



SERMON OF THE WEEK

First Presbyterian Church of Honolulu at Ko'olau

August 21, 2016

"Courageous Sacrifice"

The Rev. Steve Peich

How many of you have ancestors that were immigrants to the United States? In most cases stories of immigrants are often infused with qualities like courage, risk, and sacrifice.

I'm the grandson of immigrants. And courage, risk, and sacrifice were no strangers to the journey of my own ancestors.

My grandparents came here from Serbia. They weren't very educated. Both of my grandfathers had a sixth grade education, and both grandmothers had about a fourth grade education. When they arrived here they knew no English. In fact, they couldn't even laugh in English. To say they lived lives of hardship would be a gross understatement.

My one grandfather came here after traveling the world as a merchant marine for about seven years. That doesn't sound like a big deal and may even seem a little romantic, until you realize he became a merchant marine at the ripe old age of 12 years old.

His parents put him on a merchant boat because his family could not afford to feed him and his siblings. It was either put him on a boat and take the risk of never seeing him again, but giving him a better chance to live, or keep him home and watch him and

others in his family go hungry and perhaps starve.

Like all my grandparents he came to the U.S. via New York City, but the NYC he arrived in is not like the NYC you see today. For an immigrant in those days, it could be quite dangerous.

In fact, very early on a thief held up my grandfather with a knife one night on a street in New York. When my grandfather reached into his coat pretending to get his wallet, he pulled out a gun and pointed it at the man and said in his broken English, "No, don't think so."

His first legitimate job in America was shoveling horse manure in the streets of NYC. You see when my grandfather landed here (circa 1906) the model T from Henry Ford was not even produced yet. So cars were still recent commodities, which meant that they still had a lot of horse drawn vehicles in those days hauling all kinds of stuff up and down the streets of New York. So basically his first legit American job was as a "pooper-scooper". Talk about living the American dream!

After getting married and having kids he did all kinds of things to make sure my mother and my uncle did not have to suffer the hardships he had to endure.

During the Depression, he would work four weeks in a month, but got paid for only three.

In 1960, I finally came along. Unfortunately, by the time I was eight years old three of my grandparents were gone. By 14 the last one, that old merchant marine, passed away as well.

The sad thing is they never got to see the full legacy of their risk, courage, and sacrifice. You see I was the first child in both bloodlines to finish college. In fact, I have been very fortunate to be able to gain a great deal of education *beyond* college. But these sixth grade educated people never got to see that.

They never saw my life as a minister and a missionary and a counselor. They never got to see to see all the people in so many different places I have been able to help find healing and wholeness in Christ. They never were able to see how I got to live in a place the world calls, "Paradise."

Think about it for a minute. For perhaps hundreds of year my family members were peasant farmers, or at best, fishermen. But because of the courage, risk, and sacrifice of my grandparents in just two generations the course of my family was completely *Rewritten*.

And what they did for me was provide the opportunities for the best possible future. My life was only a dream, a wild dream, for them. And they risked and sacrificed so much to help make that a reality in their family line.

So my question this morning is simply this: What is *our* dream for *future* generations that will be birthed by this church? What is *your* dream for this community? And what kind of sacrifices will need to be made to see such dreams come to fruition?

During this month we are talking about both the legacy and the future of First Prez by looking through the lens of Acts 1.8. And we are also in the midst of a Capital Appeal to raise \$1.8 million between now and next August. We are doing this Appeal because it will in large part pay off our property debt, which will help free up \$140,000 each year for ten years. With that kind of money we can help a *lot* of people have the best possible future.

So in light of all that, this morning I want to challenge us to reflect on how we can live and give in such a way so as to provide the best possible future for this community and for those we will reach through our ministries. How can we by our courage, risk and sacrifice, help others and our larger society rewrite the future?

Let us now look more deeply at the verses in and around Acts 1.8, which may help give us greater vision and dimension to what this Appeal is all about.

As we just read in verse 3, after Jesus rose from the dead, He spent 40 days giving His followers further understanding about the Kingdom of

God. In Jesus' teaching, and in the entire book of Acts, this is a central theme. In fact, this theme actually bookends the whole book of Acts.

