

## **MISSION: SOLIDARITY ACROSS BOUNDARIES**

Sermon Christ Church, Oyster Bay, New York, by the Rev. Dr. Titus Presler,  
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on World Mission Sunday, the Last Sunday after Epiphany, 3 February 2008  
Year A, Last Epiphany: Matthew 17.1-9

### **Greetings to you on this last Sunday in Epiphanytide,**

the season devoted to the showing forth of the light of Christ in all the world,  
this Sunday when every year we hear the story of the transfiguration of Jesus in  
glory on the mountain,  
and now in the life of the Episcopal Church, this Sunday on which we celebrate  
the mission of God and the mission of the church in all the world.

*These themes all lend force to each other:*

*the showing forth of Christ in all the world continues through the world mission  
into which God invites us,  
and through that mission God transfigures both the world and the church that  
God sends into the world.*

### **Y'all here at Christ Church have had a new mission statement for about two years.**

I'm sure you all know about it, because your Vestry put it together and published it on  
your website,

but just as a reminder to all of us, it goes like this:

**"With God's help, we strive to embody the unbounded love of Jesus Christ.**

**Sustained by the Holy Spirit on our journey of faith, we offer hospitality,  
healing and hope."**

You've said a great deal there!

You say you strive to embody the unbounded love of Jesus Christ.

So your mission is about **love**:

not just any love,  
but the love of God in Christ Jesus,  
that unmerited, overflowing, generous love of Christ that reaches out and  
embraces and renews all whom Christ touches.

You say the love of Christ is **unbounded**:

I take that to mean both magnitude – meaning huge and unending –  
and extent – meaning no limitations, no boundaries, reaching out and touching  
everything and everyone in the universe.

You say you intend not simply to affirm or talk about this love:

no, you actually want to express it, meaning you want people to experience  
Christ's love in some way *through* you,  
and in your statement you go beyond simply expressing that love,  
for you say that you intend to **embody** the love of Christ,  
meaning that you intend to en flesh the love of Christ,  
have it within you in such a way that people outside you experience  
Christ's love personally, closely, even bodily.

**You've called this statement of yours a *mission* statement.**

Now the word *mission* comes from the Latin for the verb *to send* –  
 so missions – trade missions, space missions, diplomatic missions, religious  
 missions –  
 all mission has to do with people sending and being sent to carry out specific  
 errands in some environment that is different from the one they came  
 from.

So I assume that by having a mission statement you are saying that you here at Christ  
 Church in Oyster Bay,  
 each of you and all of you together have been sent – I assume by God – to do  
 something,  
 and you then define that something as embodying the boundless love of God in  
 Jesus Christ.

**Boundless, you say! Meaning no boundaries.**

Well, that's not simply *your* mission, it's the defining mark of *all* mission.

What defines mission of all kinds is crossing boundaries,  
 and it's certainly true of Christian mission, and especially true of the church's  
 world mission.

When we're on mission we cross boundaries from who we are and what we're familiar  
 with

over into new territory not our own  
 in order to meet people who are different from us, different in all kinds of ways:  
 socially, politically, economically, racially, linguistically, nationally, or  
 some combination of these.

Here's another way to think about it:

among the many ministries you undertake here at Christ Church  
*you're on mission when you minister in the dimension of difference.*

**And I see you reaching out to minister in dimensions of difference,**

reaching out beyond Oyster Bay and beyond Long Island to express and embody  
 that boundary-crossing love of Christ.

Shoot, you've reached us at General Seminary in Manhattan!

In September we opened the Desmond Tutu Education Center at General with a huge  
 gala celebration that featured Tutu himself and the actor Sam Waterston,  
 who's a friend of the seminary,  
 and then we moved right into a remarkable conference called *Reconciliation at  
 the Round Table: God's Call in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*  
 that highlighted needs for reconciliation at the intersections of race and religion in  
 the conflicts of today's world,  
 and we had speakers talking about the need for healing from slavery and  
 segregation in this country,  
 and speakers from other parts of the world talking about their reconciliation  
 needs: Israel and Palestine, healing from terrorism in the UK, in in  
 relations between Muslims and Christians in Nigeria, Pakistan and Egypt.

Christ Church, Oyster Bay, helped to make this happen with a \$5,000 grant from your  
 mission fund,

and that was a great gift to us!

Moreover, Peter Casparian and several parishioners attended the conference physically, again embodying that love of Christ as you reached beyond Long Island to reach us at General and participate in Christ's reconciling love in so many parts of the world.

We at General are very grateful for your presence and your mission in that major event.  
*Thank you.*

**In the same grant cycle you made a grant to Lynn Coulther,**

a Young Adult Service Corps missionary sent by the Diocese of Western North Carolina to serve in the Diocese of Durgapur in the Church of North India, the country of my birth and first 18 years of life.

I was thrilled to see that support from you, because in that grant you were affirming the importance of embodied presence in mission.

Visits, grants, development projects and so on – all these are important in mission – but there is no substitute for the ongoing and committed presence of a person on the ground

who learns about the culture, learns the language, and lives in solidarity with the joys and challenges of sisters and brothers in Christ in another part of the world –

that persons forms an incarnate link between us and a community in Christ in another part of the world.

