



# SERMON OF THE WEEK

First Presbyterian Church of Honolulu at Ko'olau

March 1, 2015

"Even Though"

The Rev. Dr. Dan Chun

It is great to be back in Hawaii. Our church group of 15 had a great time in the Philippines last week. Our primary goal for going was to learn more about ministry partners of the non-profit called MADE IN HOPE and its efforts to prevent sex trafficking and domestic violence in the Philippines.

Many people have been asking me about our trip, so I've decided to give you a brief summary about it. For me, the trip began last Sunday when Steve Peich, Gary Toh, and I took off on the long 15-hour trip to Manila, Philippines, where we met a dozen others from Hawaii making the journey. Hundreds of our members over the years have taken these short-term mission trips. Why? As it says on the Compassion website: "In order to provide compassion to others, we must understand what it is."

The word "compassion" means to "suffer with." It's an emotional response of sympathy. But it's not just a feeling. It's combined with an overwhelming desire to help because we feel it that when they suffer, we suffer. Because we have compassion, we want to take action and help the person who is suffering.

So such trips open up our minds, hearts, and souls to literally help those who desperately need our help. And we should help considering that we have so much compared to the rest of the world. One of the

mission trip team leaders was First Prez member Chris Kanemura, who also works with Made In Hope, which tries to raise awareness of domestic violence and sex trafficking issues both here in Hawaii and in the Philippines.

Before I got to the Philippines, most of the team had already done several site visits of Made in Hope's ministry partners. The first place they went to was Baguio City, which was about a 6-hour drive north of Manila headed by a woman called Ate Ely. This remarkable woman, along with others, had planted a growing and thriving congregation called Agape Church in a poor area of Baguio.

That's our team on the long and swinging bridge going to Agape Church. Glad they made it back and since I have acrophobia I'm glad I missed that trek. But I wish I did see Agape Church and here it is. (Picture of the church was shown.)

Ate Ely also leads Turning Point Ministries, which provides shelter for orphans and others needing shelter. She personally cares for about 15 to 20 orphaned children.

Right next door to Agape Church is the Asia Seed Project, a group that's committed to training and helping rural families provide adequate food and income for themselves through small-scale gardening, organic farming, and livestock raising. The Asia Seed Project

believes that families that are able to live sustainably are less vulnerable to being trafficked.

After Baguio, the team went to Manila and spent time with the women at Samaritana Transformation Ministries. These women are transitioning out of prostitution and are learning new skills that they can use to earn honest living.

This area around Manila is a hot spot for prostitution, child molestation, and domestic violence. As many as 100-thousand street children are involved in and victimized by prostitution, some of them as young as 11-years-old. In fact, 1 out of every 10 children trafficked around the world is Filipino. BTW, the average age of one entering into prostitution in Hawaii is 13.4 years of age, with more than 125 prostitution houses in Hawaii.

After visiting Samaritana, the team visited RIGHT START, which is a fantastic after-school program for kids in an economically depressed neighborhood in Quezon City. Ninety percent of these kids live in homes without a father. Rates for unemployment, domestic violence, drug and alcohol use are high. But RIGHT START is providing a safe and loving Christian environment for these kids to grow.

So while the team did all that with Pastor Tim, I arrived a few days later in Manila with Steve and Gary.

**W**hile in Manila, I was able to meet two of my Compassion kids, Elayne on the left is 19 years old now and is in college. Pam and I have supported her since elementary school days. That's Leo Paul on the right who is now 15, and we have been sponsoring him for many years now too.

Not only do these children live in tremendous poverty but they have suffered great heartaches too. Elayne's father is an alcoholic and has abandoned the family. Her mother could not find a good paying job in the Philippines, so she went to the country of Dubai where many other Filipinas go to find jobs. Elayne's mother works there in a hotel laundry service. She has missed most of Elayne's childhood. Elayne said she sees her mom maybe once every two years when she can get a vacation.

When Leo Paul was a young child, his mother abandoned him. Then just a few years ago, while I was already sponsoring him, Leo Paul's father was murdered in his home in a case of mistaken identity. And then two years ago Leo Paul's family lost their entire house when Typhoon Haiyan hit southern Philippines. But thankfully through Compassion, Pam and I were able to support Leo Paul and his family in the rebuilding of their new house.

With no father and an absent mother, Leo Paul now lives with his aging grandparents. His grandfather is currently very ill. Leo Paul hopes to become an engineer some day, and I hope to help him make that dream come true.

Behind those smiles is great sadness. So Compassion set it up that I could take them to the Manila Aquarium to give them some fun times and experiences they don't normally have. We went into a penguin exhibit at the aquarium

where they allow you to go under the penguins and then pop up so you can be in the exhibit with the penguins and have the chance to feed them in 23-degree climate.