Here in the beginning of the book Jesus is talking about it, but if we look at the very end we see something quite similar. At the very end of the book in Acts 28:30-31, it says this: *"For two whole years Paul stayed (in Rome) in his own rented house and welcomed all who came to see him. Boldly and without hindrance he preached the kingdom of God and taught about the Lord Jesus Christ."*

My point is, that all the activities and words spread out in the intervening chapters of the book of Acts is an elucidation and demonstration of how the Kingdom of God started to take on flesh among the followers of God.

There is a lot that could be said about this subject, but let me make just a brief point. The Kingdom of God is all about the in-breaking of God's rule. It is the in-breaking of God's purposes, passions, character, and values to bear on the world, in every and all places, to make it and us as He intended. Because when that happens the world gets rewritten.

In commenting on the message of Jesus and the Kingdom of God, theologian N.T. Wright says this: *"The key thing to note here is that the in-breaking kingdom Jesus was announcing created a new world, a new context, and was challenging His hearers to become the *new people* that the new context demanded, citizens of a new world."*

It is not just when we get to heaven, but right here and now on

earth as it is in heaven. And that is what Christianity is all about; that through Jesus Christ we become a new people, who work now with God to forge a new world. What a great calling we all have.

And this is why Jesus' commission, about being witnesses for His Kingdom, is no small thing. It really is a statement, a commission for world change. It's a statement of rewriting the narrative of the world to give it the best future possible.

You see, when you and I step into Christlike actions, like getting involved with "Do Justice Saturday," or when we give to Christ's work in the world, we help rewrite the narrative and trajectory of this world.

Last week a bunch of the pastoral staff went to serve the houseless at the River of Life mission in Chinatown. We served around 200 people that evening. And from my perspective, every plate served, every cup filled with water or juice, every smile and welcome given was helping a narrative be rewritten. The narrative that says people don't care about the houseless and the hurting, that God has forgotten them and that they are marginal, detestable, and unworthy of love. We were rewriting that.

When we do Laundry Love or build homes for families or even offer classes like the marriage class, or support groups like divorce care or cancer with hope, we rewrite the narrative that says: "You are on your own to make life work. You are on your own to overcome anxieties and fears. You are on your own to improve your family life." It is a narrative that says: "Your life is hopeless now that you're divorced or sick."

I was told that on Saturday Laundry Love served 38 houseless families and washed 3,500 pounds of laundry. That's some good *rewriting* going on.

Brothers and sisters, the ministries of First Prez aren't simply there to keep us busy. They are there to bring about the best future possible for those who hurt, for those who are in despair, for those who may not know Jesus Christ as their Savior. And we do that because this is exactly what the Kingdom of God seeks to bring about. That's exciting stuff!

Now as exciting as all this sounds don't think for a minute think this is an easy assignment. This is why the filling of the Holy Spirit (mentioned twice in our reading) is directly connected to the issue of the Kingdom of God and our being witnesses of it in the world...because being a witness is not easy.

Let me elaborate. In Acts 1:8 you see here Christ's commission for the disciples to be His witnesses for Him and His kingdom was to be done in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and the ends of the earth.

Now on the one hand, these are geographical demarcations. Jerusalem being the central geographic place in the Jewish world was the place to start and then moving out concentrically to Judea, Samaria, etc. To put it in our context we would interpret this directive as saying: Be witnesses in Honolulu, Oahu, Hawaii, and the ends of the earth.

This is all well and good, but the point I want to make is: I think there's a whole lot more going on here besides geographic assignments.

You see, each of the places mentioned by Jesus present special

challenges to this mission. For example, 40 days before verse 8, Jesus was beaten, whipped, and hung on a cross, *in Jerusalem*. 40 days previously these very people to whom Jesus is sending were in a locked room for fear of being killed *in Jerusalem*.

In other words Jerusalem for them was not simply Kaneohe or Kailua. It was hell on earth. So when you read "Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and the ends of the earth," don't think: easy place, harder place, really hard place, New Jersey (just joking). They were all difficult places.

