

“A Fair Balance”
Rev. Joseph J. Clifford, D. Min.
Text: 2 Corinthians 8:7-15
Myers Park Presbyterian Church
October 7, 2018

Now as you excel in everything—in faith, in speech, in knowledge, in utmost eagerness, and in our love for you—so we want you to excel also in this generous undertaking.⁸ I do not say this as a command, but I am testing the genuineness of your love against the earnestness of others.⁹ For you know the generous act of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that by his poverty you might become rich.¹⁰ And in this matter I am giving my advice: it is appropriate for you who began last year not only to do something but even to desire to do something—¹¹ now finish doing it, so that your eagerness may be matched by completing it according to your means.¹² For if the eagerness is there, the gift is acceptable according to what one has—not according to what one does not have.¹³ I do not mean that there should be relief for others and pressure on you, but it is a question of a fair balance between¹⁴ your present abundance and their need, so that their abundance may be for your need, in order that there may be a fair balance.¹⁵ As it is written, “The one who had much did not have too much, and the one who had little did not have too little.”

In June of 1949, almost 70 years ago, Dr. C. Darby Fulton, writing on behalf of the World Mission Board of the Southern Presbyterian Church, sent a letter to our congregation’s Session. He was seeking permission for Dr. Jas. A. Jones to participate in a four-month tour of global mission fields in the Congo, Brazil, Cameroon, Uruguay, Paraguay, Chile and Peru. He wrote,

“We realize...that this will involve a great sacrifice for your church. Yet, we believe that the advantages to be gained, both for Dr. Jones himself, for your congregation, for our church as a whole, and for the Christian enterprise throughout the world will far outweigh the sacrifices that you or we may be called upon to make in this endeavor.”¹

Ultimately the Session approved Dr. Jones’ trip. Upon his return, they received another letter from the Presbyterian mission in Congo. It read, in part:

“Both Dr. Jones’s scriptural messages at our morning and evening devotions, and his informative counsel at several points of our deliberations have contributed immeasurably to our spiritual perceptions and to the discharge of the serious matters which we have faced together in this meeting...The Mission thanks you especially because we recognize that in lending Dr. Jones to us for the months of November and December you have done so at great sacrifice to your local work. But we assure you that he is making a large contribution to the work of the Kingdom of Christ by his stay among us.”²

So Dr. Jones spent two months, including Christmas in what was then referred to as “The Belgian Congo.” In 1950, Myers Park Presbyterian sent our first Congo Mission team. 68 years later, we are still in relationship with the Congolese Presbyterian Church.

Why Congo? There is tremendous need. Between 1998 and 2003, the country was at the center of “Africa’s world war,” a five-year conflict that claimed up to six million lives. One of the consequences of that prolonged strife is that a generation of children did not attend school. 7.3 million Congolese

¹ Thomas F. Clark. *History of Myers Park Presbyterian Church, 1926-1966*, p. 136.

² *Ibid.*, p. 137.

children, 1/3 of the school age population have no education. They suffer the highest proportion of undernourished people in the world—70% of the population. The need in the Congo is great.

In partnership with the Congolese Presbyterian Church, Myers Park works to respond to that need. We have built two girls' schools in Kananga (2007) and two in Tshikaji (2013), with an agreement to build a fifth school in Mbjui Mayi recently signed. On-going involvement provides support for school supplies, scholarships, best practices and school board relationships, as well as funding for a mission co-worker position to assist in strengthening educational programs. We are also building a dormitory for women at UPRECO, the Presbyterian University where Dr. Kabue is Rector.

In partnership with the Christian Medical Institute of the Kasai, (IMCK) – we also support the Good Shepherd Hospital, including knowledge sharing, physician partnerships and exchanges, a medical training center, a nursing school, residency program and community health programs, including a feeding program providing three meals a day to severely malnourished children. Today, members of the Congo ministry team are wearing yellow ribbons. I would invite them all to stand.

Congo is not our only global ministry partner. We also have partnerships in Cuba, with the Presbyterian Reformed Church of Cuba, particularly with the congregation in Remedios, Cuba, and with the Evangelical Theological Seminary in Matanzas, Cuba. Cuba ministry team disciples are wearing green ribbons. I would invite them all to stand.

