

FROM NOW ON...
2 CORINTHIANS 5:11-21

On Friday, the PC(USA)'s Director of Worldwide Mission Hunter Farrell was in Tuscaloosa for a gathering at First Presbyterian Church. Given my experience with Presbyterian Disaster Assistance and Presbyterian Border Ministry, I was eager to participate in the discussion. Even if the subject had not interested me, I probably would have been there anyway, because lunch was being served.

Before accepting a call to Louisville, Farrell served in Africa and South America, so Tuscaloosa was not much of a challenge, especially after being in Opelika on Thursday for a meeting of the Presbytery of Sheppards and Lapsley.

Following Farrell's introduction, he thanked those who invited him here and gave thanks for missional efforts in Tuscaloosa and beyond. Among those named was campus ministry at University Presbyterian Church and First Presbyterian Church Tuscaloosa. At this point, James Goodlet, who was not wearing a gorilla suit, stretched across Associate Executive Presbyter Dan Stephens, and offered me a fist to bump. Something about him reminded me of Tiger Woods. Then I remembered that this was James Goodlet, Presbyterian campus minister at the University of Alabama, someone with whom I work diligently and for whom I pray regularly. There was nothing to do but fist-bump him back. Well, almost nothing. Given that this was a gathering of Presbyterian dignitaries, it seemed appropriate not only to bump fists but also to give him a big "Roll Tide!"

Now I am the one saying "thank you" for the opportunity to preach, as God gathers us to worship and then sends us out to be Christ's body in the world.

So how do you feel about campus ministry being framed in terms of mission? It truth, it would not surprise me if some of you are offended, because God may have brought you here from a place in which mission is defined in terms of being somewhere you go, something you do or someone to convert. If James and Barrett are missionaries, how will you ever trust them? They may be out to change you, to take away something valuable, like your past, your culture or the faith that has brought you to this place at this time.

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2 Corinthians may not help much considering how this section begins: “Therefore, knowing the fear of the Lord, we try to persuade others.” Persuade others to do what? To forget everything that they ever have been taught? To forsake ever love that they have ever known? To be Presbyterian? To pull for Georgia Tech? No, to be well known to God and to each other: “Knowing the fear of the Lord, we try to persuade others; but we ourselves are well known to God, and I hope that we are also well known to your consciences.”

Who is not well known to God? Nobody. So mission, or “the ministry of reconciliation,” as it is called here, starts with God’s knowledge of us, not our knowledge of God or our knowledge of what is going to happen in any given mission situation.

In the summer of 2005, I participated in Presbyterian Border Ministry for the first time. I led a group of youth and adults to Mexico. The plan was to work with other Presbyterians in churches along the border between Laredo, TX and Nuevo Laredo, MX, but before we had a chance to do this, the line between the government and drug cartels on the border blurred. Violence intensified. Children were dying. Churches were being obliterated by gunfire. The place that we were to visit had become national news.

The group gathered to process the tragedy and to adjust our plans accordingly. We watched in horror and disbelief. We were beside ourselves. We had invested so much spiritually, physically and emotionally in preparing to go, and suddenly, it was obvious that it was not going to happen. Who in his right mind would take a group of adults, much less high school youth, into that situation at that time? We agonized, because we thought we knew where we were being called to go and what we were being called to do. God had something else in mind, and, as the Scriptures proclaim, God’s knowledge of us trumps our knowledge of ourselves.

To add insult to injury, we were Presbyterian. Meaning: we did not have much experience with change, at least sudden change. Why didn’t the drug cartels in Mexico go through committee? That would have been the decent and orderly thing to do! At one point, we discussed going nowhere and doing nothing, but somehow that did not seem to be an option. The Spirit was there reminding us that “if we are beside ourselves, it is for God; if we are in our right mind, it is for you.”

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The question with which we grappled was, “Who was the ‘you’?” Who were we for? With whom would we be serving? Obviously, it was not the church in Nuevo Laredo. I contacted Presbyterian Border Ministry and asked for alternatives, as did every other church in the United States that was scheduled to go that summer. Clearly, where we would go and what we would do was out of our hands. Clearly, it always was, but that did not stop us from asking, “Why?” By God’s grace, we persevered: “For the love of Christ urges us on, because we are convinced that one has died for all; therefore all have died. And he died for all, so that those who live might live no longer for themselves, but for him who died and was raised for them.”

