

“What’s Our Gift?”

A Sermon Prepared by Guest Pastor Gary N. Nottis for
The Congregation of St. John’s United Church of Christ, Lewisburg, Pennsylvania

May 21, 2017

The Israelites described in this morning’s scripture text from Numbers 21 were a community of wandering people in search of a better life. Every one of them had grown up in Egypt and had been subjected to the life-destroying expectations of that foreign culture. Knowing that their lives could be better, they cried out for help and God answered. The Holy One inspired Moses to challenge Pharaoh and to win their freedom. As we know, Moses succeeded in his work and led the Israelites out of Egypt. They embarked on a journey of transformation to discover new identities and a new way of living as free people under God’s reign. However, the Israelites didn’t realize how difficult it would be to get to their destination.

At times, the Israelites even found themselves speculating whether it was better to be a slave or not. Although slavery had brought them much suffering, they at least had shelter and abundant water, as well plentiful amounts of familiar food. Those were things they often lacked during their journey in the wilderness. It’s no wonder that from time to time, the Israelites grew angry and impatient about their situation. They wanted to reach the end of their travels sooner as opposed to later and really before it was best for them. Because of this, the Israelites frequently rebelled against God and Moses. They just couldn’t be satisfied with the blessings God had given them. They wanted more. Consequently, they tried to take matters into their own hands, made terrible mistakes, and were punished for their actions. No doubt, some of the wounds they received from their own haphazard attempts at finding their best possible lives, apart from God, caused them deep pain and lingering death, as did the snake bites noted in Numbers 21:6.

Fortunately for them, they had a leader like Moses. Moses would go before God and plead on their behalf. His actions and words saved the people on several occasions, and brought them God’s pardon and restoration. In fact, Moses did that very thing in our story from Numbers 21. Moses prayed to God to end the plague of snakes that were attacking the Israelites (Numbers 21:7). God responded to his prayer by empowering Moses to make a bronze snake and attaching it to a pole (Numbers 21:8). Moses then lifted up the snake and pole, and any who looked upon it were healed (Numbers 21:9).

As I reflect on today’s account of the Israelites and the snakes, I can’t help but see parallels between their circumstances and that of many people living within a few miles of St. John’s. The great majority are young or middle-aged, striving to find the good life, as defined by prevailing cultural standards of appearance, affluence, and achievement. There is also an ever-growing senior population that lives at home and in nearby retirement communities. These individuals are frequently alone, in need of support, and troubled by a loss of independence or self-worth. Many people residing near us, no matter what their age may be, are enslaved by past hurts and experiences. These are sad and life-draining situations I have witnessed, all too often.

I have found that our neighbors know that life can be better and certainly want that reality for themselves and their loved ones. It’s what God wants for them, as well. But like the Israelites, they have to deal with frustrating life challenges that can prompt some of them to be impatient and to fail to see the blessings in their lives. They are in need of guidance and healing. Who can act like a Moses for them? Who can lift up the bronze snake for their salvation?

The author of Ephesians 2 reminds us that as a people of God and members of the church of Jesus Christ, we have a responsibility to help others deal with their hurts and hopes in life. God saved us by grace and, now, we have an obligation to extend God’s grace and salvation to all

(Ephesians 2:8-10). That is the very reason for the existence of our faith community and a reality that we have affirmed in our congregational Mission Statement, printed for us to remember at the top of our worship bulletins. It states, in part, "... St. John's United Church of Christ, as inspired and directed by the Holy Spirit seeks: ... To provide loving service to all of God's people..."

These are great words, even if they are rather vague. And we try to fulfill them frequently through financial contributions. Just think about our response to the recent call for cleanup buckets. And let us not forget how we go beyond simply giving money to worthy projects. We provide lap quilts for shut-ins, Easter and Christmas donations to families, non-perishable items for the local food pantry, and more. These are all important and valued ways that we at St. John's serve others.

Even so, this is not exactly how Jesus asks us to render loving service. Recall the story of Jesus' sending of 72 disciples into the Galilean countryside, preserved in Luke 10. His followers were charged with a distinctive mission, something that no one else could provide. They had the task of visiting rural communities to freely offer healing and the revealing of God's kingdom on earth. Put differently, Jesus' disciples were to render loving service in a way that was focused, unique, and required the personal sacrifice of presence, time, talents, labor, and other resources. His followers were to declare that God's kingdom was available even to those who rejected them (Luke 10:11). Their mission was for everyone, no exceptions!

So, how do we, as a congregation, explicitly and actively live out our stated purpose? What is our focused and unique mission, especially in light of the charge and expectations Jesus gave to his first followers? It makes you stop and think, doesn't it?

