

ReciproCare in Mission

Psalm 15

Genesis 12: 1–9

Mark 16: 14–19

by Rev. Shirley Gale

(Leader's Note: Author, the Rev. Shirley Gale, has provided personal experiences to illustrate her sermon. They have been written so they are easy to share, however, if you have a similar personal experience or an experience that illustrates the same point, you are welcome to adapt the sermon.)

In his book, Disappointment with God, Philip Yancey relates this story from his own life.

One time when Yancey and his mother were looking through a box of old photos he came across a crumpled picture of himself at 18 months. He asked her why she had kept this one. His mother explained that Yancey's father, at 24, had lain completely paralyzed by polio and was encased from the neck down in a huge, cylindrical breathing unit. Due to the severity of his illness his two young sons were banned from the hospital, so Yancey's mother hung this photo from the breathing unit just above Yancey's father's head. The last four months of his life were spent looking at the faces he loved. Yancey said: "that crumpled photo, was one of the few links connecting me to my father. Someone I have no memory of, and who spent all day, every day loving me."

Yancey went on to say: "...the emotions I felt when I saw that crumpled photo were the very same emotions I felt that night in my college dorm-room when I first believed in a God of love...and realized Someone is there who loves me. It was a startling feeling of wild hope, a feeling so new and overwhelming that it seemed fully worth risking my life on."

That photo and what it represented, had a profound impact on Philip Yancy's life and faith. I'm sure neither his mother or father would ever have thought that God would work so powerfully through such a simple thing as a photo, nor did they likely consider themselves to be missionaries to their own son.

We serve a God who is always at work, a God whose love is unmeasurable, unconditional, and missional. Missional? Yes, our God is a missional God, whose mission is to draw all people to God's self in love. God pursues this mission in more ways than we can possibly imagine. One of those ways is in and through people. The primary purpose of the Church, therefore, is for its people to go into the world, near and far, serving as God's missionaries.

Serving isn't always easy, nor in ways that we expect. It's not unusual to hear seniors in the Church, especially those we refer to as shut-ins, express the thought that due to age and the limitations the aging process can often inflict, they no longer believe they have a role in the mission of the Church of Jesus Christ. Limitations, such as failing memory, forgetting names, a dependency on walkers, or the inability to drive, can keep them from feeling useful.

Dorothy* was one such person. She attended the Presbyterian church in her small town. She was a life-time member of the WMS and regularly attended worship. She was very active in the congregation, until shortly after the birth of her daughter when she became bed-ridden with a crippling illness. Each day, for many years, her husband would carry Dorothy to a specially constructed seat in their front window where she would spend the day overlooking the town's main street. Jean*, a young, six-year-old girl, who attended Sunday School at the same church, started visiting Dorothy twice a week. In the summer, she brought flowers from her mother's garden. These visits continued until Dorothy's death seven years later. During these visits, Dorothy would talk about her life, her faith, and all the wonderful things she observed from her second-floor window-seat. Even though she didn't know all the people that passed by her window she prayed for them. In her gentle way, Dorothy taught and mentored Jean in her faith journey and planted the seeds of her understanding of mission. Dorothy made Jean feel that she was an acceptable, worthy person whom God loved.

What a wonderful gift to give an extremely shy young girl who wanted nothing more than to be invisible so people wouldn't see her! After each visit with Dorothy, instead of walking, as usual, close to the buildings, with her head down, hoping she was unnoticed, Jean walked to school down the middle of the sidewalk with her head up, and her face decorated with a big smile. Isn't it amazing how God used a woman who could no longer walk to help a young girl to walk with new dignity and joy?

Jean eventually answered God's call to serve as an Ordained Minister, which she does still today. Dorothy was only one of many people over the years who helped shape Jean's life and faith. Dorothy may not have realized it, but she was really a missionary - right on her door-step.

Today, there is still a great need for such a missionary-minded, nurturing community for the Church to be what God calls it to be and Jesus commanded it to be. We are to be a caring place where people seek God's guidance to discover effective and meaningful ways to participate in God's mission. As God's missionaries we are called to use, as we are able, whatever gifts and means God entrusts to us, today - regardless of our age or limited physical capacities.

