

PASTORAL PRAYER

Gracious loving God, no issue is beyond your understanding, no person beyond your grace, no situation beyond redemption. Gracious loving God, you are the God that holds all possibilities in your hands. You hold each one of us in your hands; you call us toward fulfillment and true joy when we abide in you. God of all, we take solace and challenge in this as we remember our calling of mission. Despite the details we assemble, despite all the faithful action and the faithful planning, mission needs the joy of Christ in order to have life within it. With your guidance and blessing, allow us to have this life abundant, this joy never-ending, in our work of mission, in our work of learning, in our work of living the life you have entrusted to us. Gracious God, the world is full of difficulty, strife, and pain, but with our eyes centered on you, hopelessness has no dominion.

Hear the prayers of our hearts, and let them translate into love for you and love for your people. Let the way we give our supplications feed our desire to be your people, to be more conformed to your image, Holy God. We lift up the prayers of our hearts, those said plainly and those unexpressed aloud. We lift the prayers of our neighbors, the obvious burdens and joys and the ones hidden from public. We lift the burdens of our world, for we do not easily see where death and destruction reign in this land of plenty. Let our lives of joy fill other lives in our deeds and words that uplift. We give all these things to you for your empowerment of us, as we pray as one people the prayer Christ taught us, saying...

SERMON

There's one thing missing from our mission soufflé. We have the idea of partnership: we never do it alone. We work with those we serve to create a relationship of mission work that lasts and that honors our neighbors. We work with God to work in

mission faithfully, making the mission about God's eternal glory and not what we want. Also, we have the idea of seeing our neighbors in need as we would the Lord Jesus Christ, for it helps us remember who is in charge, who makes it all work, and who is orchestrating the entire mission. But what's missing? That sorta sums it all up, doesn't it? No, there is one final ingredient that gives the rest life. How about this? (Said with despair, sadness) "Well, I'm going to go on this mission trip because God's the one who gives us the direction for mission. I really want to love my neighbor and I want to grow in a missional attitude with them. The joy of Jesus Christ is bubbling from my heart." Oh, really? But is it? We need joy. The final piece is joy, true joy, the joy of Jesus Christ. Are we living with joy, or is joy a far-off concept? There cannot be good mission without joy, because there cannot be good mission without Christ, and Christ is the source of joy. Let us see the source of this joy in scripture and apply it to some stories about mission as we wrap up this series with the attitude that governs good mission.

This is one of my favorite passages in all of scripture because it shows a very tangible image of what our relationship with Christ looks like. There is the vine and there is the branches. The branches cannot survive without the vine, and the vine grows branches from its nourishment to make those branches fruitful. Sometimes it takes a little trimming to make the branches the most fruitful, and, indeed, God is always calling us to grow more fully throughout all phases of our lives. But if we want to abide, to grow, to live more fully, it requires that we abide in Christ's love. Only then do we bear much fruit.

But let's focus on the image of the relationship between the vine and the branches. It may be an image, but the fact of it is that this is quite literal. Our relationship is reciprocal. If we go back to elementary math, we remember what it means to be reciprocal.

It's mutual; when we abide fully in Christ's love, we grow to be stronger Christians. As we grow to be stronger Christians, then we allow the Kingdom to grow and Christ to become more well known through our love we show and spread. As one increases, the other increases, and the fruit abounds. This is the beginning of mission; this fact, Christ says, allows us to have joy, the joy that makes us complete.

Despite how we use it in society, "joy" is not the same as "happiness." In scripture, we don't talk about happiness; we talk about joy. Happiness is of the moment. Happiness means that what happens on the outside dictates how we feel at all times. Happiness is about us; one doesn't spread happiness. It's there, and then it goes away after a while. There is a place for happiness in life, but happiness does not sustain us. After all, Christ does not make us happy; Christ makes us joyful. Joy is the other side of the coin. Joy comes from within and frames life, where life frames happiness. Life tells us whether we will be happy, but joy informs how life will be. We can be in the pit of sadness and grief and still hold onto joy because joy has an eternal root, an eternal space for it to shine forth. We spread joy, for joy connects us to something eternal. This is the story of the True Vine. When we abide in Christ's love and open ourselves to love our neighbors we like and do not like, then joy grows in us because we are feeding off the True Vine.

Last week, I made it clear: we can't do it all by ourselves. We can't just decide to love our neighbor in need as if they were Christ; we need the Holy Spirit working through us to show us the way and empower us for the journey. This is how it works. It's like any good plant, and that's what Jesus is saying here. Just as you know your plants are feasting on the nutrients and water when they produce a good yield of squash, carrots, strawberries, or any other produce, you know that we are feeding on the love of Christ

when it results in true love for those in need. It's the outside sign of an inward faith and connection. In mission, it's not only the work that we do and the results we have but the attitude we take when we work in mission. It's not just about the task but how we do it, for both are important.