And this is why reading verse 12 where it says that "they returned to Jerusalem" is no small thing. This is *not* a trip back to their nice hometown suburb, but it's a walk down into the belly of the beast, in order to *change* that beast. That's what Jerusalem means to them.

After all, down there are *still* the Sanhedrin, the Pharisees, the scribes, the Romans, the threat of persecution, rejection, and suffering. In fact, by Acts chapter 5 some of the disciples are beaten. By chapter 7 a disciple named Stephen is stoned to death. By chapter 12 an apostle James is killed. Jerusalem is a very threatening place.

So trust me, for the disciples on that mountain, Jerusalem isn't Kahala, it's more like Iraq.

So why return to that hellhole? Why venture out into all that hostility, or at best indifference to Jesus and His narrative for life? Why risk all that struggle and sacrifice?

We could ask the same of our ancestors. Why risk everything and face hardship and start with nothing?

What do you think their answers would be? I have a feeling it would be something like, "So that *others*, *beyond me*, may have a future and a hope." And if you asked them if it was worth all that difficulty and sacrifice, what would they say? "Absolutely!"

That's what happens when we risk and make courageous sacrifices for God's kingdom. Difficulties? Yes. Worth it? Absolutely. That's the spirit of Acts 1:8.

Yes, down in Jerusalem, etc., are hardships, hard people, and struggle. But there are also people whom God passionately loves *down there*. And there are mind-blowing miracles to be done, *down there*. Healings to take place, *down there*.

The building of a community, *down there*. The creation of a way of living the world has never seen, *down there!*

In other words, just like for my grandparents before me, there was an experience of life they could only dream of, down there in Jerusalem and beyond.

You see, when the disciples went to Jerusalem and waited for the Holy Spirit they became a new kind of people, with a new boldness, courage, communal value, and a drastically new view of their resources.

Before we look at that new community let me be clear about something from the outset. God's new order cannot exist outside of the power and presence of God's Spirit. Spirit talk and Kingdom of God talk and mission talk, all go hand in hand.

Our mission of being witnesses is not our “real earnest, human powered” efforts to serve God. The task and action and goal demanded of the church are more than busyness and strenuous human effort. We need more than clever ideas, really cool messages, hip pastors, or philanthropic nice people to carry out the mission of God. We need Divine power!

To love in a world of hate, we need Divine power. To be merciful in a world of violence, we need Divine power. To forgive in a world hell bent on vengeance, retaliation, and litigation we need Holy Spirit power. Because it takes Divine power to choose compassion over competition, sacrifice over selfishness, forgiveness over revenge. It takes power and courage and sacrifice to create and make manifest the alternative narrative that is the Kingdom of God.

Folks, in a broken and hurting world we need Divine power not just to do the spectacular, but simply to be obedient.

Now what is interesting to note here is being filled with the Holy Spirit created all kinds of interesting outcomes. In Acts chapter 2 and onward, people miraculously spoke in other languages that were not their native tongue. People performed acts of miraculous healing. People began to speak boldly about Christ in the face of severe persecution.

And what is equally amazing is as a result of being filled with the Spirit of God, these Christians decided how to live communally. We must realize that when we become Christians we do not simply become adherents to some religion, but the makers of a whole new social reality. This new social reality is what we proclaim and

demonstrate together. Let me show you what I mean.

As a direct result of being Kingdom oriented, Spirit-filled people we see in Acts chapters two and four something that is nothing short of breathtaking.

Look at Acts 2:44-45 – *“All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need.”*

This was not a law that was demanded of them, but something that simply arose out of their hearts. And this wasn’t some one-time event or some hippie commune thing. It was a lifestyle that endured in the church for quite a while.

Look at Acts 4:31-35: *“When they had prayed, the place in which they were gathered together was shaken; and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke the word of God with boldness. ³² Now the whole group of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one claimed private ownership of any possessions, but everything they owned was held in common.*

³³ *With great power the apostles gave their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all.*

³⁴ *There was not a needy person among them, for as many as owned lands or houses sold them and brought the proceeds of what was sold. ³⁵ They laid it at the apostles’ feet, and it was distributed to each as any had need.”*

We may read this and think this sort of thing doesn’t happen anymore, but let me tell you I have

personally experienced this kind of community more than a few times in my life.

