

Luke 10:1-12

3 John 1-8

November 11, 2018

Preached by Philip Gladden at the Wallace Presbyterian Church, Wallace, NC

**STEP UP. STEP OUT.
BE A MISSION CO-WORKER**

Let us pray: Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

In this day of e-mails, texts, Twitter, Skype, Face Time, and Instant Messaging, it can be a pleasant surprise to get a written letter in the mail. Most of us will open the annual Christmas letter from family and friends in the coming weeks. Perhaps some folks still write personal thank you notes. It's nice to check the daily mail and find an envelope that is addressed in someone's distinctive handwriting, rather than see a pre-printed address label.

Twenty of the twenty-seven books of the New Testament are actually letters. Remember, these letters were written by real people to real people. Even though we only hear one side of the conversation (that of the letter writer), we get a good idea of some of the issues and situations in the early churches throughout Asia Minor during the latter part of the first century A.D.

The third letter of John is the second shortest letter in the New Testament, at fifteen verses just two verses longer than 2 John. John, the elder, writes to the beloved Gaius, a leader in a local church. John writes to commend Gaius for his hospitality to traveling mission co-workers, even the people Gaius didn't know. John encourages Gaius to continue showing such hospitality in the future. Then John criticizes another church leader named Diotrephes, who apparently wasn't showing such hospitality. Either Diotrephes was trying to pull a power play and establish his own authority in the church or (more kindly) he was trying to protect the Christian community from false teachings. John ends his letter with his hope to see Gaius in person, with a blessing of peace, and with greetings from and to friends.

We received a similar letter this week from José Luis Casal, Director of Presbyterian World Mission. He greets us with these words, "Dear partners in God's mission." He commends us for our ongoing support of Dustin and Sherri Ellington when he writes, "Thank you very much for your support of our mission co-workers. The prayers and financial gifts of people like you enable them to work alongside global partners to address poverty, hopelessness, violence and other pressing problems in the name of Jesus Christ."

Mr. Casal then describes in more detail the ministry of our mission co-workers: "Every day, Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) mission co-workers are blessed to be able to walk alongside their brothers and sisters across the globe. Listening to each other in faith and in friendship, they learn from each other how to work towards a world in which everyone flourishes. Acting upon what they discover together, PC(USA) mission co-workers and our global partners strengthen the body of Christ."

Echoing John the Elder's encouragement to Gaius, "Therefore we ought to support such people, so that we may become co-workers with the truth," Mr. Casal writes, "The majority of our mission co-workers' funding comes from the special gifts of individuals and congregations like yours, for God's mission is a responsibility of the whole church, not a particular area of the church. In faith, our mission co-workers accept a call to mission service. In faith, World Mission, representing the whole church and you, sends them to work with our global partners. In faith, will you also commit to support this work with your prayers and financial gifts?"

He ends his letter with these words, "At God's service and at your service!"

In both John's and José's letters, they address particular situations in their churches, but they share a common principle — partnership with mission co-workers. We don't know exactly what Gaius' hospitality to the brothers entailed — maybe a place to sleep and food to eat, perhaps some money to send them on their way in a manner worthy of God. But the theological stewardship principle underlying that specific, concrete request and action is working together — even with people you might not know — in service to God and to God's people.

The same principle of mutual and shared ministry shows up in Paul's second letter to the Christians at Corinth. One of Paul's greatest desires was to collect an offering from the churches in Asia Minor to benefit the mother church in Jerusalem. The challenge was that, for the most part, church members in Asia Minor were Gentiles, while church members in Jerusalem were Jews. Paul knew there was a specific, concrete need in Jerusalem — the saints there were suffering in some way and needed help. Paul also knew that a specific, concrete pledge and offering of money from the Gentiles for the Jews would show the unity we have in Jesus Christ.

Here's what Paul writes to the Corinthian Christians about the theological importance of their offering (and there is some practical advice mixed in, also): "I do not mean that there should be relief for others and pressure on you, but it is a question of a fair balance between your present abundance and their need, so that their abundance may be for your need, in order that there may be a fair balance . . . You will be enriched in every way for your great generosity, which will produce thanksgiving to God through us; for the rendering of this ministry not only supplies the needs of the saints but also overflows with many thanksgivings to God. Through the testing of this ministry you glorify God by your obedience to the confession of the gospel of Christ and by the generosity of your sharing with them and with all others, while they long for you and pray for you because of the surpassing grace of God that he has given you. Thanks be to God for his indescribable gift!" (2 Corinthians 8:13-15; 9:11-15)

We also received an envelope in the mail recently from the Presbytery of Coastal Carolina, with a cover letter from Dr. Bill Reinhold, our recently retired General Presbyter and Stated Clerk. This packet is the presbytery's annual "askings" letter, which is sent out to each of the 180+ congregations throughout southeastern North Carolina. Bill's letter was similar to John's letter to Gaius in tone, structure, and theology. In our church's line item budget there is an item designated "Budgeted Benevolences." This is our congregation's annual contribution to the presbytery's mission budget. As Bill re-

minds us in his letter, “This supports the programs and ministries of the Presbytery’s budget which includes mission support for the General Assembly.”