It is not only one's age or physical limitations that can stand in the way of feeling useful or fulfilling God's call to serve. With work or family obligations, one can feel there isn't enough time. With financial challenges, one can feel there isn't enough money. And with our personal discomfort or misgivings about our abilities, one can feel they are not properly equipped. It is important to trust that God has given us the gifts and means, we only have to listen and act.

We are reminded by the Apostle Paul that it is often at our own point of weakness that God does God's greatest work. Paul pleaded with God to be relieved of his weakness – his “thorn in the flesh,” he called it (c.f. 2nd Corinthians 12:7). God responded to Paul saying: “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.” (2 Cor. 12:8b)

Indeed, it is often in times of weakness God calls us to tasks we feel unable to accomplish. The Rev. Shirley Gale, the writer of today's Mission Awareness Sunday service, was reminded of this call one Sunday just before worship. Knox Church in Guelph has a position called Pastoral Assistant. The position focuses on seniors within the congregation and the community, especially those who live in nursing homes and senior residences, or those unable to attend Sunday worship or other church functions.

A woman named Ann had filled this ministry remarkably well for ten years, but at eighty-two wanted to retire. After much prayer she approached Shirley one Sunday morning requesting permission to submit Shirley's name as her replacement. Shirley, now seventy-three, and retired from ministry

because of Multiple Sclerosis, smiled and thanked Ann for thinking of her. She went on to explain that she was too old to start active ministry again. Shirley suggested that the position needed a younger, healthier person. Shirley sat down in the pew thinking the matter was closed.

Ann, however, was convinced that if Shirley prayerfully considered this ministry she would realize she still had a mission. She invited Shirley for lunch and further discussion. Finally, with much trepidation, Shirley accepted the position. Well, for over two years now, Shirley has been serving as the Pastoral Assistant. For Shirley, these years have been rewarding and meaningful, even though at times physically challenging.

Shirley's initial refusal to consider this new mission was because, like many seniors, she believed her age and disease made her unfit. She felt old and limited. But shortly after taking up the position of Pastoral Assistant, she was reminded during a visit with Margaret that God does use us despite our limitations. Margaret is a Knox member, who, for more than ten years has resided in a full-care facility, bed-ridden because of severe Lupus and rheumatoid arthritis. She can no longer move without assistance, nor can she feed herself. And yet, Margaret cheerfully greets each visitor with a warm, bright smile and a receptive ear. She knows the names of each staff person, their spouses and children. She loves to hear about the happenings in the lives of each person who enters her room. What is exceptional about Margaret is her deep faith and the way she shares it so sincerely and simply with everyone. She prays daily for the staff, her visitors, her family, her church family, and the church's ministries. One staff member at the residence said that Margaret's zeal for the Lord is very well known and that she has made a definite impact on the lives of so many of them. Margaret is the go-too person when someone needs to talk. She believes her mission is prayer and encouragement for those who do and those who don't know the Lord. She does it humbly and faithfully.

Margaret is one of the persons who has caused Shirley to reflect anew on the nature of mission and how it is so often reciprocal—or as Shirley now calls it ReciproCare.

Shirley puts it this way: ReciproCare is simply caring for others and acknowledging that others can and do care for us in return. And, for this reason it is an integral and inseparable part of mission.

ReciproCare is giving something of ourselves and realizing that in the very act of giving our gift-of-caring the receiver actually cares for us, blesses us in return. God is present and at work in the giving and receiving of care. Through Shirley's ministry with shut-ins she has come to understand, in a way she hadn't before, that her age and physical limitations due to MS, rather than posing barriers that close doors, are often assets or keys that can open doors. Shirley is often accepted as "one of them" because of what we would traditionally think of as weaknesses. When we open ourselves up to weaknesses and share vulnerabilities—physical, emotional, or situational—it is easy for others to relate. We become one of them and they become one of us. This frequently creates opportunities for us to share with each other how we can live each day, bearing whatever burdens may be part of that day, not in our own strength, but in the strength God provides.

(Leader's note: the person delivering this sermon may wish to include an example of this from their own life/ministry experience here.)

