

Message: “The Flip Side of Justice”

Mozart Adevu sent us pictures and a newsletter from Ghana this week. He writes,

“We have had some amazing work going on in the past few months Over 100 farmers have enrolled for training in organic crop production in two communities of Jeduako and Osramanae in the Sekyere Central and Krachi West districts in Ghana. Through your support, these farmers are undergoing 18-week long Farmer Field Schools concurrently in these two locations. The Farmer Field Schools are currently in their 10th week. Some 60 other female farmers have also received training in Nutrition with a major focus on hands-on training in the utilization of Moringa and soy for food enrichment. Training in livestock husbandry and breeding (sheep and goats) was also offered to some 100 other farmers. Together with the participants of the livestock training program, we have constructed a model livestock barn in each of the two locations (the first of the kind in those locations and indeed districts) Several beneficiaries have planned to build similar structures for their livestock using local affordable materials. We are indeed making great strides to achieve sustainability in these communities. We are very mindful of the environment and the impact of agricultural activities on the ecology and the farmers are doing their bit to mitigate against climate change and its impact on the environment.

My program has also recently scaled up efforts in Beekeeping with the support for over 100 farmers with a total of about 550 new beehives which were constructed at the community level and distributed based on need and interest of the beneficiary family.

Women have constituted over 70% of participants who received training over the last 3 months on the program in sustainable agriculture. I hope to report on the outcomes of the training and the impact on the lives of the beneficiaries in the next newsletter.”¹

Mozart and his ministry team are putting their faith into action by helping people who have little income, food security or means to get ahead find new ways to live sustainable, fruitful lives. Thank you for

¹ Mozart Adevu, August 2019 newsletter, Global Ministries Missionary

your continued support for this important ministry. It is making a difference in the world. They are showing others how to cope with the worries and anxieties that most of us struggle with. They aren't seeking to become wealthy, but to have lives that are lived fully without the threat of starvation or death due to illness or disease. And they do so in a way that respects creation. That's the hope of many people today.

Sadly, there is great injustice in the world today. Globally, few people are able to live in a healthy way with freedom and joy.

Nationally, we're brought to tears by the recent shootings in Gilroy, CA, El Paso, TX and Dayton, OH. Our hearts go out to those who lost loved ones. We're saddened by stories of children involuntarily separated from their parents at our border and in the recent ICE raids in Morton, Mississippi. Our hearts go out to those families and communities that are affected. Even those who are citizens are living in fear. We rightly feel indignation at the lack of response by those who are empowered to make a change for the better.

The very institutions intended to protect and help us are broken.

Governments are unable to fix the problems or even to see their way to finding answers. Political infighting, rather than multilateral agreements and action, rules in the seats of power in our nation and across the world. Corporations are unable to fix the problems. The majority are focused on their bottom line and what increases the power and wealth for those at the top of the ladder. Our systems are less representative and more egalitarian for the benefit of the few rather than all. That's unjust.

Most troubling of all, the church is broken, too. Few denominations are free from clergy abuse scandals. Others, including the United Methodist Church, are struggling with their identity and purpose. Many church leaders live in fear, striking out at what they do not, or will not, embrace or try to understand. Religion has become a weapon, rather than a means of grace. We live in a post-Christendom era. The church is no longer at the center of our culture. People question the relevance and purpose of the church.

What are we to do? I believe God gives us the answer: we are to remain faithful and take action to do good and bring justice. God gives us a warning and direction in these words from Isaiah 1,

“No matter how long or loud or often you pray, I [won’t] be listening. And do you know why? Because you’ve been tearing people to pieces, and your hands are bloody. Go home and wash up. Clean up your act. Sweep your lives clean of your evildoings so I don’t have to look at them any longer. Say no to wrong. Learn to do good. Work for justice. Help the down-and-out. Stand up for the homeless. Go to bat for the defenseless.” (Isaiah 1:15b-17, MSG).

If you’re like me, you read these verses and say “yes, Lord.” This is an expression of our WHY. We believe that faith in Jesus will make everyone’s lives better. The problem is that our yes is quickly followed by confusion when we ask ourselves HOW and WHAT.

How can we help? What can we do? Aside from the occasional social media rant and rave, most of us don’t know how we can help and make a difference. We don’t know how to bring justice. We’re uncomfortable with real change because it means we’ll have to deal with conflict. The good news is that we want to see things change for the better. We’re just afraid that we’ll end up burned out, broken and bitter.

There is hope: justice and joy can and must coexist. There are ways for that to happen. Just ask anyone who works with people who are in need of love and care. Rev. Doug Ruffle says it this way, “Joy is found when we, as the people of God, put our faith into action by pursuing justice and championing the oppressed.”² God is delighted when we move past empty words to actions that have an impact. This is a call to move past things God sees as meaningless. Those things take a lot of our time and attention, but have very little impact on our lives or the lives of others.

What are we to do? To paraphrase Rev. Paul Nixon, “[Let’s] refuse to belong to a dying church!”³ If we aren’t willing to change our thinking and learn to do good, seeking justice and peace, changing the status quo, we’re going to follow the same footsteps the church has taken for the past forty years. We’ll continue to decline, lose our voice and be even less relevant to those inside and outside the walls of our

² <https://www.umcdiscipleship.org/worship/season-after-pentecost-part-3-worship-planning-series/august-11-ninth-sunday-after-pentecost-year-c/ninth-sunday-after-pentecost-2019-year-c-preaching-notes>

³ Paul Nixon, *I Refuse to Lead a Dying Church*, Pilgrim Press, 2007

buildings. This is true today. It was true in Jesus' time. And it was true in Isaiah's time as well. That's why we study these scriptures after all this time. There are lessons we can learn from other people's experience of God. Let's learn from their mistakes and stay in love with God and each other.

