

October 7, 2007 8:30am, 9:16am, and 11am Worship
First Presbyterian Church, Lancaster, PA
Topic: Generosity – The World is Waiting

Rev. Donald W. Hackett D.Min.
Text: Ephesians 1:16-19

Ephesians 1:16-19 (The Message Bible)

I couldn't stop thanking God for you—every time I prayed, I'd think of you and give thanks. But I do more than thank. I ask—ask the God of our Master, Jesus Christ, the God of glory—to make you intelligent and discerning in knowing him personally, your eyes focused and clear, so that you can see exactly what it is he is calling you to do, grasp the immensity of this glorious way of life he has for Christians, oh, the utter extravagance of his work in us who trust him—endless energy, boundless strength!

Thank You!

It is so good to be home! After four months away, my family and I are glad to be back in Lancaster County and reconnected with our friends and church family. It is fitting that I bring you this update while our church is reflecting on the practice of generosity. Why? For you, the people and leaders of First Presbyterian Church have been very generous to us. You gave us a summer of a lifetime! We have been able to travel and see places we only dreamed about before. So before I go any further, I need to say again like the Apostle Paul in his letter to the Ephesians, **“I couldn't stop thanking God for you—every time I prayed, I'd think of you and give thanks.”** Thank you!

Background of our trip.

After Randy Riggs took his Sabbatical in 2004, he graciously encouraged me to do the same. I began to dream about how I would invest four months off from full-time duties. There were so many places I would love to visit. I grew up in a military family and had the privilege of living all over the United States, in Japan, and Germany as well. Travel is in my blood. As I thought about it, China was an obvious choice. I had worked in a Chinese Presbyterian Church in Southern California during my last year of seminary over 20 years ago. I have been praying on a regular basis for the church in China ever since. As God would have it, my wife is American-born Chinese and still has close relatives in mainland China. I wanted to introduce our family to the beauty of China and meet some relatives still living there. My desire, too, was to have our family reconnect with my relatives on the West Coast and enjoy the great natural beauty there, as well.

As I dreamed about these possibilities, the thought occurred to me, “Is it all right God for me to want to go to these places? Given all the needs in the world, should so much money be spent on me and my family in so short of time?” As I listened for God’s response, a calm, wonderful feeling came over me. I felt God was saying to me, “I would love for you to do this!” “Really?” I thought. “Wow!” At that moment it did not really matter if I actually would get to go to these places. It was enough to know that God would love for me to go. In that spirit I requested time off for 2006 and in May of 2005 submitted my application for a clergy renewal grant. I learned in October of 2005 that I was not one of the applicants chosen for the scholarship. Undeterred, I asked the church to postpone my Sabbatical leave for 2007 and in the spring of 2006 I applied again for the funding.

In October of 2006, I was told again that I was not chosen. Later we discovered that since this particular foundation gave its grants to churches and not individuals, I would not likely receive one since Randy Riggs was a recent recipient. I decided that even though I did not receive the grant, I would still like to have the time off to be with family and to travel and study in a more limited way. Little did I know that God was not done with this chapter of our story. He was quietly doing a deeper work in Rila.

How God worked everything together.

While it has been my strong desire to visit China, it has not always been my wife's desire. Rila was born and raised in northern New Jersey. She looks Chinese, but she is really a New Jersey girl. She never learned to speak Chinese and felt looking Chinese made it harder for her to fit in at school when she was growing up. Even when I talked about going to China, she felt that would be nice, but really had no burning desire to go.

That all would change. Rila attended a concert given by her piano teacher, Xun Pan. There he played some short pieces called "pictures of Sichuan" that expressed the beauty of that area of China. As Rila listened, a deep desire was born inside of her. She thought, "I have to see China." After the concert she waited in line to talk to her teacher. As she stood there she got talking to another Chinese man, Ming Gao. Ming teaches at a local college and has a son, Jeffrey, who is friends with our son, Ian. Ming said he had been recently persuaded to coordinate a trip to China for friends who have never been. They would be going in the summer of 2007. Rila came away from that conversation thinking, "Great! I finally have the desire to go to China and even a great group to go with, but there are no funds for the trip. We were just rejected by that foundation for a clergy renewal grant. Why are you doing this to me, God?!"

