



Lessons From the Road

TEXT
Hebrews 11:32–12:2

October 4, 2020 — World Communion Sunday — Sermon by Rev. Tom Are, Jr.

No one is Christian alone. We just can't manage that. It's not just that the Christian life is ultimately a life of love, and as such there must be others that we love. But even more than that, Christian faith is not a small or simple thing, and we all need teachers.

That's what the writer of Hebrews tells us. You might think of Hebrews as a sermon, and the preacher is encouraging people who are weary. Encouraging people who are struggling to maintain hope. Encouraging people who look at the world and wonder, where is God?

The preacher reminds the church of others who have stood tall, who have been strong. He calls them a cloud of witnesses. In this faith, we are never alone. We are surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses.

It's World Communion Sunday, and it's a good day to remember the mission we engage in around the world. Together we have done and continue to do some really great mission. But today I am thinking not just about what we have done in international mission, but what we have learned from the road. For some of the faithful who are

part of our cloud of witnesses are from other lands. We have relationships around the world, and those relationships instruct and inspire us.

Today a few folks will share their own experiences. Layne Stowers went to Haiti to visit the Higgins Brothers Surgicenter of Hope — a mission that was pulled up out of the ground by an elder in this church, Dr. Ted Higgins. Hear Layne's reflections on her trip.

Layne Stowers said, "I chose to go to Haiti after learning from a friend about the opportunity and the mission of Haitian Christian Mission and the Higgins Brothers Surgicenter. After learning that Dr. Higgins was a member of Village Church, I reached out and was fortunate enough to be able to be a part of such an incredible trip. My two most significant memories were my time in the OR spent watching and assisting both American and Haitian surgeons — in addition to being able to watch a live birth. This trip truly taught me the power and importance of gratitude. The Haitian people are so appreciative of everything the Higgins Brothers Surgicenter is doing for their community. Though every patient lives below the poverty

line, they are truly some of the happiest, most grateful people I've ever met."

Layne sent us that video from her dorm room at TCU, where she is on a pre-med track. Now, I don't know that this trip is what put that vocational direction in the head and heart of this remarkable young woman, but it certainly affirmed her call.

Several years ago, we raised money so that a church in Kenya could expand their church building. This is in addition to the health clinic, birthing center, and home for girls that we, as Presbyterians in the Kansas City area, have provided in Thwake and in Wote, Kenya. You know, we used to go as missionaries to share our faith in Jesus Christ. But today more often than not, we encounter people who seem stronger in their faith than we are ourselves. It's less us doing for them and more partnership with each other.

Clerk of Session Scott Stanley has been to Thwake, Kenya, several times. He offers a wise word about that experience.

Scott Stanley said, "It's a very small part of the world, but when you can make a difference for a small part of the world, that's maybe about as good as you can get. We can't solve

everything. But if you can help maybe make life a little easier, a little better and keep there, keep doing it, I think that's a good goal."

You do make a difference. But I would be hard-pressed to determine whether the greater difference is the one we make around the world ... or the one the world makes upon us.

We often hear from our young people, from our high school students who travel to the Dominican Republic, and they speak of how the relationships established there broaden their perspective, expand their understanding and deepen their faith.

Last year I got to take a trip to the DR to witness firsthand our church's partnership with the Light A Candle Foundation. We landed and boarded a bus and headed for our lodging. Before we got out of the airport parking lot, Wilken, the director of Light A Candle, started teasing me. He said, "I have been to your church, Prairie Village Church, he called you. It's about time you came to see us here. I have been praying to God that you would finally pack a bag and figure out which direction was south." I knew in that moment I would love this guy, and I do. He oversees amazing work among some of the neediest people I know. Were I to ever get discouraged about ministry in Prairie Village, a cure would be to remember my friend Wilkin, a part of our cloud of witnesses.

Let me invite you to hear Ellen's reflection on this trip.

