

First Presbyterian Church

Cheyenne, Wyoming

March 27, 2011

Mission Speaker, Dr. Jonathan Partee

Worship Theme: Who is My Neighbor?

Luke 10:25-37; Deuteronomy 6:1-9

[By way of introduction, Pastor Bob shared that he grew up 1 mile from where I am currently raising my family and grew up in the church I am currently attending. In addition, my father taught at Pittsburgh Theological Seminary where he went to school and my grandfather, Don McClure, was instrumental in inspiring him to enter the ministry.]

Rev. Garrard has told you of some of the connections we share. I should also mention that we both follow the trinity ... the Steelers, the Pirates and the Penguins. Our connections go beyond what Bob has already shared. Bob's brother, Doug, encouraged Sara and I before we went to Ethiopia where I taught Physics at Addis Ababa University and Sara was taught English at the Evangelical Theological College. Doug was also at First Presbyterian Church in Boulder where my brother was attending. Bob mentioned my grandfather, Don McClure, who was martyred in Gode, Ethiopia in 1977 as one of his inspirations to enter the ministry. When I was in Ethiopia, I wanted to visit my Grandfather's grave, but it was still dangerous, given its location near the border of Somalia. When I arrived in Gode, I was terrified to see the anti-aircraft guns, the spent munitions littering the landscape, and the guards carrying AK-47s. Needing directions, I saw two "highland" Ethiopians standing nearby with a Somali. I stumbled through my Amharic question and the Somali looked at me and said in perfect English "You speak Amharic like a Western Pennsylvanian."¹ It is truly a small world, after all.

In Amharic, the language many Ethiopians speak, the word "ingeda" means stranger. However, the same word has another meaning. "Ingeda" also means guest. This is, in fact, the scriptural imperative – Christ's attitude on how we should treat those whose ways are strange, whose ideas are peculiar, whose looks are different. In Ethiopia, Sara and I are described by all of those things. And yet, in many cases, we were treated with sacrificial hospitality.

In our second week in Ethiopia, a waiter from a local tea shop invited us to his home. The waiter, a young man in his 20's, had graduated from high-school with a 3.0 GPA which is far, far too low to be admitted into the few spots available at the university. The only way he could support his family was to work 60 hours a week waiting tables, for less than \$30 a month. His home was simply a mud and grass hut, with a tin roof. The whole family of eight lived on his salary in a space not much larger than a one car garage. Yet they invited us in, gave us a full tray of the traditional food, and went out and purchased two bottles of Coca-Cola. For Americans, a 12 oz. Coke in Ethiopia is a bargain at 25c a bottle, but for Ethiopians a 25c Coke is a huge sacrifice. I know this because once our Cokes were open, an adult set the immaculate

¹ The Somali, it turned out, had attended the University of Pittsburgh medical school.

bottle opener down on the table, and the children examined it carefully because they had obviously never seen it before. Once we were finished, the empty bottles were taken and given to the children, who tipped the end up and waited, in eager anticipation, for the last drop to slowly ooze down the bottle's neck and drop on their tongues. This single syrupy drop was savored by these children as a great and rare delicacy.

For the Ethiopians, we were ingeda, strangers, but we were also ingeda guests. American Christians, who give poorly out of their plenty, are truly humbled by those who give plenty out of their poverty.

In our scripture [Luke (10:25-37)] today, we read that an expert in the law stood up to test Jesus by asking what was necessary to inherit eternal life. This was the old Testament equivalent of asking "What do you think about Health Care Reform. Most anything Jesus answered would get him into trouble with one or another group. Instead of answering directly, Jesus turned it into a question. Jesus asked the expert "What do you think?" The expert, probably in an effort to show his knowledge, chose the first commandment "Love the Lord your God with all of your heart" and added to that a little-known verse, one verse out of a long list of Levitical laws, "Love your neighbor as yourself." (Leviticus 19:18) Much to the expert's surprise, Jesus said "That's exactly right. You're right! There's nothing I can add to that."