Living and working with people in the slums of Durgapur about 90 miles north of Calcutta,

Lynn will offer a great deal to the children she will serve,

but she will doubtless return home – and I hope she'll visit you here – a different person, transfigured by her experience of Christ and people very different from herself in that place.

That will also be a gift in the Jericho Road project you are undertaking post-Katrina with the cathedral in New Orleans,

actually going to that place to build a house in addition to offering funds for rebuilding projects.

*Such solidarity with one another in the body of Christ*

*– the mutual bearing of burdens of which Paul writes in today's reading from 1 Corinthians –*

*is central to mission today and vital to the transfiguring of the church and its people.*

**One of the speakers at the September conference on reconciliation was Mano Rumalshah, Bishop of the Diocese of Peshawar in Pakistan –**

Peshawar, that city on the Afghan border that is one of the centers of Taliban influence and violence that is fueling conflict in both Afghanistan and Pakistan.

Mano taught a course on the situation of the small Christian minority amid the Muslim majority in Pakistan during the fall,

and the students found their perspectives on the church and the world transformed.

In December, we heard from Mano, then back in Pakistan, that Dr. Reginald Zaheeruddin, the medical superintendent at the diocesan hospital in Bannu had been kidnapped by the Taliban.

My wife Jane and I know Dr. Zaheeruddin from our visit to the Diocese of Peshawar several years ago –

he is a gentle and caring Christian in whose guidance that hospital in North Waziristan offers care almost entirely to Muslims, and sometimes it turns out that patients are Taliban fighters.

For four weeks his family and the diocese heard nothing from Dr. Zaheeruddin or about him –

while all there and many here were praying for him –  
and then on Jan. 2 he and his driver were abruptly released.

The other day we received an account of his captivity from Ashar Dean, the development officer of the diocese.

The conditions had indeed been terrible, but Dr. Zaheeruddin's steadfast faith during the ordeal is inspiring.

From the account:

The chains between their legs made it impossible for them to bend their legs, even when sitting on the bed and it was impossible for one of his legs to touch the floor properly. Yet, miraculously, he could come to his knees a few times for prayers. This was the Holy Spirit, which enabled him to do so. While praying on his knees he felt the chilled cold ground changing to warmth and on one occasion he started to sweat.

At *namaz* (Muslim prayer time) they were told to make their ablutions and pray. But Dr. Reginald explained he was a Christian and would not say *namaz*. He was told that he was being invited to accept Islam. On the first Friday, a man came and told him to accept Islam and say *namaz*, but Dr. Reginald refused. The following week a *maulvi* (Muslim priest) came to his room four or five times a day and before going to bed for several days, to preach Islam. He was also made to listen to some religious cassettes. After several days, he was taken blindfold[ed] to another place and forced to turn round several times. . . . He became aware from the sound, that they were making his video. When he sat down and his blindfolds removed, he was confronted with a few men sitting in front of him directing Kalashnikovs at him. From beside him he could hear a tapping sound, and he turned his eyes to see a man tapping a dagger on his palm. He was again invited to become a Muslim. When he refused they reminded him that they could slaughter him or whip him and keep him in prison for life. They kept asking him further questions and trying to force him to convert to Islam. Finally he asked them where it says in the Quran that a Muslim should force someone to convert. They remained silent and the subject was not mentioned again.

After describing how Dr. Zaheeruddin's captors then made a ransom demand, Ashar Dean goes on:

Meanwhile God was answering his prayers by giving him dreams and visions. Every time he prayed he could see a globe, which grew bigger and faces appeared, known and unknown, in thousands, praying for him. This vision kept his spirits up and he knew that it was true that people were praying for him. He was never assailed by doubts but was strong in trust. God also gave him the assurance that in the end no money would be paid. Although he lost a lot of weight, he maintained good health despite the cold, the dirty water, meager, unhealthy food and unhygienic conditions. Spiritually also he remained strong and prayed and sang psalms and Christian songs up to 20 hours a day.

Bishop Rumalshah will be speaking at the Tutu Center again in April,  
and he may bring Dr. Zaheeruddin with him to share his testimony of faith under  
adversity.

**On this World Mission Sunday in 2008 I want to remind you only of what you  
already know.**

Indeed the love of God is boundless.

The human family marks off all kinds of boundaries and erects fences on them.

Indeed God sends us on mission to cross boundaries and share the love of Christ over  
those boundaries

and stand in solidarity with those who are isolated and suffering,  
so that the world may know the reconciling love of God.

It is crucial that Episcopalians engage in this mission at this time when the disparities  
between rich and poor are growing,

when tensions between Christians and Muslims are growing,

and when relationships among provinces of the Anglican Communion are

severely strained, especially between the Episcopal Church and some

Anglican provinces in Africa, where I have been a missionary, and some  
in Asia and some in Latin America.

*Crossing boundaries can be difficult, and some of the encounters can be painful,*

*but in the boundless love of Christ you will find yourselves able to offer  
hospitality, healing and hope,*

*and in such giving you will find yourselves transfigured by the glory of God.*