

“Called as Partners in Christ’s Service: Observing & Participating” Christine Chakoian

Romans 12:9-17

Mission Testimony by Jamie Wildman

John 14:1-7

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Romans 12:9-17

Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good; love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honor. Do not lag in zeal, be ardent in spirit, serve the Lord. Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer. Contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to strangers.

Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. Live in harmony with one another; do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly; do not claim to be wiser than you are. Do not repay anyone evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all.

John 14:1-7

‘Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me. In my Father’s house there are many dwelling-places. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also. And you know the way to the place where I am going.’ Thomas said to him, ‘Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?’ Jesus said to him, ‘I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. If you know me, you will know my Father also. From now on you do know him and have seen him.’

This fall we’ve been focused on mission. The first question we asked is *why* we do mission. Is it to do good? Is it to be philanthropists? Yes, of course – but Christian mission is much more. For Christians, mission is about bearing Christ’s name, carrying Christ’s agenda, accomplishing Christ’s goals in the world. In St. Teresa of Avila’s words,

“Christ has no body now but yours. No hands, no feet on earth but yours. Yours are the eyes through which he looks compassion on this world. Yours are the feet with which he walks to do good. Yours are the hands through which he blesses all the world.”

That's *why* we do mission. Which leads to the second question: *how* do we do mission? It seems pretty obvious: if we call ourselves Christian, we need to keep trying our best to act like Christ would act: to approach others with the attitude of respect ... the attitude of compassion ... the attitude of humility.

Now we turn to our third question: the "*what*" of mission. What do healthy practices of mission look like? In our study guide - Sherron Kay George's book, *Called as Partners in Christ's Service* – the first practice is "Observing and Participating." Her point boils down to this: before we try to *do* God's mission, the first thing we need to do is *observe* God's work that's already going on in the world. She says,

"The mission of the church only becomes a possibility when we observe what God is doing in the world and *then* participate in that activity."

To put it simply, we can only do God's mission if and when we see what God is doing. Why does that matter? Well, first, if we jump in too soon, we run the risk that it's our agenda – not God's – that we're pursuing. We've all seen that kind of presumptuousness at work, that holier-than-thou, I-know-best, well-intentioned, condescending effort. But the other risk is this: if we don't keep our eyes open to God's work in the world, we can turn hopeless, defeated ... even cynical. This election-cycle in particular, I've seen that discouragement set in. People are asking themselves, what difference does it make anymore? The world is going to hell in a hand-basket, and there's nothing I can do about it. Today, I want to offer you hope. God *is* at work in the world; the Holy Spirit *is* alive and well. As Jesus once said, "Those who have eyes to see, let them see."

But don't take my word for it. As we've been doing in this series on mission, we'll hear testimony from among you. Today it's our joy to hear from Jamie Wildman.

JAMIE:

I am honored and privileged to have the opportunity to speak on the topic of observing and participating and provide testimony about how I've glimpsed what God is already accomplishing, and what a privilege it is to participate in it.

To start, I would like to provide an overview of my road to participation. I remember sitting at a lunch about 7 years ago in downtown Chicago which was being hosted by a prominent member of the financial services community with the guests being a number of folks like me who were under the age of 40. He began the lunch by asking each person at the table what they do to give back. I vividly remember my heart racing as he rounded the table eventually coming to me. Let's just say I was not proud of the quick attempt of a response I provided – knowing in my heart that I could and should do more to give back. This prompted me to begin to think about ways in which I could make a difference.

Around that same time, a relative of mine passed away whom I love and I respect dearly – his obituary and eulogy touched me deeply as I learned about all of his accomplishments and gained clear appreciation for what an impact he made on the world. I immediately sought vigilantly for ways in which I could get more involved philanthropically and eventually joined the Board of Directors of the American Red Cross of Chicago and Northern Illinois and also joined the Board of Directors of Bernie's Book Bank.

For those of you who are not familiar with Bernie's Book Bank, this organization collects, processes and distributes children's books to significantly increase book ownership among children. I am proud to serve as Vice Chairman of the Board and have Bernie's Book Bank as a core mission partner of First Presbyterian Church as I am passionate about the work this organization does – making a significant impact on the lives of at risk children both here in Lake County and throughout Chicagoland.

To me, lack of proper education is one of the greatest challenges facing our nation. This challenge is clearly illustrated by the fact that when the state of Arizona projects how many prison beds it will need, it factors in the number of kids who read well in the 4th grade. That to me is an extremely frightening reality.

Anyone trying to advance in life is able to do so based on either who they know or what they know. For at risk children, their only option for advancement is based on what they know and in many instances, the tools needed are not always readily available.

Consider this:

1. 61% of low income households have no books at all in the home.
2. While an average middle class family in America averages approximately 13 age-appropriate books per household, in less fortunate neighborhoods, there is one book for every 300 children.

Simply put, these households are focusing their financial resources on survival.