Mission, in the PC(USA), at least by its Director of Worldwide Mission, is defined not in terms of “us” and “them” but in terms of “all.” As one body, the church shares in Christ’s, even if one group is more powerful than the other. Presbyterian Border Ministry is defined in terms of international partnership. Churches in Mexico and the United States work together for God’s glory. Campus ministry in Tuscaloosa, Alabama is defined in terms of partnership between First Presbyterian Church and area churches, because God created and calls us to work together. College students are involved in this mission, because the work that we are called to do is not age, education or experience specific. Meaning: college students are no more objects of conversion than are Muslims, Hindus or Jews. Each and every one of us was created by God and for God’s pleasure; and to reduce another human being to a number---whether membership, budget, waistline or SAT---is something other than the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

God calls us to relate to one another and to our neighbors as spiritual and sentient beings, even, and perhaps especially, if we do not speak the same language or share the same experience. “From now on,” the Scriptures say, “we regard no one from a human point of view; even though we once knew Christ from a human point of view, we know him no longer in that way.” No, we no longer regard anyone from a human point of view. The standard is higher, which is to say that the standard is spiritual: “If anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!”

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Notice that no timeline for everything becoming new is provided. When a group has their hearts set on a particular mission in a particular place at a particular time and then everything changes suddenly, it is possible to become impatient and pray prayers like, “Uh, God, when is this going to happen? Is there a chance that everything will be worked out on the border in time for us to use those tickets that we already purchased?” Such prayers are selfish, which is to say human, when one considers the suffering behind the suffering of one group’s travel plans being changed. For us, violence on the border was inconvenient and disappointing. For churches and families on the border, it was death and destruction---not of the spirit, but of the bodies to which each and every one of us clings.

You understand. You know how it feels to pour your heart and soul into a mission that changes suddenly and to mourn the death and destruction of a people you had not met, but had begun to pray for and love, before you met them. I wish I could give you some clarity on why God is not calling you to Haiti this spring, but I cannot. All I am capable of doing is proclaiming the Gospel of Jesus and trust that God’s grace is sufficient to meet your needs, just as God’s grace is sufficient to meet the needs of all people, in all places at all times.

Sometimes the work of reconciliation starts at home. You may feel estranged from yourself or your neighbor. You may find yourself asking, “Why?” But because God has sent you to this place at this time and commissioned to serve in campus ministry, there is work to do, even though it looks differently than you once thought it would.

I made it to Mexico that summer in which everything changed. No, it was not Nuevo Laredo but Saltillo, and from the time that I arrived, there was one event after another that confirmed that that was the place to which God had called us. For example, the pastor who greeted us was a Ron-shaped fellow, and as soon as we arrived at his home, he introduced me to his daughter Lydia. He taught me much about ministry, and who knows? Maybe he learned something from me. Seemingly everybody involved remembers the experience as life-changing. In fact, the experience was so amazing that we returned the next year.

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What do you make of this story? More importantly, what are you making of your stories? How are you being reconciled to God tonight? How will this experience help you to be an agent of reconciliation in the church and the world? Spend some time in silence, and take inventory of your thoughts and feelings, be they about Haiti, Atlanta, life or death. Now give these thoughts and feelings to God so that God may be glorified. All of these thoughts and feelings are from God, to whom we are reconciled in Jesus Christ. God calls us to share in Christ's ministry of reconciliation. In Jesus Christ, the world was and is and eventually will be reconciled to God. Scripture exhorts us not to judge ourselves or our neighbors harshly, because abuse interferes with trust, which is the basis of reconciliation.

I pray that in the face of uncertainty, you will trust to God to be God, because God will be God anyway. I pray that in the fact of adversity, you will be comforted by the assurance that God knows you better than you know yourself and loves you still. I pray that in the face of death, you will remember that in life and in death, you belong to God, and "for our sake God made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God." No, we are not yet there. We are not yet righteous. We are in a state of becoming. So are the people of Haiti. So is every person for whom you have ever cried, and in this state of becoming, there is grace, God's grace, and God's grace is sufficient wherever you serve and however you serve from now on. O the depth of the riches and wisdom of the knowledge of God! How unsearchable are God's judgments and how inscrutable God's ways! For from God and through God and to God are all things. To God be glory forever. Amen.

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