I imagine the expert in the law was stunned. He would not have expected Jesus to agree with him. So, in an effort to justify himself, in an effort to entrap Jesus, he asked the question that we ask ourselves today: "Who is my neighbor?" Jesus's response was to tell this story:

A man was going from Cheyenne to Denver when he fell into the hands of robbers. They stripped him of his clothes, beat him and went away, leaving him half-dead. After some time, a Catholic came down the same road, but when he saw the man lying on the pavement, he passed by on the other side. "This is really somebody else's problem," the Catholic said, "I've got too many problems in my own parish to worry about. I'll let someone else take care of this injured man. Besides, he's probably not even Catholic."

A few hours later, a Presbyterian came by but he, too, passed by on the other side of the road. "There are so many issues in my own city, in my own state, in my own country, and I really don't think this man is even an American. My energies should be directed towards those who live in my town."

Still later, a Muslim came to where the man was lying; and when he saw him, he took pity on him. He bandaged his wounds, put him in the back seat of his car, and took him to the hospital. The Muslim told the hospital: "Anything this man needs, charge it to me. I will reimburse you for whatever it takes to make him well."

And Jesus asks "Who was the neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?" The answer is now, as it was two thousand years ago, "The one who showed mercy to him." Every Christian knows that our neighbors are not only those who live next door. Our neighbors are not only those who live in our city. Our neighbors are anyone who needs help; anyone who needs mercy. Our neighbors live all over the world.

Today I'd like to tell you three stories about your Ethiopian neighbors. The stories I'll tell you are not isolated incidents, they are descriptive of the everyday life of millions of African fathers, mothers and children.

The first story I'd like to share concerns Aklilu, one of the top students at the Evangelical Theological College where Sara taught. Aklilu was a high school Physics teacher who decided to follow his dream of entering the ministry. He was accepted into the College and studied for three and a half years as Tigist, his wife, worked as a lawyer to support the family. Aklilu is an intelligent, honest, hardworking, popular student and he quickly went to the head of his class and was elected student council president. Aklilu and Tigist have three teenage daughters who come from Tigist's first marriage - her first husband died young and left her as a widow. When Aklilu was courting Tigist, Aklilu's friends strongly recommended that he not marry an older woman, especially one with children, for in Ethiopian culture, marrying an older woman is unheard of. However, they were in love, so they married and spent two wonderful years together.

Near the end of the fall semester, Tigist was admitted into the hospital with a severe case of asthma. While Ethiopian doctors are well trained, the facilities in Ethiopia are truly abysmal. The hospitals cannot charge their destitute patients very much money, the government cannot afford to subsidize treatment, and so the hospital must cut corners. One of the corners cut is that no medical personnel work on weekends. It's almost impossible to believe, but if an Ethiopian is gravely injured on Saturday, unless they can afford an expensive private clinic, they must wait until Monday to be treated. While in the hospital, Tigist's severe, but curable, asthma was complicated when she caught pneumonia. She was struggling to breathe, so she was using a breathing tube to provide additional oxygen. Nevertheless, she seemed to be getting better.

On Saturday, her breathing tube became dislodged. No doctor could be called, and no one was qualified or able to replace the tube, so her family stood helplessly by her bedside listening to each rasping, struggling, agonizing, strangled breath. On Sunday, she breathed her last. Her body was no longer able to pull in enough oxygen without the assistance of the breathing tube, so she suffocated. A simple medical condition, easily treatable in America or in Europe, led to death and tore apart an Ethiopian family. I wished those Americans who are only willing to help the guy living next door had been sitting with us at Tigist's funeral realizing the needlessness of her death and enduring the overwhelming grief of her husband. Can't you, in your God-given imagination, see Aklilu, grieving for his wife and wondering how he can face the future without her? In the face of this African father you see your neighbor.

The second story takes place deep in Southern Ethiopia, almost on the border of Kenya. On this semi-arid land, dry for most of the year, there live a group of people called the Wata. The Wata are the working-class subtribe of the Borana people. In many African traditions the artisans, those who work with clay, metal, wood or skins are despised. When a team of us visited the Wata in the summer of 1999, they were in desperate shape. The rains had failed, turning their semi-arid land into a burning desert. The weak cattle had to be driven over miles of rock-strewn land to the nearest,

filthy, stagnant water hole. The cattle could only be taken to water once every three days because nearby, warlike tribes often raided the Wata cattle and sometimes killed the herdsman. Getting water every day was just too dangerous. To add to all of this misery, the gods of the Wata demanded sacrifices of food and butter as the children of the Wata starved.

