



Village Is a Place of Mission

TEXT
Philippians 1:6–7

November 8, 2020 — Sermon by Rev. Tom Are, Jr.

In these verses, the apostle Paul writes from a tender place. He's in jail.

He's cut off from his friends and those he loves. He's alone, but his faith is strong. He says the good will be brought to completion on the day of Jesus Christ — a day when all that has gone wrong will be made right; a day when the best in us and the best in the world will come to full fruition. That's what he means by the day of Jesus Christ.

I call that God's promised day. We aren't there yet, not by a long shot. But sometimes we get glimpses of what it might look like.

Paul trusts in that day, in part, because he had a glimpse in his friends at church in Philippi. When Paul was at his lowest moment, he remembered how the folks at Philippi loved him. He says, "You hold me in your heart." It gave him strength. It gave him hope. It was the love that they shared that gave him confidence that the day of Jesus Christ could be trusted; because in that love, even in difficult times, he could see the fingerprints of God and knew that God was at work in the world.

My grandmother stitched her days together with little

proverbs. She had a saying for every circumstance. If I had misbehaved, we are speaking hypothetically you understand, she would threaten to "jerk a knot in my head." I don't know what that means. She would say, "Why are you going around your elbow to get to your thumb?" What? One I heard more than a few times was, "Tom, there is very little educational value in the second kick of a mule." And of course, there was, "Bless your heart." It sounds sweet, but "bless your heart" is South Carolina talk for "you must be the dumbest child I have ever known." Slammed your finger in the car door, well bless your heart.

Now, if I'm making my grandmother sound like someone should have called the authorities, then I have misled. She loved me, and don't tell my siblings, but I'm confident she loved me the most. And if I were ever down, if life ever beat me up a bit, she would say, "If I could, I would give you my heart for the hurting times."

That's what the Philippians did. They gave their heart to Paul when he was hurting. And as a result, it gave Paul not only strength for today, but hope for tomorrow. He says because you hold me in your heart, I know

God is at work, and we are living toward God's promised day.

We are talking about Village being Village. At Village, we give our heart for the hurting times. We call that mission. Village is the Mission Church on Mission Road ... that's what I was told in my first conversation with the Pastor Nominating Committee back in the fall of 2003. We don't say it just that way anymore, because when we first started saying it, Prairie Village was more prairie than village, and we were the only church on Mission Road. But now there are many. And many of them are engaged in mission as well.

But we are still, and always have been, a church of mission on Mission Road.

It started at our first congregational meeting when Village chose to give \$25,000 ... that's 1949 dollars ... \$25,000 to the Board of American Mission of the Presbyterian Church. The money would be used to start another congregation in some other village. It was an act of gratitude because a few years earlier, Presbyterians from Ohio and Pennsylvania and New York had taken up collections to start a new church in a place called Prairie Village.

In our early years, our mission was almost exclusively international. In 1961, Dr. Bob Meneilly, our founding pastor and a saint in shoes, went to the Philippines for several months to serve as a missionary. In 1962, Dr. Bob gave a four-week report on the state of Presbyterian Mission around the world, and 15,000 people from the community attended over the four weeks. Village was striving to commit 25 percent of our budget to mission, almost all of that around the globe.

But then something changed.

The civil rights movement emerged in America. We at Village realized that there was work that needed to be done in our own community. Our mission focus shifted from across the globe to across the street. In 1964, the Session requested that Dr. Bob preach a sermon series on race relations — that he provide a faith perspective on the realities of racial injustice that plagued America. Dr. Bob preached about fair housing and spoke out against the housing covenants that prohibited people of color from living in our communities. He was criticized for being political and for being a socialist. Those charges never go away, do they? We still hear them. He wasn't either, of course. He was just a Christian preacher — but not just that.

By 1971, the Session created the Community Relations Committee. It was later called the Community Concern Committee. Today we call it our Missions Committee. For 50 years now,

we have been giving our heart to the hurt in our own city.