"Hi, I'm Ellen Gatewood. I had the opportunity to travel to

the Dominican Republic in November 2019 with Village. I went on this trip because I wanted a chance to see a part of the world that I hadn't seen before. It was also a great way to get to know some members of our church family. While we were there, it was a privilege to see the Light A Candle Foundation being the hands and feet of Christ. Wilken and Ricky have established an incredible organization to help the people of their country receive food, health care and educational opportunities. I think it is incredibly important that they are the ones providing these services because they know better than any of us what their community needs. You could quickly tell the Dominicans, especially the people in the bateys, had a very strong faith that guided their daily lives. It was a blessing to be able to work and worship alongside them for several days."

I love how Ellen has seen that we engage in mission not as saviors, but as partners. The truth is we need each other in different ways. Ellen also shares a common inspiration. The trust in God demonstrated by them as they face the harshest of circumstances has much to teach us.

The preacher of Hebrews would remind us, we are surrounded by a cloud of witnesses, and it is in relationships like these that God is at work.

Fred Logan, an elder at Village, was part of a trip to the U.S./Mexico border, visiting Frontero de Cristo. He met a woman named Joca. He is not the same because he now has a

human relationship with someone dealing with human issues on the border. But let him tell you about it.

Fred Logan said, "I think the image that sticks with me most is of Joca, the director of Frontera on the Mexico side. And what always struck me was the smile on her face, the happiness. It's very challenging, challenging economically for the people there. They're dealing with people with very tough issues. But she confronts those challenges with gladness in her heart. And you hear the word beatific or heavenly, kind of, I think, a beatific smile. And that will always stick with me."

These are hard days. We are COVID weary. And some infectious disease experts are saying that by the end of the year, the death toll could climb from 200,000 where it is now to over 350,000. That's like six Vietnams in nine months. We are unsettled by the protests that continue — unsettled in part because we know there is legitimacy to the claim of systemic racism in America, but simply knowing that does not mean it is easy to change. We are unsettled by the values or sometimes the lack thereof in our nation, as democracy itself is under attack — at times by those who have sworn to uphold it. And some elected officials are publicly advocating violence if things don't go their way. We haven't seen days like these. These are hard days.

The Hebrew preacher has some wisdom to offer. The writer of Hebrews says, pay at-

tention to others who have had hard days and see what they can teach you.

Again, hear from Scott Stanley's experience.

Scott Stanley said, "I think one of the things that people have learned is that when you're doing mission work, what's really important is just being there, being present. I mean, you're not supposed to go with the idea that I'm helping these people. They didn't ask for us to be here. David saw that where he grew up didn't have some of the same services that were available and he could do something about it. But what's important is that you keep coming back. If you just go and build a clinic or whatever, that isn't really accomplishing much. It kind of makes you maybe feel good because you're building something. But just like we do in the DRMP, when you keep going back year after year after year, and have people working there every day, then you have a presence in people's lives."

Joy is a consistent characteristic in most of the people we meet around the world. And it's not because of their life circumstance. It's because they trust in the holy love of God. So, I invite you to let their witness nourish joy in you.

Fred knows exactly what the Hebrew preacher is teaching us:

Fred Logan said, "I think the trip has made me a more joyful person, has made me a more appreciative person. Appreciative of what we have, but also I think then more seriously appreciative of the challenge.

We have some policy challenges and we need to face those. But as Christians, there's another side of this. And that is to welcome that brother or sister who lives in the light."

Village family, you have done some amazing mission around the world. You have provided a tangible witness to Jesus Christ in places the world has passed by. And God has been at work in those relationships, and we are not the same as a church because of this cloud of witnesses that surrounds us.

These are hard days ... and yet there is reason for joy. But remember joy is less the fruit of happiness or even positive circumstances. Joy is the fruit of courage and trust that there is a love that defines life in this world in every moment.

Trust in that love. These are lessons we have from the road.

This sermon was delivered at Village Presbyterian Church, 6641 Mission Road, Prairie Village, KS 66208.

The sermon can be read, heard or seen on the church's website: <http://www.villagepres.org/current-sermonsermon-archives.html>.