immigrant congregations transform Presbyterian mission and ministry around the country and help us to stay true to the Gospel. We are encouraged and empowered to cast off anxiety and fear, discord and division, and embrace our mission of reconciliation, justice, healing and hope. Today, we come to the table in humility and unity with our brothers and sisters from around the world. Thank God for the opportunity to celebrate with those who witness to the transformative work of the Holy Spirit. Amen