

Stand Up, Take Your Mat and Walk

Mark 2:1-12

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Almost every one of the 34,000 United Methodist churches in the United States has a unit of the United Methodist Women, which we call the UMW. They are often the “life blood” of our congregations and are dedicated to the following mission:

“The organized unit of the United Methodist Women shall be a community of women whose purpose is to know God and to experience freedom as whole person through Jesus Christ; to develop a creative, supportive fellowship; and to expand concepts of mission through participation in the global ministries of the church.”

One of the common activities of a UMW is to find ways to support our United Methodist mission workers around the world. As we heard from Jan Lull this morning, a long distance correspondence and compassionate hearts have resulted in an important friendship and significant signs of hope for future leaders in Africa with our church. Our UMW is now supporting twelve women at Africa University. Education can transform the world. And today it is no accident that it is non-governmental organizations such as the church in Africa that is empowering the next generation of women to become all that God is calling them to be.

Women are given the responsibility of providing security, education and nurture for the basic family unit by most cultures in Africa. Women travel for miles to gather water and wood; women plant the gardens that feed their families; women journey to the marketplace to sell what little surplus they have; women keep their children safe and healthy. As George Monboit, columnist for the UK Guardian writes, “If wealth was the inevitable result of hard work and enterprise, every woman in Africa would be an millionaire!”

Study after study suggests that as women have access to formal education their communities benefit from higher per capita income and decreased infant mortality, HIV/AIDS and population growth rates. Women and children are the most vulnerable members of any society and that is especially true in Africa. In any issue we confront....peace, health, education or economic development....women get the worst of it. Yet in spite of their crucial role in African culture and in its future, women in 75% of nations of Africa only receive a fraction of the opportunities for schooling than do men (UNESCO).

As Rev. Kelvin Sauls said a few years ago, “When you educate a man in Africa you change a life. When you educate a woman in Africa, you change a nation.”

Some will ask that with all of the problems we face here at home, why should we care about the education of people we don't know, who live in strange and distant lands? My only answer comes from the apostle Paul; "Now you are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it....if one part suffers, every part suffers with it." (I Cor. 12:27, 26 NIV)

In our scripture lesson this morning from the gospel of Mark, we find the story of Jesus healing a paralyzed man in Capernaum. There was a huge crowd at the house where Jesus was teaching. It was so crowded that the four friends who came to bring the bedridden man in hopes of the possibility of healing had to dig through the roof of sticks and mud to drop him in front of the Master. It is written "When Jesus saw their faith....he said...your sins are forgiven." [Note: "Their faith", plural, the four friends and the paralytic.]

Remember that in first century Palestine, physical illness was thought to be a punishment from God for a sin committed by the victim or previous generations of the victim's family. Yet only God could forgive sins and the pious officials in the room questioned Jesus' authority. To prove his authority as the "Son of Man"* Jesus says to the paralytic, "Stand up, take your mat and go home". And he does! All were amazed and praised God.

There are many levels of meaning to this text not the least of which is the faith of the friends and paralyzed man who would stop at nothing to seek his healing, even a crowd and an adobe roof!

Miracles don't always happen when you are alone. In many instances we get by with the help of our friends. The faith of those who stand by us and support us and carry us when we can't take another step can be as important in healing as our own determination and faith. Many of us here this morning know that to be true!

Why would that be any different on a global scale? Africa has great challenges to be sure and tremendous resources, potential and faith. They don't need us to solve their problems for them as if we had all the answers. [Which we don't!] But there are times when they can use a helping hand, a community of friends and fellow travelers who will share with them the journey to healing and hope.

That's what we can be in our support of the woman students at Africa University.

I am very proud to be a commissioned missionary of the United Methodist church; commissioned by Bishop Hobart Omstutz in 1979 before serving the Board of Global Ministries in Sarawak, Northern Borneo for three years, and prior to that studying and working for a year at the Kaaga Rural Training Center, in Meru, Kenya, East Africa. I am proud of that title even knowing that the role of the "missionary" has gotten a negative connotation among some today with images of hypocrisy and coercive conversions.

At the end of World War II most of Africa was colonized by a handful of European nations which had for centuries exploited the raw materials and people of those lands. In many cases

Protestant and Roman Catholic Church institutions and missionaries played a key role in that exploitation.

Yet for all of the criticism of the colonial mission enterprise, some justified, some not, in the end it was the church that taught many Africans how to read and write. And in so doing, lead quite directly, even if it wasn't the intention of the missionaries, to the destruction of colonialism and the liberation of its people.

To a person, whether it was Jomo Kenyatta of Kenya, Able Muzarewa of the former Rhodesia, Patrice Lumumba of the Democratic Republic of the Congo or Nelson Mandela of South Africa, the great freedom fighters of colonial Africa, hundreds of men and women, were taught to read and write at mission schools. And, they were taught to read the Bible. Even if presented for all of the wrong reasons, these brilliant men and women caught the biblical vision of God's future and their rightful place in it. Peace, justice and equality were their promise too! Once the leaders of the captive populations were literate and informed, it was merely a matter of time for colonialism to die of its own moral bankruptcy. By the year 1970 only a few African nations were still under colonial rule.

In most cases today, and it is certainly true of United Methodists among others, North American missionaries working outside of the United States are not overlords or agents of exploitation but rather friends, colleagues and partners with the local churches they serve and under whose indigenous authority they are now directed.

When we support the education of African women at our University in Zimbabwe, we are equipping the next generation of African mission agents to return to their native lands and lead the transformation of their nations.

We will celebrate the 20th anniversary of Africa University this year. The first United Methodist institution of higher learning on the Continent of Africa was opened in March of 1992 with 40 students. Today there are 1,634 students from 23 different African counties. In our twenty years AU has matriculated 4,000 graduates.

Our graduates are remaining in Africa and making a positive difference. Across Africa, our graduates are leading, innovating, sowing hope and healing and meeting Africa's vital needs. Prayers are being answered and dreams are coming true in ways that impact the lives of millions of people on the continent. (Bishop Ernst Lyght, 1/26/12)

Jesus still says to those who have faith, "Stand up, pick up your mat and walk!" And...Sometimes we need the community of friends to get us there. We can be such agents of God's future for our sisters at Africa University. We can be such mission agents right here at home, too. We are all in this together.

Amen.

*"Son of Man" is a title which Jesus used of himself, probably seemed to his listeners to carry either of two meanings, a) that Jesus called himself a typical human being in accordance with the common meaning or b) that Jesus linked himself to the prophesied figure of Dan 7:13-14 who was popularly regarded as the coming Messiah. Nowhere does Jesus fully disclose his own understanding of the term. However, each meaning by itself, as well as both together, would have appealed to him. It was also characteristic of him to speak in such a way as to oblige his hearers to determine their own personal attitudes towards him as a part of the process of understanding his words. (Mk. 2:10 note, The New Oxford Annotated Bible, NRSV, Oxford University Press, 1991, p. NT 50)