Well, don't feel too badly if you can't articulate what our mission is or if we can't agree on its specifics. In looking back through our historical records, I haven't found any particular reference to a focused mission for our faith community. Further, we're not alone in this situation. Many mainline Protestant churches are unable to plainly define their missions.¹ Lacking such centers for their congregational lives, those faith communities eventually adopt an unspoken effort to, "Keep doing what we have been doing."² They concentrate their energies on trying to raise enough money to pay the bills, to keep current members happy, and to get whoever they can to help staff church committees.³ Is it any surprise that those congregations become stagnant, suffer the loss of members and resources, and ultimately close their doors?⁴

Congregational studies have shown that the real reason why such churches are currently struggling is because they don't have stated focused missions. Those that do have them live and grow.⁵ Further, it is almost never too late for any faith community to adopt such a mission and become revitalized. For example, listen to the following true story offered by a member of one such congregation, a woman named Alice.

Our church had dwindled down to fourteen people. We had been dying off slowly over the years. Those of us who were left were in our seventies and eighties.

We decided that we wanted to do something worthwhile in mission before our church was dead, done, and gone. We approached the principal of the nearby elementary school and said to him, "Our church is down to fourteen people. We have been dying off for years. It will not be that many more years before we are gone. Before that happens,

¹ Robert D. Schieler, *Revive Your Mainline Congregation: Prescriptions for Vital Church Life* (Cleveland, Ohio: The Pilgrim Press, 2003).

² Ibid, 28.

³ Schieler, *Revive Your Mainline Congregation*.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

we'd like to do something to be helpful with the children and the faculty in this elementary school."

The principal said, "Oh, your such-and-such church?"

"Yes," we answered.

"Oh, I thought your church had died years ago."

"In a way we had," Alice continued. "Our mission statement had become: 'We are down to fourteen people, and it won't be that many years before we're dead, done, and gone.'"

We made an agreement with the principal that we would be helpful in whatever ways we could with the children and the teachers in the elementary school.

It has been a remarkable year. We've made some excellent mistakes along the way, and at the same time, our church is alive in ways we never could have imagined.

As we look back, we know now that our church was really already dead when we adopted a theology of survival. We have new life with a theology of mission. We're still not a big church, but we have about ninety coming for worship on Sunday morning now.

We no longer worry about being bigger. We worry whether we will be helpful with the children with whom we are working. And we see people from the community who come to help us with our mission to the elementary school.⁶

The development of a focused mission and a wholehearted commitment to it can save congregations. It doesn't replace existing projects. But, it is the most important. Such focused missions have to be driven by an abiding sense of compassion and the urging of the Spirit. They must also be rooted in the strengths and capabilities of a faith community. What are our strengths? What are our capabilities?

This congregation has the ability and power to discern and commit to a focused mission, a great gift we can give to Lewisburg and beyond, something that sets us apart from other churches. Just think about the dying church in the previous account. The people in that congregation were in their 70s and 80s, and most surely had health issues. Yet, they sought God's guidance and gave what they had to the local elementary school. Some of the church members likely gave voice to prayer requests from people at the school during times of trouble. Others may have visited students, parents, and teachers, and given them the gifts of friendship and food. Still others probably helped students with homework. The members of that small, aged congregation offered whatever they could and the things they were best at providing. It made a huge difference for the elementary school and brought new life to the church. Several of you like to visit with members of this church and pray for them. When times are hard, you write cards, deliver food, and offer transportation. Kay and I have been blessed by gifts like these from a number of you. What if you did those very things for people at a nearby school, nursing home, or even a mental health facility? How would it be if we provided a safe space for individuals rejected by society so they might flourish and know the presence of God and the Holy One's kingdom? What might the spirit, working through us, compel us to offer that will bring our neighbors hope and a future, and for our church, as well?

A number of you might question if we have the resources to undertake a concentrated mission. And if that is the case, I ask you to remember two things. First and foremost, it doesn't take a lot to start and a little becomes much in God's hands. The story of the struggling church and the nearby school is certainly proof of this reality. Second, numerous congregational studies have conclusively shown that when such effort is truly embraced, resources appear to match the mission. The stronger the mission, the more resources become available.⁷ Why? Mission often unifies a congregation,

⁶ Kennon L. Callahan, *Small, Strong Congregations: Creating Strengths and Health for Your Congregations* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2000). This story appears on pages 32-33 and has been edited for tense and readability.

⁷ Callahan, *Small, Strong Congregations*.

gives it a focus, creates energy and optimism, and sparks creative approaches to problems. Under those conditions, churchgoers tend to find that they can give more of their time, talents, and possessions. In addition, determined mission efforts encourage compassionate, tolerant, and respectful interactions between members of faith communities. This leads to a minimizing of cynicism, negativity, and poor behaviors, which then further motivates churchgoers to risk increased participation in the life of their congregations.⁸

What is the great gift we can offer? What dedicated mission can we wholeheartedly embrace so others can better deal with their hurts and hopes, and find the good life that God wants each to have? Think about it. Pray about it. Listen for God's still, small voice. Be willing to share your discoveries with one another. Amen.

⁸ Ibid.