We would soon find out. Three weeks later I went to our Personnel Committee and told them that I would still like to take my sabbatical in 2007 even though I did not have outside funding. They surprised me and said they would like to see what they could do about helping me with travel funds. Later that month at the Session meeting they brought up the issue and our elders decided to fund my whole Sabbatical request. I was in shock! I had never heard of a church doing such a wonderful and generous thing! They committed to it and you, the people of First Presbyterian Church, gave above and beyond our budget to make it all happen. Thank you.

The trip Rila and I took that transformed us started before the Sabbatical even began. God used you and your generous living to shape us. You have made us feel so very loved and cared for. Our faith, trust, and delight in our God have grown tremendously. We have seen God work in ways we would have never imagined. That is what generous living does for others.

The world is bigger than we think.

China is bigger than I realized. I read that China covers four million square miles and has a population of about 1.3 billion people. In that one country there are 49 cities with populations of over one million people. It did not hit me how many people are in China until we drove from the airport to

downtown Beijing. All the way into the city there were tall, crowded apartment buildings on either side of the highway...mile after mile after mile. I thought to myself, "So that is where everyone lives!" I have never seen so many people on bicycles and motorcycles on the same road. Crossing the street in some cities was a high risk activity.

The sights we saw were mind-boggling:

- the ancient mystery of the Forbidden City and the Ming Tombs,
- the serenity of the Summer Gardens and the gardens of Suzhou,
- the immensity of the Great Wall, the Yangtze River, and the Three Gorge Dam, and of course,
- the wonder of adolescent pandas at play.

Each of these places drew us deeper into the rich ethos and enormity of China. The world is so much bigger than we think.

The world is smaller than we think.

The world is smaller than we think. While we were in Beijing we had the privilege of visiting with four of Rila's cousins. Late one night after sightseeing all day we gathered at a restaurant called the "Brazilian Grill." These cousins were a good 30 years older than Rila and flowing with gracious hospitality. As we sampled a variety of grilled meats from animals we could not quite identify, we attempted to build a bridge across the cultures. While their English was much better than our Chinese, the conversation was limited. To our delight one of the cousins had worked for the Chinese embassy in Argentina and was very fluent in Spanish. She and my son Ian, who is also conversant in Spanish, would talk in Spanish and then translate in English and Chinese for the rest of us. The world is smaller than we think.

After we returned home from China we made two extensive trips in the United States. In late June and July we flew out to Los Angeles, rented a mini-van and drove over 3,000 miles visiting family, friends, and churches in California, Nevada, Utah, Arizona, Wyoming, Montana, Idaho, and Washington. Later in August we drove another 3,200 miles through Pennsylvania, West Virginia, Ohio, Kentucky, Michigan, Indiana, Illinois, Wisconsin, and upstate New York. In all, we visited six different providences in China, 16 different states in the United States, and 19 different churches. That is a lot of travel and church!

The lessons we learned.

As I stand on the other side of my sabbatical, three observations are beginning to emerge:

1. The needs are great. Many Chinese as well as millions of Americans do not realize that the God revealed in Jesus Christ loves each of them. They have not experienced God in a personal and transforming way. Poverty, superstition and materialism were commonplace in the places we saw. People are still hungry for hope and a life worth living. I met a Chinese graduate student on the plane home to the United States who had many deep spiritual questions.
2. God is at work everywhere! Though still a tightly controlled Communist country, China is brimming with vibrant faith in Jesus Christ. Some believe the church in China is well over 60 million people with 30,000 new believers added to the church each day. There are still many areas in China where churches and pastors are persecuted. Still many churches are growing and becoming more public with their faith. God is at work! As I visited churches around our country, they were each discovering unique ways to be faithful, bold, creative, and servants to their neighborhoods. I was very encouraged by what I saw.

3. There is a place for us. We know from our visits to Kenya and Honduras, and even our involvement in Lancaster City, that there is still much important work for us all to do. Every day God gives you and me opportunities to love and serve others. This church knows how to serve well. My prayer is that we will get even better at loving and serving in Jesus' name. My prayer is that we will help thousands discover the heart of Christ in the heart of the city. Our future is bright, for the love of God runs deep.