How do our “Budgeted Benevolences” for the Presbytery of Coastal Carolina benefit God’s people (including all of us in this church)? Youth ministries and activities, the Hunger Program which provides financial grants to food pantries, officer education for newly elected elders, Christian Education resources, help for congregations seeking pastors, the services of our Mission Coordinators such as Nancy Gladden, Laura Lupton, and Clarence Page — and the list goes on and on.

I took today’s sermon title from the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) World Mission website. Here is a brief explanation of what it means to be a mission co-worker: “While we have traditionally called those who serve the call of God around the world for the church missionaries, we now refer to them as mission co-workers to represent that they walk with and work with our partners in the countries we serve. The task of a mission co-worker is to help support the work of the partner and listen to the partner’s advice and guidance. As natives of the countries and lands we serve, our partners know well the needs and values of those they serve. We value their guidance and customs and want to become part of their work.”

The website has information about opportunities with the Presbyterian Mission Agency if you think God is calling you to the mission field. You can also look at a map of everywhere the Presbyterian Mission Agency serves in the world, and read stories about our mission co-workers throughout the world.

Most of our mission co-workers give up much to serve the church and our Lord on our behalf. They travel and live lean as they work with partners in all places around the globe. They serve at the invitation of the partner churches and are dependent upon the hospitality of their partners.

In many ways, this sounds similar to the instructions Jesus gave the seventy missionaries he sent out. Jesus told them, “Carry no purse, no bag, no sandals . . . Remain in the same house, eating and drinking whatever they provide, for the laborer deserves to be paid. Whenever you enter a town and its people welcome you, eat what is set before you.” (Luke 10:4, 7, 8)

I have experienced first-hand the hospitality of mission partners, whether it was in an island community in Tabasco, Mexico when the fishermen fed us their daily catch for lunch rather than sell it in the market or at a church luncheon in Lusaka, Zambia where we were served chicken AND beef in a place where many people don’t often have any kind of meat to eat.

So, our mission co-workers depend on people like us to be able to do their work with God’s people and our church partners. When we first began to support Dustin and Sherri Ellington in Zambia, we had a missions dinner in the Fellowship Hall. As part of the program, I mentioned that (at the time) it cost about \$75,000 annually to support a mission co-worker and that Wallace Presbyterian was going to start providing some support for the Ellingtons.

After dinner, a church member came to me and said, “Do you mean our church is going to send the Presbyterian World Mission program \$75,000 a year to support the

Ellingtons? Where are we going to get that money?” After I explained to her that we would only be contributing part of the needed funds, I asked, “But why not? Wouldn’t it be great if our church could fully support a mission co-worker?”

\$75,000 a year sounds pretty daunting, doesn’t it? But that’s when we look at the amount at a macro level. What if we break it down? The rule of thumb number of giving units in our church is about 110. So, that works out to \$681.81 per year per giving unit, which means \$56.82 per month or \$1.87 per day. What could you not spend \$1.87 a day on and never miss? Or \$50 a month? I don’t know if we could ever pull it off, but breaking down the numbers that way ought to give us pause before we too quickly say, “Oh, we could never do that” or “We don’t have enough to do something like that.”

Someone told me the other day, “Every morning I read the obituaries to make sure my name isn’t listed.” Here’s an obituary I came across the other day: “Our church was saddened to learn this week of the death of one of our most valued members, Someone Else. For many, many years as a part of our church, Someone Else did far more than a normal person’s share of the work. Whenever there was a job to do, a class to teach, or a meeting to attend, everybody said, ‘Let Someone Else do it.’ Whenever leadership was mentioned, this wonderful person was looked to for inspiration as well as results — ‘Someone Else can work with that group.’

“It was common knowledge that Someone Else was among the most generous givers. Whenever there was a financial need, everyone assumed Someone Else would make up the difference. Now Someone Else is gone! We wonder what we are going to do. Someone Else has left a wonderful example to follow, but who is going to follow it? Who is going to do the things Someone Else did? When you are asked to help this year, remember — we can’t depend on Someone Else anymore.”

Do you want to be a mission co-worker? Maybe you’ll never leave the familiarity and comfort of your home to go to a far-away place in the mission field. But there are plenty of opportunities right here at home to be a mission co-worker and to support our mission co-workers who are abroad on our behalf.

You’ll be getting a letter and packet from the Stewardship & Finance Ministry Team in the next few weeks. The packet and letter will be similar in tone, content, and theology as John’s letter to Gaius, Paul’s letter to the Corinthians, and Mr. Casal’s and Dr. Reinhold’s letters to us.

As the apostle Paul wrote, “the rendering of this ministry not only supplies the needs of the saints but also overflows with many thanksgivings to God.” And, as John wrote to Gaius so many years ago, “We ought to support such people, so that we may become co-workers with the truth.”

Let us pray: Lord our God, in Jesus Christ you have taught us that love is the fulfilling of the law. Send your Holy Spirit upon us, and pour into our hearts your most excellent gift of love. May we love you with our whole

***being, and our neighbors as ourselves; through Jesus Christ our Lord.
Amen.***