

**175 YEARS OF MINISTRY:
SERVING OTHERS
AS AN EXPRESSION OF THE
LOVE OF CHRIST**

SUNDAY, MAY 22, 2011

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Matthew 28: 5-10, 16-20
175 Anniversary: Serving Others As An
Expression of the Love of Christ

“Go into all the world and make disciples among the nations...” sounds like a pretty daunting undertaking. It is an enterprise that involves raising funds, training missionaries, setting up support systems, and translating the scriptures into every written language known to humanity.

In 1810, just sixteen years before our four founding families first met to worship in a log cabin at the edge of the Michigan wilderness, a twenty two year old seminary student and son of a New England Congregational minister could not ignore the missionary appeal of the closing words of Matthew’s gospel, “Go into all the world...” His name was Adoniram Judson and he was a student at the same Congregational seminary that I graduated from 171 years later in 1981, the same year that my colleague, Emily Joye McGaughy was born!

Adoniram Judson helped form the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions, the for-runner of our United Church of Christ Global Ministries. Two years later, in 1812, he and his wife Ann sailed for India to be missionaries. When they arrived, they were refused entry by the Indian government, and so they went to Burma where they worked for six years without winning a single convert. During those years they were plagued with ill health, loneliness, and the death of their baby son. Adoniram Judson was imprisoned for nearly two years, and during that time he began working to translate the Bible into the Burmese language. Soon after his release from prison, Ann and their baby daughter, Maria, died of spotted fever. In his grief, Adoniram Judson withdrew into seclusion, and there he completed the translation of the entire Bible into Burmese. Thirty years after his death,

Burma had 63 Christian churches and over 7,000 baptized converts.

Today there is a congregation of Burmese Christians worshipping in this church building here in Battle Creek because sixteen years before our congregation was first organized, the son of a New England Congregational pastor felt compelled to follow Jesus' great commission: "Go into all the world and make disciples..." Last year when Pastor Van from the Burmese congregation preached his last sermon for us before leaving Battle Creek to organize a new church among the Burmese refugees in Houston Texas, he reminded us of the story of Adoniram Judson, the person who connected us 200 years before we ever met.

You and I are here today because the word "go" has always been at the heart of our Christian faith. The church of Jesus Christ is not a club that exists for the benefit of its members. It is an outwardly focused missionary movement that seeks to spread the love of Christ throughout the world.

In the 19th century, when we spoke of mission and outreach, we focused on sending missionaries to far off places to proclaim the good news of the gospel in word and deed. We sent missionaries to India, Asia, China and Africa building schools and medical clinics, digging wells and training farmers in better agricultural practices. They didn't just preach and teach the gospel message; they embodied it by serving others as an expression of the love of Christ. Today, Rev. Susan Valiquette, who was once an associate pastor at our church here in Battle Creek, is now a missionary in South Africa where she serves as the chaplain and instructor at the Inanda Seminary for girls in Durban. Throughout its 175 year history, this church has been supporting people who have been inspired to pack up their lives and go to far away places in response to Jesus' great commission: "go into all the world to make disciples among the nations..."

But today the word “go” isn’t only focused on places far away. Mission and outreach also includes everything that all of us say and do to spread the love of Christ from the moment we go out from this church building until the moment when we return again. Today the mission field begins at the threshold of the church doors. For most of us today, Jesus’ great commission means: go into the offices and factories where you work and make disciples, go into the groups where you socialize and make disciples, go into the stores where you shop and make disciples, go into the classrooms where you learn and make disciples, go into the bars where you drink and make disciples, go into the fitness centers where you exercise and make disciples. Where ever your life takes you on a daily basis, go and make disciples. Don’t keep your faith to yourself. Go serve others as an expression of the love of Christ.

At our Awestruck worship service this past Wednesday, three of our church members reflected on their experiences as daily life missionaries, people who are striving to share the gospel through the ordinary activities of their lives here in Battle Creek.

Susan Glidden works for Lutheran Social Services at their office in downtown Battle Creek. They are Michigan’s largest refugee resettlement organization and part of what attracted Susan to the job was their mission statement. It is actually the same statement as our worship theme this morning: “Serving Others as an Expression of the Love of Christ.” It seemed like the perfect opportunity for Susan to bear witness to her Christian faith, not through preaching or teaching, but through the ways she interacts with clients and coworkers in the office.

Susan works at the front desk and is the first person everyone encounters when they come in the door. Early on, Susan resolved that she wanted to express the love of Christ by greeting people as if it was Christ greeting them. Being

understanding and sympathetic and welcoming and having a servant's heart seemed like a prerequisite for Susan and so she committed herself to doing her best to embody Christ's love in all her interactions with clients and staff. But people are messy. They are moody and petty. They get frustrated and angry. They can be manipulative and downright nasty at times. What seemed like a simple mission has turned out to be incredibly challenging. It is hard serving others as an expression of the love of Christ when they don't always behave as if they deserve to be treated well.

Susan's commitment at work reminds us that people are messy: they are always broken and whole, sinners and saints, infuriating and inspiring. And those are the people whom we are called to serve as an expression of the love of Christ.

Diane Dickey was out walking her dog one day when she met a woman who is visiting Battle Creek for a few weeks and was also out walking her dog. Their pets provided a connecting point and they soon found themselves settling into comfortable conversation as they got to know each other's life stories. Diane is not what anyone would consider an evangelical zealot who is constantly getting into people's faces and challenging them to get right with God. As far as I know she was not one of those people going around warning everyone to get ready for last night's rapture. But after listening to the visitor share her story, Diane felt compelled to invite her to come to our church. This church has provided spiritual sustenance and supportive community for Diane and she wanted the person she met to come and experience what has become a valued part of her own life.

Today we don't have to go far to find people who are yearning for good news. Everywhere we go we find people who are struggling to hold on to hope. Today more people than ever before are isolated and lonely, searching for meaning and looking for a way to make a difference in the

world. Diane's experience reminds us that responding to Jesus' great commission to "go into all the world and make disciples..." can be as simple as inviting someone you know to come and be part of this community of faith, hope and love.

Finally, Maria Ptacin talked about the experience she had when she said "yes" to a friend's invitation to come and experience what church is like here at First Congregational UCC. Maria was yearning for a deeper faith connection and a community where she could share her gifts for ministry and her friend Laurel Macon invited her to come and worship with us at a Wednesday evening Awestruck Celebration. Maria came for dinner one night and stayed for worship. She was graciously welcomed, warmly received and felt inspired by the message of the service that night. The next week when she returned, Karen Parker immediately sat down at a table next to her, introduced herself and started up a conversation. From the first time she came, Maria felt like she belonged here.

Maria's story reminds us that sharing hospitality is one of the ways we serve others as an expression of the love of Christ. Sharing hospitality is about much more than food and drink. It is about inclusion, it is about making a place for someone, it is about sharing the blessings of abundant life.

For 175 years, faithful women, men and children of this church have been responding to Jesus' great commission: "go into all the world and make disciples..." Sometimes we are called to far off places. Sometimes we are called to places just beyond the walls of this church building. "Go" is the word at the heart of our faith. All of us are missionaries. Go...serve others as an expression of the love of Christ. Amen.