In the Wata camp, many of the children walked around listlessly, they did not run and play as happy, healthy children do. Their hair was an unhealthy ginger color; due to malnutrition their bellies were distended. The first night we were camped outside of the village, a child died of starvation. Anyone who has lost a child knows the crushing weight of that African mother's anguish and suffering. The grief in the tiny village was palpable. I wished that those persons who subscribe to those callous theories; those who believe that native people are happier left alone in their sickness and pagan superstitions could have been with us and tried to comfort that heart-broken African mother as her grief came in soul-wrenching sobs in mourning for her dead child. In your God-given imagination you can see that little baby in his mother's arms – with her tears falling on his dead body, can't you? In the face of the African mother you see your neighbor.

The third story takes place right outside Sara and my apartment building in Addis Ababa, the most modern city in all of Abyssinia. During our time in Ethiopia, we lived on the tenth floor of a twelve story building in a small, 30x20', studio apartment. By American standards, our building was in terrible disrepair. There was graffiti on the walls and the elevators only worked half of the time. Live 220V wires dangled into the stairwell, ready to injure a passing child. Ruined, bent, access hatches revealed a tangled mess of telephone wires. The windows in the stairwell were broken, so rain came straight in, pooling on the floor and running, like tiny waterfalls, down the stairs. Most of the light fixtures in the halls were gone and the wooden railings were covered with black, sticky film, remains from 30 years of hands. Our neighbors were doctors, lawyers, professors. We were living in an Ethiopian upper-middle-class apartment building.

When I left the apartment building each morning, a huddle of little children, sitting on the cold pavement a quarter of a mile away, would see me, flash their bright smiles, and quickly leap to their feet. Their eyes alight, they raced towards me, jostling for position like runners at the beginning of a race. Typically the older, stronger, bigger kids elbowed their way to the front as four or five pairs of legs churned, out-of-rhythm, like one large, uncoordinated beast. Through torn pants and frayed shirts, knees and elbows appeared and disappeared into the dingy gray garments that serve for clothing. As they neared me, the patter of bare feet on uneven, ruined asphalt slowed, and as one, the group smiled and held out their hands for what could be their best acquisition of the day: the bag of garbage I was carrying to the dumpster.

With our family histories in Africa, Sara and I thought, that we understood what kind of pain and suffering we would find in Ethiopia, but we were not adequately prepared. That a moldy orange or a rotten banana would be worth racing across a parking lot shows a level of need beyond what we could have imagined. Growing up in America insulates most Christians from such pain, but it does not excuse Christians

from the responsibility for those who are experiencing agony on a daily basis. In your imagination, you can see small children fighting for your garbage and it your heart breaks thinking of your own precious sons and daughters. In the face of African children you see your neighbors.

You will be pleased to know that the money given to your missionaries, the mission committee and the One Great Hour of Sharing is applied to situations just like these. Aklilu was given the funds necessary for him to graduate as the valedictorian and go on to a job teaching in an Ethiopian seminary. Our mission is currently working among the Wata and, in fact, the whole Borana tribe, improving the water system in their semi-arid land. When possible, funds were also given to provide Ethiopia children with the basic necessities of life. Much has been done, but much remains to be done.

When you go home today, I would like for you to imagine that your closest friend has just lost his spouse because of a fatal combination of asthma and inadequate medical care. What would you feel? What would you do?

When you sit down to dinner tonight, imagine that your next door neighbors are dying, due to a lack of food and water. What would you feel? What what would you do?

When you put out the garbage this week, I want you to imagine that thin children, dressed in rags, fight you for it. What would you feel? What would you do?

Jesus commands us simply "Love your neighbor as yourself." Therefore, in addition to whatever else we feel, we should feel love and find a way to express it.

What will you do? There are many things you can do to assist those who need help. The two most obvious are the offering of heartfelt prayer and financial resources. The needs of the world are so staggering that many of us suffer from "compassion fatigue." However, the fact that we cannot do everything is not an excuse to do nothing. Every person, every family, every denomination has a divine mandate to love God with all our heart and love our neighbor as our self.

Thanks be to God who gives us so much responsibility, yet also gives us His Spirit to guide us along the path of righteousness and mercy.