Then we went to a Fish Spa at the Ocean Park to have what is called Doctor Fish. The fish eat away the dead skin on our feet, which was fun but ticklish at the same time, and that's why you heard the children's chaperones screaming in the background.

I also had the chance to see the two college kids that our church elders and deacons are sponsoring through Compassion's College Program: Kayce Esteban and Queenie Ibon. Both of them have gone through much hardship. Queenie lost her father and at early age and both come from great poverty. And by the way on March 22 and 29, we will all have a chance to sponsor a Compassion child during our Compassion Sunday.

We saw tremendous poverty in Manila. We went into the homes of some who lived near the river in Manila. The houses were small and rickety and so vulnerable to the flooding. And of course, there are kids everywhere, and they love to photo bomb you as you can see in this picture.

One of the reasons for our going to the Philippines was to be part of a conference in Davao City called SALT AND LIGHT, which aimed to raise awareness on the problem of human trafficking and domestic violence. Steve, Laura, and I spoke at it and the rest of the team provided prayer support. Davao is an hour and-a-half flight south of Manila, in the southern part of the Philippines called Mindanao. Mindanao is a set of islands where there is great terrorist activity.

The conference was put on by two young adult women, Michelle

Tolentino and Rafonzel Pabunag or "Raf" for short. Many of you may have met and spoken with them because they have both spoken at our church on previous Compassion Sundays. Both of them were Compassion-sponsored kids who grew up in the slums of Manila and Davao. But both were able to go to college because of the ministry of Compassion International.

The amazing thing is that they had a dream of putting on a conference that would build up the body of Christ in the Philippines. Their dream and efforts resulted in their inaugural conference gathering 333 leaders/pastors from 105 churches and nonprofit organizations to encourage and unify them and to teach them about the huge problem of sex trafficking and domestic violence in the Philippines.

Over there anywhere from 450-thousand to 800-thousand women are trafficked and prostituted within the country. And that's not even counting the children. In the last 10 years there have been 174 cases in Davao City of violence against women and children involving Filipino police and soldiers. But most of the cases are against the police officers who are supposed to be protecting the women and children. And just last fall, the Davao Police Chief was charged with domestic abuse against his wife and children. He was ultimately fired.

The more I think about Michelle and Raf, the more I am impressed with them. I was trying to think, how many American young adults in their 20's and 30's would say, what can we do to build up the body of Christ? And instead of focusing on themselves or only thinking of their own issues, like putting on a young adults conference on relationships, Michelle and Raf thought bigger!

**T**hey had a greater vision of how to bring unity to all of the churches, build up the pastors and leaders of non-government organizations, support them and then alert them about the major issues that are affecting their country, like sex trafficking, pornography, and domestic violence. How many young adults do that?

By God's grace, our church's Impact Ministries Team felt moved to fund most of that conference. YOUR tithes and offerings planted the seeds to help protect thousands of families and children from sex trafficking and domestic violence. Good for you all!

Now in the short time we have together before communion, what does this all mean? The sermon title is *Even Though*. EVEN THOUGH, there is suffering in this world, may the word go out, from this day forth, that First Prez will try to help. Even though you may be suffering today, may you know, that First Prez is a spiritual hospital. We will try our hardest to help you spiritually, emotionally, physically. Even though you come here today with great burdens, know this: that God, our Lord Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit desires to help you. God is a faithful God.

This is Lent, the approximately six-week season just before Easter, when followers of Jesus traditionally use it as a time of repentance, reflection, fasting, and giving to the poor to remind us of how the Lord suffered and died for us. But when we are suffering, we might think that God doesn't hear us or that He doesn't exist. Nothing could be further from the truth.

The Book of Habakkuk in the Old Testament is the writings of a prophet named Habakkuk, who asked the Lord on behalf of the Jewish people the age-old question that

many of us ask. Right in the first chapter in the second verse comes these penetrating and heart-felt words – the same kinds of words people in poverty cry out. These are people who don't have justice or political system to protect them, the same kinds of words you may SHOUT out.

*Hab. 1:2 How long, O LORD, must I call for help? But you do not listen! "Violence is everywhere!" I cry, but you do not come to save.*

*Hab. 1:3 Must I forever see these evil deeds? Why must I watch all this misery? Wherever I look, I see destruction and violence. I am surrounded by people who love to argue and fight.*

*Hab. 1:4 The law has become paralyzed, and there is no justice in the courts. The wicked far outnumber the righteous, so that justice has become perverted.*

These words are often on the lips of those who face disease and tragedy and trauma. These words would be true of the people in poor areas, like the ones in the Philippines that we visited.

Many of those who are poor are powerless. They have families in which the main perpetrators in their lives are their own family members. And to make matters worse, the justice system is slow in helping them, or it's essentially non-existent. They are the forgotten people with no voice. Even the police or their soldiers do not always protect them.