We could not do what we do in mission without joy, and it was a common theme in our mission to Guatemala. Last week, I told you about the trials and difficulties we went through just to reach Guatemala. We had our first flight cancelled, and because of it, we weren't able to reach our second flight in Houston. So, we had to fly to Houston later that day and fly to Guatemala the following morning. Was it a huge inconvenience? Yep. Was it irredeemable? Nope; it just depends where you are rooted. We took intention to be rooted in Christ, so what seemed a pain was a blessing I disguise. In fact, it helped assemble the group. We became stronger because of it; we became assembled as a team. Our eyes weren't focused on all the issues as a barrier. The issues instead became a joke, which allowed us to concentrate on what really mattered: we were going to do God's work among people who knew us as brothers and sisters in Christ. We remembered why we were doing what we were doing. In fact, one person in the group told me that this trip was a means of reorienting toward what God's doing in the world that grounds this person in the work back home. That, I believe, is a testimony toward how this person abides in the True Vine. This is what it means for this person to abide and to grow much fruit throughout all of life, for love for those friends in need in Guatemala drove this person to go through every obstacle and arrive in Patulup with joy in the heart.

But the fun didn't stop there. So, as you know, our main task was to assemble stoves in the village. We assembled our stoves pretty much in one day. That was no trouble; it

was pretty easy. The harder part was putting up the smokestacks, which took several days. In this village, most everyone lived in a corrugated metal shack with a dirt floor. The roofs were made of this same corrugated metal or clay shingles. So, we needed to cut a hole in the metal roof to get the smokestack up and caulk around it, or we needed to rearrange the clay shingles and cement around it on fifteen homes. Seems easy, right? Well, while we could disperse into multiple teams to build the stoves, we couldn't do the same to make the smokestacks work. We had one team that had the one set of tools we needed. It was a grind. When only about two or three people could work on the task at once, the rest of us had to just hold off and jump in whenever we could. It became boring quickly when the same people needed to work on the same thing.

But that boredom quickly changed into joy when we remembered what we were really doing and it was all about. Right after we finished, and I mean RIGHT after we called it good, there was someone standing by with a pile of kindling ready to get the stove started. It was a joyous experience. The people received a gift that was truly good and useful, which sparked gratitude and joy in receiving it. It not only allowed them to use less wood, it allowed them to have a strong effective stove when they previously had an open fire. On top of that, having this stove allowed for better health; just having a smokestack increased ventilation to create better health. It fed their bodies. It fed all of our hearts to direct our efforts to their benefit. Joy took hold, the joy of Jesus Christ, because we were ministering in his name. That joy allowed us to go through the same motions over and over, when all one could do is stand by and assist the professionals cutting holes in roofs. And we had long, hard days; this was what kept us going when we wanted to stop.

It was a meaningful mission trip, but, as I look back on it, it was necessary for me personally to reorient. More often than not, one needs to go away from the familiar, day-to-day routine to truly see what God is doing among us and around the world today. To do that, one has to get beyond the fact that you aren't where you'd rather be. Sure, there were inconveniences. You couldn't drink or brush your teeth in the tap water. You needed to always have bottled water at hand. You got dirty and sweaty, and when you came back to your hotel room, despite moderate temperatures, there were no air conditioners. It would be a lie to say that we were not eager to return home to these creature comforts.

At the same time, I think it is a sin to return home and think that having all these comforts is the way we are supposed to have it. We are privileged to have all these blessings, and it's the wrong thing to think that we are escaping a place where they are absent. Instead, it's more faithful to recognize how great we have it and resolve to live differently in that light. It's not that we deserve it but that we have a great blessing that we own just because we were born in a different place than our neighbors whose country does not have the same infrastructure that ours does. This shifts the tone to gratitude, where Christ's joy can sprout. As the great line from Spider Man says, "With great power comes great responsibility." And, friends, going to a place like Guatemala reminds us that we have much more than we often realize. To have more than one pair of shoes, to have a house with windows, to have a refrigerator with food is a great, great blessing. The secret of blessing, though, is that it becomes a greater blessing when we share what we have been entrusted with. That feeds off the True Vine and gives us great joy.

Life is going to stink from time to time. God's not moving as fast as you want; perhaps God's not doing what you want God to do. Things are going to go uphill and

downhill. All those things will affect our happiness. But what keeps you going in life when everything goes awry? It must come from the heart connected and directed by the great Orchestrator. Let it be the joy of Jesus Christ, feeding off the true vine that provides the ultimate nourishment. From that nourishment let us be conduits to the world to allow fruit to sprout, the fruit that is the Kingdom coming to earth with buds of love and care. This is the energy and life of mission; it is the energy and life of...life. So let us live, live abundantly, with the joy of Jesus Christ in our hearts to engage this difficult world with love and compassion, spreading blessing as Christ has blessed us. For the difficulty of mission, for the joy of mission, for the task of mission ahead...thanks be to God! Amen and Amen.