The fact is, the things we do for good or ill, affect the lives of others whether we realize it or not. Jane Goodall, renowned for her work among the Tanzanian chimps, said it this way: "You cannot get through a single day without having an impact on the world around you. The truth is we do make a difference, and we have to decide what kind of difference we want to make."

Every day is a new day God has given us in which we can "have an impact on the world" around us. A day when we can touch the lives of others with the caring love of our God, and in the process be touched by them. Opportunities and need for mission are all around us - it can be as close as our own homes, on our doorsteps, or next door, and it is far beyond us in places where only our hearts and tangible expressions of care can reach.

Often this reciprocated gift is so unobtrusively given that we, at first, may not recognize that we have received as much, or more, than we have given. And, even though we are unlikely to ever know the full impact of our caring on the life of another, we are called to care, nevertheless.

For a great many years, members of The Presbyterian Church in Canada, through the international mission work of Presbyterian World Service & Development; International Ministries; and Women's

Missionary Society and Atlantic Mission Society, to name only a few, has positively impacted the lives and well-being of countless numbers of people in many different countries throughout the world.

Today we have become the beneficiaries of those who were previously the recipients of our expressions of care and love. We see this in many of our congregations who have received into their fellowship new immigrants, who have moved to Canada from countries that have been part of our mission outreach. Now we receive as they share their faith, their talents, and leadership skills with us. We also experience this same grace when international brothers and sisters in Christ participate in events such as General Assembly, Women's Gatherings, and Canada Youth and encourage us by sharing their faith and their experiences of how Christ is at work in their own lives and home countries.

(Leader's note: share the results of mission and outreach projects of your WMS/AMS group or that your congregation is involved in. A suggested paragraph introduction: We have witnessed many gifts of ReciproCare in our own congregation.)

ReciproCare is a gift that blesses both the one who receives the caring act and the one who gives this gift because this reciprocal experience is a powerful reminder of God's gift of constant, loving care of us. The Apostle Paul reminds us of the importance of the reciprocal nature of ministry in his letter to the Romans (1:11–12) "I long to see you so that I may impart to you some spiritual gift to make you strong." But then he checks himself and adds, "That is, that you and I may be mutually encouraged by each other's faith."

It would seem that, with few exceptions, we cannot bring to God our prayers of intercession for people and for the growth of God's Kingdom in the world, if we are not sincerely open to God using us, as God chooses, in the answering of our prayers.

Our response to God's gifts and God's care can be nothing less than the intentional and faithful response of sharing the gifts of God's caring love with the world God created, redeemed in Christ Jesus, and loves beyond measure or bounds. Whether you feel it is your age, physical limitations, work or family obligations, financial challenges or personal misgivings that makes you unable to accomplish God's call, remember that his love and grace equips you to be a missionary today, near and far.

God's mission is the loving redemption and renewal of all people and creation - it is this Mission we are called to live each day, or as one person has said: "To be living Gospels."

Jesus said it this way: "Go into all the world and proclaim the good news to the whole creation."

(Mark 16:15a)

We can do this assured that we do not journey alone for as Jesus also said: "And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age." (Matthew 28:18)

Thanks be to God.

(names have been changed)*

The worship resources for Mission Awareness Sunday have been written by the Rev. Shirley Gale. Shirley grew up in Perth, ON. In the Presbyterian Church she gave leadership in women's groups, church school, Bible study groups, and youth and children's groups.

In 1972, she and her family moved to Montreal where, in preparation for ministry, she studied at McGill University and Presbyterian College. Upon ordination, Shirley was called as minister of St. Matthew's Church in Montreal where she served for nine years. Since her first call, Shirley has ministered in Forest, ON; been a full-time Interim-Minister in Port Perry and Ashburn, ON; co-pastored with her husband, the Rev. Herb Gale in Guelph, ON; and sat on various committees and task forces at all levels of the church.

Since her retirement in 2000, Shirley hasn't stopped working. She has assisted several congregations with conflict resolution, future planning, and preparing to receive a new minister.

These days, Shirley enjoys time with her husband and family and also gardening, music, reading, and knitting. She keeps busy with traveling, pulpit supply, and committee work for Presbytery.