Bernie's Book Bank was founded in 2009 here in Lake Forest and has developed rapidly – it has distributed nearly 6 million books since inception and will distribute 3 million books this year alone. This translates into serving approximately 250,000 children birth through 6th grade annually with 12 quality books per year at a cost of about \$0.45 / book. I would encourage anyone who is interested to not only consider helping in the warehouse in Lake Bluff, but also attending a book distribution as this is truly where the rubber meets the road. You would think that you are giving away ice cream by the way these children receive these books with excitement and immediately start digging into their new possessions – many of these children have virtually nothing else to clearly call their own. During these distributions, you truly feel God's presence as you can vividly see the work you are doing transforming the lives of others.

Whenever our family goes to the warehouse, I always ask my daughters if they like books and if they think that it is good that we are helping children who don't have books to get books. While they admittedly are probably somewhat tired of me repeating this message, they nonetheless are able to sense at a very early age what Kristin and I stand for as both parents and as individuals. Each night at bedtime we say a prayer for the strength to help others, solve problems and ultimately make this world a better place. They are able to see these words in action and feel God's presence as we help to transform lives through our family's involvement with Bernie's Book Bank.

One of the greatest aspects of this organization is the fact that children can get actively involved with the effort – in fact, it is one of the only charities I am aware of that enables children to actively participate in its efforts. I have taken my children to the warehouse several times – in fact, we were there yesterday. During yesterday's visit, I could vividly see God's presence in the warehouse. My daughter, Avery, was tasked with placing stickers on books to identify these books as books from Bernie's Book Bank and encouraging readers to pass them along to others. I mean, what child DOESN'T like putting stickers on things! Watching the enjoyment on her face as she worked hard leading other kids in the stickering effort while simultaneously providing a father/daughter bonding experience while simultaneously helping to make the world a better place, I felt truly blessed that God provides us with the opportunity to have such amazing experiences. Knowing that our work is having a tremendous impact on the lives of others only further exacerbates His presence.

If you want to learn more about Bernie's Book Bank, I would be happy to speak with you further about it. I recently attended a Faraja School event hosted by Dave and Tracy Tolmie where Dave said it best – my goal is not to get you involved with this (although if you would like to get more involved with this, great), but hopefully this encourages you to get involved with something where you will feel God's presence as you make a tremendous impact on the lives of others.

A friend of mine recently passed away – he used to regularly say that you live for your obituary, not your resume. This is a challenging principle for many including myself to always adhere to, but I think is an important message for all of us to keep in mind on a regular basis. This same friend passed along a prayer to me - part of which included a simple message which succinctly sums up my message today that philanthropic work enables us to not only do good in the world, but also enables us to see God’s strength in our lives. The prayer is as follows:

“Take time to do charity... it is a God given privilege.” Amen.

Amen indeed! I love that, Jamie: your road to participation started when you saw what God was doing through others. You saw God at work in the role model who stood in front of all of you “young pups” and challenged you to give back ... that’s when your eyes were opened and you realized that *this* is who you want to be. You saw God at work in the testimonies at your beloved relative’s funeral: God’s accomplishments and impact that happened through him. And then you began to see God at work in *you* – something you never had sought before, or expected. And you see God at work over and over and over again at those book distributions, when you’d think you’re giving away ice cream by the way these children receive these books with excitement – these children who have virtually nothing else to call their own. This, you say, is “where the rubber meets the road” – or, I might say, where Christ’s work meets our world.

I’m not naïve. I’m certainly not Pollyanna. And in talking with many of you in this election cycle as never before, I get it that it’s easy to feel defeated. But at times like this - that’s exactly when we need to look up and notice God’s work in the world. To notice God’s work *in our country*. To notice what’s happened *here* before, that seemed impossible to many. When Americans saw Christ’s respect for all people ... and they chose to abolish

slavery. When Americans saw Christ's compassion for the stranger ... and they chose to welcome the huddled masses, yearning to breathe free. When Americans saw Christ's humility toward the lowly and the powerful alike ... and they chose to educate *all* children, rich and poor alike; and they chose to give *all* citizens voice and vote, men and women alike.

Is there still work to be done? You bet there is. Are there different opinions of how we should get there? Of course. Is it easy to feel defeated? Now more than ever! But we have *choices*. We can let our human limitations get the better of us. Or we can choose to *look for* God's presence ... we can choose to *see* Christ's way ... we can choose to *open our eyes* to signs of the Spirit. And, like Jamie, when we do, then we can make that choice, take that step to participate in it. We can, as Scripture tells us, choose to "Let love be genuine" – love not just for our own kids, but for kids who have no books to read. We can choose to "love one another with mutual affection" – not just our like-minded friends, but those who challenge us. We can choose to "outdo one another in showing honor" – not just the people who are like us, but especially those with whom we have little in common. We can choose to "Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer" – not just when it's easy, but especially when life is stressful. In other words, we can choose to do exactly what Jesus invites us to do: "Let not your hearts be troubled; neither let them be afraid." Amen.