Let's refuse to buy into the myth of a dying church. We can embrace the work the Holy Spirit is doing in our community. There's only one thing: it means we'll end up going to places we would rather not go.

I was talking to Esperanza about this message. She said something that's obvious, but it stuck with me. So much so, I think the Spirit is giving us a word through my wife.

When we are faced with seemingly impossible odds, what can we do? Take one, first step. It doesn't matter what the step is, so long as you listen and pray for God to guide you. What matters is that you take a step in faith. Maybe you'll sit down and pray for a specific person struggling with the difficult immigration process. Maybe you'll decide to give a gift to the group that works to help children or provide for the needs of those in limbo at our border. Maybe you'll decide to call a few friends and ask them to meet you to talk about what you can do to help foster kids or bring awareness to human trafficking in Riverside County. Maybe you'll decide to invite others to sign a letter to the mayor, state representative or senator asking for better mental health care and improvements in gun control laws. Maybe you'll decide to participate in the next protest or march for civil rights or gay rights downtown. The sky's the limit. Seek God's will in your actions of justice and you'll be on the right path, the way to justice with joy.

Take a step. Put your faith to work. Show you care. Be alert to what's going on, ready to act at a moment's notice.

Jesus spent quality time with the disciples when he was with them. Our reading from Luke 12 is a collection of the lessons he taught. One of the things he said is this, "*What I'm trying to do is get you to relax, not be so preoccupied with getting so you can respond to God's giving*" (v29, MSG). There's definitely a difference between prayers for our own comfort and taking actions of justice. One is self-serving. The

other is God-serving. One leads to anxiety and emptiness. The other leads to joy and a life fully lived. **Which will you choose?**

I'll bet you aren't very comfortable right now. One of the things I've learned after ten years in ministry is that clergy and laity are pretty much the same. We're all human, part of the ministry of believers. The only real difference is our attitude; how we respond to what goes on around us. Most clergy feel called to act to do something about the injustice, oppression and evil that's present in our lives and in the world around us. They're focused on the way God's grace moves in and with others. Most laity are worried about how to deal with their own troubles. They're sympathetic to the unjust things that happen to others, but personal safety and comfort come first. They're focused on the way God's grace moves for them.

I believe that's the reason why Jesus taught one of his most powerful lessons to the disciples, the servant leaders of his day, "*Where your treasure is, there your heart will be too*" (v34, CEB). If your heart is focused on yourself, on stuff, materials things and comfort, you're missing out. You're like a cup that's too full. You can't add anything to it. When your heart is focused on God and others, you're willing to empty your cup of blessings into the lives of others without question or reservation. That's because God's blessings are meant to be passed on. When we do so, God enlarges and refills our cup, so we have an even greater capacity to love.

I invite you to join me in breaking the stereotype. Take a step. Let's be a congregation known throughout our community for our selfless love and care for others. If we do, we'll find plenty of love and grace to go around.

Let us pray ...

Lord, thank you for being a God who forgives. Forgive us, Lord, for the part we play in the injustice that is happening today in our nation.

Forgive us when we look at the bottom line, rather than the faces of those seeking a better life. Convict our hearts and call us to take a first step in faith. Give us the courage to truly be your children.

We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.

Isaiah 1:1, 10-20 (CEB)

The vision about Judah and Jerusalem that Isaiah, Amoz's son, saw in the days of Judah's kings Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah.

Hear the LORD's word, you leaders of Sodom. Listen to our God's teaching, people of Gomorrah!

What should I think about all your sacrifices? says the LORD.

I'm fed up with entirely burned offerings of rams and the fat of well-fed beasts. I don't want the blood of bulls, lambs, and goats.

When you come to appear before me, who asked this from you, this trampling of my temple's courts?

Stop bringing worthless offerings. Your incense repulses me.

New moon, sabbath, and the calling of an assembly - I can't stand wickedness with celebration!

I hate your new moons and your festivals. They've become a burden that I'm tired of bearing.

When you extend your hands, I'll hide my eyes from you.

Even when you pray for a long time, I won't listen.

Your hands are stained with blood. Wash! Be clean!

Remove your ugly deeds from my sight. Put an end to such evil; learn to do good.

Seek justice: help the oppressed; defend the orphan; plead for the widow.

Come now, and let's settle this, says the LORD.

Though your sins are like scarlet, they will be white as snow.

If they are red as crimson, they will become like wool.

If you agree and obey, you will eat the best food of the land.

But if you refuse and rebel, you will be devoured by the sword.

The LORD has said this.

Luke 12:32-40 (CEB)

“Don’t be afraid, little flock, because your Father delights in giving you the kingdom. Sell your possessions and give to those in need. Make for yourselves wallets that don’t wear out - a treasure in heaven that never runs out. No thief comes near there, and no moth destroys. Where your treasure is, there your heart will be too.

Be dressed for service and keep your lamps lit. Be like people waiting for their master to come home from a wedding celebration, who can immediately open the door for him when he arrives and knocks on the door. Happy are those servants whom the master finds waiting up when he arrives. I assure you that, when he arrives, he will dress himself to serve, seat them at the table as honored guests, and wait on them. Happy are those whom he finds alert, even if he comes at midnight or just before dawn. But know this, if the homeowner had known what time the thief was coming, he wouldn’t have allowed his home to be broken into. You also must be ready, because the Human One is coming at a time when you don’t expect him.”