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Mission Groups: A Way of Responding to a World in Need

Jeremiah 4:11-12, 22-26 *I looked on the earth, and lo, it was waste and void; and to the heavens, and they had no light.*

Luke 15:1-10 *"...there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance."*

This morning I want to talk about mission groups, why we have them, why they are important, and what a mission group needs to look like. First, however, let me paint a backdrop using today's readings from Jeremiah and Luke.

In Jeremiah, the people and their leaders have drifted so far from the life of God's compassion, justice, and mercy that widespread collapse is unavoidable. God intends to send a hot desert wind across the land, bringing devastation. This might be an image for one of the hostile nations bordering Israel; Jeremiah's ministry took place in a time of the threat of invasions. The sense is that the people have brought this on themselves, yet it is experienced as God's judgment. We may not like the image of God who judges or punishes. However, it is a persistent image in scripture, Hebrew and Christian. I find myself revisiting this matter of God's judgment, thinking that we should not throw things out simply because we are uncomfortable with them, before we try to look more deeply.

The scene that Jeremiah describes is hauntingly familiar. A wasted and empty earth. Fruitful land turned arid. Cities in ruin. Birdless skies. Three years ago, Kaye and I were in India, on the last leg of our ten-day visit. As the plane rose up at sunset from the city of Madurai in the south, taking us to New Delhi in the north, I looked out on a rust-red sky, thick with pollution. I could not see the end of it. In New Delhi we would see worse in both air quality and human misery. I was not looking only at India, but our world and its future...IF something doesn't change. There are the inevitable consequences that come with living out of harmony with God's purposes for life, what enhances life and what destroys life. It is not about a "God up there" who gets mad at us and sends arbitrary punishment. It is about our discerning or ignoring the ways that give life, the ways of God that are woven into the creation for its life and sustenance. It is about knowing that how we live has consequences for us and the earth, for good or ill. It is about responsible human living. We can choose how we will live, in compassion, justice, peace, and respect for persons and the creation, or in opposite ways. What we choose is what we will get. We can respond to the needs of our world in loving service or with self-induced unawareness.

Then there is the reading from Luke. It is great to have ninety-nine found sheep, but the shepherd leaves them to find the one lost sheep. A woman loses one of her ten silver coins. She does not give up until she has turned the house upside down to recover it. And so, says Jesus, there is more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over many who are righteous. Remember, he is telling these parables to those who think of themselves as righteous and are critical of Jesus for hanging out with sinners, the unrighteous.

Some of us are not comfortable with the "sinner" and "repentance" thing. We don't like to be called sinners, maybe for good reasons. It has usually meant that we are no good, worthless people, born that way, who don't deserve God's love, but God loves us anyway. I don't believe that, and Hebrew and Christian scriptures, especially Jesus' teachings, do not support such a view. We get that way because of the crazy, hurtful human world we live in, and the church and religion which also can get crazy. My respect is growing for the word repentance. The Greek word means changing our minds, or getting a new mind. In recent years, I have come to see that "repentance" means waking up to our true selves in our relationship with God. Being "sinners", then, means to me forgetting who we really are and living in ways that bring about our own problems, as individuals and as a people. No wonder there is great joy, as Jesus says, when one sinner repents, joy in heaven and earth. When one person wakes up to her or his true nature as God's beloved child and starts living with that whole new outlook, everything changes and anything is possible.

All of this is to say that what we most need is to wake up to our true selves so that we can be part of the healing of life, so that we can live in ways that enhance and mend the life of our world, God's good creation. That is the twin purpose of our community, the Church of the Covenant: to be engaged in our own "repentance", that is, our coming fully alive to ourselves in relation to God, and to be engaged in the service of life. It is an inward journey, the daily work we do to be more self-understanding and inwardly aware of God's presence, call,

and gifts in our lives. It is an outward journey, the particular ways we feel God calls us to serve our community of faith or the wider world through the gifts God gives each of us, whatever they may be. This is the way we respond to our world that has begun to have the markings of Jeremiah's wasteland vision. This is the way we choose a different present and future. This is the way God's judgment becomes God's blessing.

The way we structure ministries is what we call mission groups. The idea came from Gordon Cosby out of his experiences as a chaplain in World War II. He saw young men dying without being aware of God and their relationship to God. He also saw what can happen when small groups of people are committed to a "mission" and to each other in the carrying out of that mission. This is how the church needs to be, thought Gordon: small groups of people who share a specific vision for ministry, something they believe God has called them to do in the service of life. They commit themselves to the mission and to each other. They deepen their lives and life together through their group's inward journey--through worship, prayer, study, and sharing with one another their struggles and growth in the life of faith. They work together on the outward journey, the mission to which they feel called--taking full responsibility for every aspect of the mission, identifying the gifts that each person brings to it and letting those gifts nourish and shape the mission. Essentially, thought Gordon, that is the church--small groups of people on an inward and an outward journey. Meeting some need in the world, but equally important, working with their own repentance, their own coming alive in their relationship with God.

