

“Difficult Service”
Luke 10:1-11, 16-20
Rev. Désirée H. Gold

Cottage Grove United Church of Christ
Cottage Grove, Minnesota
Sunday, 27 July, 2010
Thirteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time

A couple of weeks ago I attended the Annual Meeting of the Minnesota Conference - United Church of Christ. The theme of this year’s Annual Meeting was “Witnesses...to the Ends of the Earth!” and in that vein there was a lot of discussion of our global mission partnerships. One of our keynote speakers was the Rev. Cally Rogers-Witte, who is Executive Minister of Wider Church Ministries and Co-Executive of Global Ministries, a partnership between the UCC and Christian Church (Disciples of Christ). She gave a brief history of global mission work in the United Church of Christ, starting with the formation of the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions, which was founded in the early 1800’s. Then she brought us up to the modern day, with stories about our current missionaries serving overseas, including Monica and Tom Liddle from Peace UCC in Duluth.

The Liddles are currently serving the mission field in East Timor, where Monica runs a clinic and Tom teaches English and works with a program that helps train pastors and educators. She spoke about the deprivations they endure in a Third World country (Monica recently delivered her own baby -- well, Tom delivered it under Monica’s instruction, since Monica is the only doctor for miles around). She spoke, too, of the tremendous amount of *good* the Liddles are doing in a place that needs all the help it can get.

The Liddles, and others like them, are doing the work Christ called us to do when he commissioned seventy of his followers and sent them out in pairs to do his work. Jesus tells us, “The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few,” language that we Minnesotans can surely understand almost as well as the Israelites who originally heard his words. The Liddles went to East Timor because there was work to be done there, and they felt Christ was calling them to do it.

Our missionaries go to foreign lands not to *forcibly convert* people but because they have been *asked* to help by people who are in need. The United Church of Christ has missionaries all over the world, including a couple with whom I corresponded while they served in Zimbabwe; and including a friend of mine from seminary, who has spent most of his life in the mission field in Japan.

Global Ministries sends missionaries abroad to do the work Christ calls them to do in this morning’s Gospel. They go to proclaim “peace” to the people they serve, and they eat the food given to them (strange though it may be) and adopt the culture in which they serve. Monica and Tom Liddle’s child attends a school in East Timor, and they live in a house similar to other houses in their community. They have been welcomed by the people in East Timor, and Monica literally does “cure the sick who are there,” as Jesus commands in our Gospel reading. I imagine, too, that she and her

husband have brought the realm of God closer to the community they serve, not by demanding Christian conversion - they serve people of several faiths - but by showing true Christian action.

The life that Monica and Tom Liddle lead sounds *exotic* and *exciting*, as do the lives of our other global missionaries. I looked at photos of the village they serve and marveled at how different it is from where I live. I corresponded with the couple in Zimbabwe in part because it was fascinating to hear about their work, and I enjoy the annual Christmas letter I get from my Japanese missionary friend in part because it is interesting to hear about a Christian missionary working in a place where Christianity is uncommon.

But we are *not* called to do the work of Christ because it is *interesting* or *fun*. We are called to do it because Jesus Christ commands us to love our neighbors with our actions, and by so doing to work toward the realm of God.

With that in mind, hear this: The work of our global missionaries is necessary and good, and I admire and honor their years of difficult Christian service. But there is work to be done much closer to home as well.

When Jesus told his followers that "The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few," he was not *just* talking about the harvest in exotic, far-off places. There was plenty of work to be done in his hometown, and even amongst his followers themselves - remember all the widows, prostitutes, and lepers he served?

That is true for us as well. While some of us may, in fact, be called to serve Christ far from home, many more of us are called to service *right here, right now*. We are called to share the Good News of the Gospel to people in our own community, by inviting them to attend church with us on Sunday or by providing for people in need through our own church or other organizations. There are myriad ways in which we can follow the call for "laborers" close to home.

One of those ways includes direct service to our church. Several leadership positions have recently opened up, and we are always in need of more people to do the work of our Ministry Teams. Yes, we are all busy. I, as your pastor, am well aware of that. But I also believe that we are *all* called to serve Christ in one way or another. Perhaps your service to Jesus Christ has nothing to do with Cottage Grove United Church of Christ. Coaching a little league team may, in fact, *be* your missionary work. Spending quality time with your family may in fact *be* your way of sharing the Gospel. But ask yourself if it is. Ask yourself what you are doing in service to Christ, and if the answer is "Nothing," then find a way to start. That service may be something as simple as going to one meeting a month and providing your brain power to a church project. It may mean helping find others within our church by serving as Gifts Coordinator. It may mean serving as the Nurture and Education chair on the Board of Shared Ministries. It may mean working a shift at the Corn Booth at the Washington County Fair, to help raise money for our church. Or it may, in fact, mean becoming a missionary in some far-off land. The point is to ask where it is that Christ is calling you and to answer that call. Prioritize your life in such a way that you never forget this morning's Gospel message.

Service to Christ is not easy, but it's what we're meant to do. Let's get to it. *And let us pray.*