In clear words, the Bible says we must advocate for them. In the book of wise words in the Bible called Proverbs, it says in the 31<sup>st</sup> chapter:

*Prov. 31:8 Speak out for those who cannot speak, for the rights of all the destitute.*

*Prov. 31:9 Speak out, judge righteously, defend the rights of the poor and needy.*

For some of the communities we visited, we wanted to say help is on the way, whether it is pastors and non-profits being taught to protect them, or whether it is the knowledge that God knows what's going on and that God is on your side.

And that's how the book of Habakkuk ends in the last and third chapter, as the prophet says to his people who have suffered for many years,:

*Hab. 3:17 EVEN THOUGH the fig trees have no blossoms, and there are no grapes on the vines; EVEN THOUGH the olive crop fails, and the fields lie empty and barren; EVEN THOUGH the flocks die in the fields, and the cattle barns are empty,*

*Hab. 3:18 YET I will rejoice in the LORD! I will be joyful in the God of my salvation!*

*Hab. 3:19 The Sovereign LORD is my strength! He makes me as surefooted as a deer, able to tread upon the heights.*

So I want to say to you, that even though you or your loved ones are in pain today, or you are feeling there is an injustice, God knows and help is on the way. Especially if you are living in an EVEN THOUGH season where you have not gotten to the YET stage where you can say "Yet, I trust God."

EVEN THOUGH you might have lost a loved know, know that God has not forgotten you. EVEN THOUGH you have gotten some bad medical news or are presently suffering from a challenging disease or injury or from surgery, God has not abandoned you. EVEN THOUGH you are having difficulty in a relationship, God can help if you ask him.

**E**VEN THOUGH, the finances are tough, God will not abandon you.

LIFE IS HARD here and in the world. I have just come back from an area like Davao city where every 5 hours a woman is beaten in a domestic dispute. In Baguio City the spouse abuse is as high as 50% of the marriages. In the city of Cebu in the Philippines it is 60%.

But I also know that in the USA, nearly 4 women die each day from domestic violence. And one in three women have been raped or beaten in their lifetime. I would be remiss after helping other women in another country not to say to my own church that I pastor, that if you are the victim of domestic violence, please tell our staff. We can only help if we know. In 70% of the homes where women are beaten, children are beaten as well.

Considering that all over the world domestic violence, prostitution, and the porn industry are mainly perpetrated by men, I want to say to our men, please let us help. We can get you to therapists who can help.

Now when some of you hear me say, "EVEN THOUGH you are suffering, God hears and that God can pull you out of the ashes," You may hear a voice inside you that says, "No way. That is a pipe dream. That is so naïve! People who suffer will always suffer. There is no YET, Yet, God hears and I will praise Him." Know today that is not a voice from Jesus. It's some other voice.

From my trip to the poorest of areas I have seen first hand people redeemed by a real God who heard their cries. I want to close with a video of 8 college students who have been sponsored through Compassion by people like some of you.

On this video I took in Davao, these are young men and women who have come from utter poverty, some of whom have been sexually, physically, and emotionally abused. They were released from poverty by Jesus through many of those who are followers of Christ. But EVEN THOUGH some of them now want to be doctors, or engineers or teachers or social workers, or accountants, they would say these opportunities are NOT what are taking them out of poverty. They would say they were taken out of poverty the day they met Jesus.

That is when they could be fulfilled and have hope EVEN THOUGH economically poor, EVEN THOUGH scarred due to abuse, EVEN THOUGH they or their families are not physically well, EVEN THOUGH they have lost loved ones through death or abandonment, EVEN THOUGH all the odds of them recovering emotionally and physically are against them.

Hear them sing their assurance that God is for real and they know His love and they love Him. Hear them sing a few verses of one of their favorite songs they presented to our tour group as a way to say thanks to all the people who told them about Jesus, and gave them hope, because of people like you. It was also their way of declaring their faith in Jesus Christ who saved them and who can save you.

One of the girls who is a lead singer was once caught in a flood in her home. The water rose above her chest. She couldn't swim out, was trapped and she was afraid of the dark that surrounded her, and so she couldn't move. But then a hand came down, and it was her brother trying to pull her out. That is like a metaphor of how they feel about God who offers His hand to pull them up.

That is our promise to you today too. Like the Bible verse from

the book of Isaiah in the 41<sup>st</sup> chapter where God says "Do not fear for I am with you, do not be afraid for I am your God, I will help you. I will strengthen you. I will lift you up with my victorious right hand"!

Look and hear now of the intensity of these compassion kids' faith and belief and gratitude for they know first hand of the love of Christ and how they have been literally abandoned by their parents, abandoned by their government, and there are violent terrorists just a five hour ride away and yet they know in their hearts, they were saved from the darkest pit of poverty and vulnerability because of God and people like you who have supported them.