1) A mission group begins when a person feels called to a particular vision for mission, something she is deeply called to do for the sake of the community of faith or the wider world. That call is shared with others--on Sunday morning, over coffee, in an e-mail exchange, or in other ways. This is "sounding the call," sharing the vision with others who might also feel drawn to that particular mission or ministry. The group, which may be only two at the start, begins to meet and opens itself in prayer and listening, to God, to each other, to one's own heart. The mission becomes clarified through prayer, talking together, and being open to God's spirit. The group begins to live into commitment to the mission and one another, and to shape its life for the inward and outward journey.

2) The commitments of the members of the mission group need to be specific and clear, both to the inward and the outward aspects of the group's life. The group needs to decide upon a few spiritual disciplines that will guide and deepen both the inward journey and the outward. Daily prayer, including prayer for the mission and the other group members; reading and study of scripture and other resources pertinent to the group's mission; financial support of the mission; faithful attendance at all meetings; discerning one's own and others' gifts to be exercised in the group's inward and outward life; willingness to be held accountable for one's commitments. These are some disciplines that will nourish and deepen the group's life and work. There may be others the group finds essential to its life and work.

3) There must be an equal balance between the inward and outward life of the group. Most groups have little problem with the outward part, but great trouble with the inward. There is a tendency to "get on with it", especially when we feel the urgency of whatever it is we are called to do. But neglecting serious and substantial time given to the group's inward journey hampers the life of the group and its effectiveness in its mission. Mission groups are not only for the purpose of outward work related to the needs of the world; they are the context in which persons continue to work with the awakening to and deepening of their relationship to God. The primary temptation of mission groups is to give only passing attention to the inward journey. We want to change the world without being changed and changing persons, but it doesn't work that way. Jesus' preaching was "Repent, become new people, for the kingdom of God is near," not "Build the kingdom and try to work a little on yourselves along the way."

The group's inward journey time will include: A beginning time of worship together, which includes at least ten minutes of silence; a time for the sharing of prayer concerns. Significant time needs to be set aside for each member to share, on a regular basis, an accountability report. How am I doing with our group disciplines? Where am I struggling? Where am I experiencing growth? What are the most important concerns or celebrations in my life at this point? What have I been doing to contribute to the group's life and mission? As the member shares, the group gives full attention, may offer help or suggestions, but receives the report respectfully and in a supportive way. Most of the time, we don't need people to give us answers or advice. We need people to truly listen to us, which provides the safe and open space for us to see for ourselves what we need.

The group's outward journey time is given to the work of the mission. It is best that this follows the

inward journey portion of the meeting, to assure that the outward grows out of the inward.

4) Paul wrote that just as the human body is one and has many members, so the church, the community of Jesus, is one in spirit but diverse in ministries. What you are called to, I am not called to, and the other way around. Mission groups need to remain aware that they are part of one body called the Church of the Covenant, a community of the diverse workings of God's spirit. This means that each group does not expect that everyone will be involved in its mission. And it means that there needs to be cultivated a respect for and honoring of others whose call is different from our own. That's the way God works with and through us as a community. Committed to what we feel called to do, we cultivate a gratefulness for others through whom God is doing other things for the sake of the community itself and the world.

5) The group needs always to be open to and welcoming of others who may feel called to explore that particular mission to discern whether or not they are called to be part of that mission. Visiting a mission group is also an important way persons who are exploring a commitment to our church community get a sense of who we are, what sort of spirit lives here. Welcoming a person with a listening and respectful spirit is essential to every mission group. We need always to remember that each group (member) also represents the whole community (body) by the spirit with which it conducts its life and work.

6) There needs to be an annual time of recommitment for each mission group. The group needs to set aside a significant time of silent retreat for this, a day or a weekend. This is a time to be together in silence and prayer, each and together seeking God's leading. Am I still called to this group and its mission? If so, what do I need to examine and evaluate, what do I need to work on or deepen in my practice of our disciplines? What do I have to contribute to this mission at this point? Looking at such questions is why an extended time of silence together is important. And there needs always to be the freedom, the REAL freedom, not to recommit.

We are now in a season of reflection leading up to our annual recommitment retreat and commitment Sunday as a community. This can also be a time of renewal for mission groups as well, a time to give attention to their lives as mission groups. It may be a time in which the seeds of new missions begin to emerge in the lives of persons listening for God's call. In all of these things, this is the way we have tried to be responsive to our own awakening, or repentance, and to God's call in our lives that brings healing to the life of God's world.