Toni Diehl, Dave Lillard and others started building houses with Habitat. Helen Taliaferro and others launched Mission Sewing. Scores of you opened your homes to those displaced by Hurricane Katrina. Over the years, we have given away millions of dollars, recently averaging \$1,250,000 a year to support ministries like the Upper Room reading ministry, and Rose Brooks to provide safety for victims of domestic violence. We supported De La Salle to educate students who became parents when they were still children themselves. We put a STEM lab at Operation Breakthrough and provided furnishings for Thelma's Kitchen. We have helped families move from sleeping in their cars to sustainable housing through Hillcrest Transitional Housing, and provided a safe place for homeless students through Avenue of Life ministry.

But not just that.

In 1992, Village purchased a beautiful piece of land with a broken-down school building sitting on it. Today it is the Robert and Shirley Meneilly Center for Mission. It is the home of the Village Church Child and Family Development Center, the home of our computer ministry, and the home of the Village Church Food Pantry that feeds thousands of people every year. And hundreds of you volunteer there. It's also worth noting that we built those buildings with environmental sensitivities and covered the roof with 207 solar panels to reduce our carbon footprint a bit.

But not just that.

In 1999, Betty Crooker, armed with a holy imagination, drove through the Ivanhoe neighborhood and spotted a woman sitting on her front porch. Betty parked her car, and with her "Sunday-go-to-church-clothes" — shoes, purse and eyeglasses all matching — she walked up on that broken-down porch and started a conversation. "Hi there, I'm Betty."

"Morning Betty, I'm Mrs. Ruthie."

"Nice to meet you; how long have you been in this neighborhood?"

Mrs. Ruthie said, "I was getting ready to ask you the same question."

Front Porch Alliance was born in that moment. For over 20 years, we have remained in that neighborhood because when there is hurt, our hearts are there. Hundreds of you have been involved in that ministry.

Here's the point: We recognized that people in need are not the recipients of our charity. We are in this together. Where there is hurt, we want to be there. We are giving our heart for the hurting times, because in our acts of service, the fingerprint of God is evidenced, and we bear witness that the good that God has begun in us and in the world will be brought to completion.

There will be a day when these injustices are healed; there will be a day when these hungers are fed; there will be a day when that which is wrong is made right, and we are living toward that day.

But not only that.

In 1991, I think it was Andy Wilson who reached back into our childhood years as a church, when we were committed to international mission, and Andy led a group to the Dominican Republic. Today, in addition to our mission in Kansas City, we also give our heart in help and in friendship to Light A Candle in La Romana, Dominican Republic; and through the Higgins Brothers Surgicenter for Hope in Haiti; and through Frontero de Christo at the U.S. border; and through the church in Thwake, Kenya. Many of you have participated in these trips. We have also welcomed the world here through Christmas International House.

But not only that.

Ten years ago, in addition to mission in the city and mission across the globe, we reached back into our first congregational meeting where we saw part of our mission is to strengthen the witness of the church in our culture. So, you helped launch NEXT Church, a network of leaders who are embracing creativity and being attentive to God's movement around us. And through the Now & Tomorrow campaign, we established the First Decision Legacy Fund to support ministry of the Presbyterian Church, remembering the \$25,000 gift to the church which was our first mission decision as a congregation. And just as we gave money to plant a new congregation in that first meeting, in 2017 we launched a second campus. Village on Antioch, and the portion of our congregation that worships at Antioch, is giv-

ing their heart to places of hurt as well.

I could go on because there is so much more to tell, but let me just say this. We have been talking about Village being Village. Why do we choose to pull money from our pockets or portfolios and invest it in this church? It's because Village is serious about our relationships with one another; it's because Village is a place of holy conversation; and it's because we are unafraid to give our heart away to those who hurt.

Like Paul, I believe that in God's ultimate future, all will be well. I believe that in God's ultimate future, all that has gone wrong will be made right. The good that God has begun in us and in the world will be brought to completion.

I believe that in part because when I was hurt, when I was down, when I was afraid, I had someone in my life who gave me her heart ... and it mattered. It gave me hope and strengthened my faith.

When together we give our heart away, maybe not all the time, but more often than we realize, it breathes that same hope into the world. We give our hearts for the hurting times, as we live toward God's promised day.

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>.