In seminary I drove a real beater of a car. I had to use stacked phone books for the seat. But to be honest, I didn’t care about its looks. The problem was I had no money to fix it when it broke down.

One day after studying on campus I got into my car to go home, but it would not start. I was so ticked off that I left the keys in the ignition and the doors unlocked and walked away inwardly hoping someone else would steal it if they could start it (which when you think about it probably doesn’t happen often on seminary campuses).

Right then I stormed back into the library grabbing newspapers to desperately look for a car that could fit my budget, which was probably about \$100.

Seriously speaking, here’s the thing that made all this so upsetting. I knew in that moment that I could either buy a car or go to school, but I could not do both at the same time. And that was heartbreaking. So when my car died I was not just thinking of getting another car, I was thinking my schooling was over. And that was depressing because I had dedicated myself to serving God.

Well, lo and behold, a friend of my then fiancé asked my fiancé what I was doing. She told him my story and how I was looking in the paper for a car.

He then said, “We have an extra car and have been praying who to give it to. Do you think you guys could use it?”

So they gave me a really nice car. In fact, it would be the nicest out of any car I owned over the next 15 years!

I felt so blessed by a miracle, an Acts 2 and 4 communal miracle, that when I graduated I did the same thing. I gave it away to be a blessing for an African family that came to the US to study. It would have been great to sell it and get some extra money, but I knew that car was a “blessing on loan from God.” And that’s what you see in Acts 2 and 4. Everything they had was a blessing on loan from God.

My point is this. What if we took that approach often about our possessions, that they’re a blessing on loan to us to give away to others? What happens to our church? What happens to our community and neighborhoods? What happens to the world?

You see folks, the grand Kingdom of God message and the supernatural filling of the Spirit are not to be some great intellectual ideals or some ephemeral experiences for our spiritual lives from time to time, but they are things that are to always move us toward concrete expression of Heaven on earth.

One Christian musicologist and theologian once said: “Our spiritual life, then, is not just a feeling, an idea, or a spiritual romance. No! It is an *embodiment* of God’s vision for humanity clearly spoken in the words of Jesus and visualized in concrete ways in His action” (Robert Webber).

Bottom line is that one of the things that will authenticate our message as witnesses, that will draw

people to Jesus will not only be the big miracles like healing, etc., but it will also be the *hard miracle* of loving each other in real, concrete and sacrificial terms.

Let me tie all this in to our Acts 1.8 Appeal.

Improving how we go about gathering as a community is crucial to our discipleship and bringing about God’s intentions for humanity. All week long, through obvious and not so obvious ways, we are being shaped into a certain narrative that the world wants to forge in our souls.

Narratives that say having stuff, power, and winning the rat race are important for the good life; that you are alone with your pain, hurt, and shame and need to pick up yourself by your own bootstraps because people won’t be there for you. A narrative that says that might makes right and all that “love your enemy” stuff is unrealistic and nonsensical. And the list goes on.

And this is why, in part, we need to invest sacrificially in what we do on Sundays. It’s why we need impactful communal gatherings that shatter and shake off the narrative of the world that has been assaulting us all week.

Its why we need to declare and demonstrate each week that the present order of things cannot keep its promises, cannot make you happy, cannot make you safe or bring salvation.

Brothers and sisters, Sunday services, youth groups, Sunday school, Life training classes, etc. are not here simply because they are the minimum requirements of having a

church. They are here to forge the alternative story of God in our souls. To forge God’s story in our souls, so that we go back into the world to reshape it according to God’s intentions; to go out into the world and heal its wounds, to give hope to its fears, to give mercy to its sin, to give life to its story of death. So that those who come after us, inside and outside this church, can have the best future possible and have their lives rewritten in the name of God.

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Note: Sermon texts are also available at fpchawaii.org. The audio version can be downloaded from iTunes. You may also request the audio version by emailing: fpchkoolau@gmail.com