In addition, we partner with Habitat for Humanity and with World Vision in El Salvador. Those who have been there with Habitat are wearing red ribbons today, and those with World Vision are wearing orange ribbons. Would they please stand? For over 25 years, we have been in relationship with the Hungarian Reformed Church through our partnership with the Great Church in Debrecen, Hungary, supporting their many ministries including Immanuel Home for children with developmental delays, education programs for Roma children, and the homeless shelter the Great Church operates in Debrecen. Friends from Hungary will be visiting us later this month. We have also had two family mission trips to Budapest working with refugee resettlement at the Columba Center. Hungary team members are wearing purple ribbons. Would they please stand?

Our newest global partner is the Bududa Learning Center in Bududa, Uganda. In partnership with them we help to provide technical education and jobs skills in that community. Disciples on that ministry team are wearing teal ribbons. Would they please stand? Before our engagement in Uganda, we worked with the health ministry in Malawi. This was also a long standing ministry of the church. Disciples involved in this ministry are wearing blue ribbons, would they please stand. This is global ministry at Myers Park Presbyterian Church. It is the fruit of seeds planted some 70 years ago by Dr. Jas. A. Jones' excursion that included two months in the Congo in 1949.

These seeds were actually planted long before Dr. Jones' trip. Many of these partnerships began with Presbyterian missionaries working in the 19th century. And of course they were not the first. Ministry partnerships go back much further than this. It could be argued they go back to the 1st century, back as far as the Apostle Paul and his efforts to bring the predominantly Gentile churches he founded into relationship with the Jerusalem Church.

We see that in 2 Corinthians, particularly in the eighth and ninth chapters. 2 Corinthians contains the first stewardship letter in the history of the church. In this section of 2 Corinthians, Paul is making an appeal to the church in Corinth to contribute to an offering for the church in Jerusalem, which was enduring a terrible famine at the time. He opens the eighth chapter by talking about how generous the Macedonians have been to the effort. This is more of a "worldly tactic;" like me saying, "You know, Covenant Presbyterian has really stepped up to the plate, I sure hope you will."

Then he invokes his theological pitch. “For you know the generous act of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that by his poverty you might become rich.” Put another way, Christ gave everything for us. In his name, shouldn’t we share what we have with those in need? He concludes, “It is a question of a fair balance between your present abundance and their need, so that their abundance may be for your need, in order that there may be a fair balance.”

A question of balance between your abundance and their need, and their abundance and your need. Most often we are familiar with the first of these phrases, how our relative material abundance might meet our mission partner’s material need. Yet those of us who have been blessed to travel to our mission partners, to experience the church and the life of faith in these places will tell you the many ways the abundance of our partners meets our needs.

In our country there is a degree to which our relative material abundance creates spiritual need, a want. Too often we believe that life’s well-being is defined by material abundance. Putting the acquisition of wealth first on our agenda can become a dehumanizing force in our life and in our society. In relationship with those who do not orient their lives around wealth, we see what life is really about. There is a depth of faith, a depth of humanity I have experienced with our mission partners, born of the struggles they have endured and the faith that has taken them through those struggles.

Whether they endured years of civil war and dictatorships in Uganda or Congo or El Salvador; or decades where communist rule marginalized people because of their Christian faith in Hungary and Cuba, these hardships have nurtured deep faith in our partners. Worship in these communities is not about checking a box for church attendance, but rather it is the fuel for the life of faith. The church is on fire in the developing world. The Congolese Presbyterian Church has a million members more than the PCUSA. The church in Cuba is growing with a beautiful zeal for faith. Living with a scarcity of material resources calls forth a beauty of humanity willing to share with all whatever comes one’s way. However, in our country, the blind pursuit of wealth can lead us to sacrifice the life that really is life. As with the Israelites if we routinely take more than we need, it can begin to rot and stink up our lives. Our relationships with sisters and brothers around the world can be a powerful antidote to our affluenza, reminding us of the life that really is life.

Paul’s words echo through the centuries: I do not mean that there should be relief for others and pressure on you, but it is a question of a fair balance between your present abundance and their need, so that their abundance may be for your need, in order that there may be a fair balance.” Thanks be to God the Session decided almost 70 years ago to let Jas. A. Jones go on that trip. For today we feast from vineyards we did not plant; our abundance meets their need need, and their abundance meets our need. In God’s beloved community there is always a fair balance. Thanks be to God! Amen.