

**The Prayer Doesn't End at Amen!**  
**Sermon, October 2, 2011**  
**Sterling United Methodist Church**  
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A Christian without a mission is in trouble! A faith that does not stir you to action in your world has little real connection in your life.

A healthy faith is one that results in transformation in your life. A healthy faith is one that reorients your priorities, your goals and your desires. A healthy faith is one where you are diminished, and the needs of God's world around you come more clearly into focus.

A healthy faith is one that cannot turn away from the lonely, the grieving, the poor, the hurting, the lost, the sick, the broken, or the oppressed. In comfortable northern Virginia it is far too easy to come to church on Sunday, get our Jesus fix for the week, and be little otherwise impacted or inconvenienced. But that's not what God wants from us!

His world is in trouble outside these doors. And there are plenty of people inside these doors yearning for love and acceptance, peace and security, healing and hope as well.

Don't just come here to be fed – come here to be equipped. Don't just come here to get your needs met, come here to find ways to meet the needs of others. If you really want to be fulfilled, pour yourself out into God's work. Surely as we dive into the scriptures and seek out the heart of Jesus, we will be transformed.

This summer Teresa, the boys and I spent two months in the town of Tachov, in the Czech Republic, as short term mission volunteers with the United Methodist Volunteers in Mission. We went there to teach English, to work with youth and children, to share in ministry and to teach and preach the gospel. But that isn't the only reason we were there.

You see, God sent us to a distant land and culture so that we might be transformed. He wanted to teach us some things about Himself and His Church. Taking the time to listen and to learn opened our eyes to many new ideas and experiences with God. Today I want to share some of those lessons with you.

Now, in the Czech Republic it was not unusual for me to preach for 45 minutes or an hour, but I will try to keep my thoughts shorter this morning.

Therefore, I've decided to focus on the "Top 10" things I learned about God in the Czech Republic. Granted, they say a good sermon should have 3 main points, and here I am giving you 10! I guess that doesn't make me a very good sermon writer, huh?

But then again, I don't get up here all that often, so I figure I'll give you 3 sermons worth all at once. So let's get to it.

## **Number 10. Community**

Have you ever wondered what the early Christian church was like? Small communities of believers, separated by distance, but known to one another and bound by a common identity in Christ. That's a little bit like what the Czech church felt like.

The Czech Republic, with its long history of religious conflicts, and its recent history of communism, has experienced a decimation of the church. The Christian community is very small, but very active. And the Christian community is also a tightly knit family. When a church member from one town visits another, they bring greetings from their home church, much as we read in the New Testament epistles. When friends from different parts of the country met again at youth camp, there was great rejoicing, hugs and laughter. There was a common bond – the bond of Christ. Christians there refer to one another as brothers and sisters, just as the New Testament writers did, because they see one another as brethren, kindred spirits.

Because the Christian community is small, its identity is distinct – it really means something to call oneself Christian. It is an identity worn proudly, even and especially in the midst of a highly secularized society.

We have much to learn from this mindset. Imagine if we rejoiced to receive a visitor from Galilee United Methodist, or Annandale United Methodist and shared greetings between churches. Imagine if we greeted one another as brothers and sisters on a kindred journey of faith together. Imagine if we felt that common bond because the name of Christ was on our hearts.

## **Number 9. Time**

Sunday is the Lord's day. Church starts when it starts, and it ends when it ends. If the service is an hour and a half, ok. If it's two hours, that's ok too. If the preacher has a message to preach – he preaches. If a congregation member has a testimony to share – she testifies. If a brother

or sister has a prayer to pray, it is prayed. In short, when the congregation steps into the doors of the church, it is on God's time. There is no grumbling when the service goes long. Instead, there is joy in the togetherness of the community worshipping God.

The first time I was asked to preach on Sunday morning I asked the pastor how long I should speak. He replied simply, "We're just eager to hear God's message that you have to share with us. Don't worry about how long it is."

What he said reflected a mindset in the Czech church. When we're in God's house, we're on God's time, and we're with God's family. This is sufficient for us.

### **Number 8. Simplicity**

It has been said that the communists sought to bring equality to the masses. However, in achieving it, they ended up lowering the standard of living for everyone. Even 20 years after communism it is evident that there is truth in that statement. Many Czech families live very simply. They live in modest apartments, drive modest cars, and have modest amounts of material things.

But two months living together in a one bedroom apartment taught us something. Yes, possessions can bring certain comforts, but our "stuff" can also be a large weight we drag around with us. There was a certain freedom in simplicity. It sure is easier to clean a one bedroom apartment than a 4 bedroom house! And you spend much more time together as a family if you only have one room to choose from. And above all, you step out of that materialistic rat race we are bombarded with in Northern Virginia. I can hardly even express to you how refreshing that was.

But simplicity goes further than just less stuff. It's about healthy living, eating fresh foods instead of processed meals, walking into town instead of driving, enjoying the nature around you, having a connection to the land, and having a deep appreciation for your history and culture.

It's hard to have a connection to the land if you pave over it so you can put up a box store to sell us more stuff. To be stewards of God's creation, as the Bible commits us to, we must rediscover His creation and the value of it. And to be caretakers of God's world we need to stop trying to own it.

## **Number 7. Hospitality**

Hospitality runs deep in the Czech church. When we arrived we were presented with a car to use for 8 weeks. It was given to us by a brother from another church in another town who we did not even meet until week 6 of our time there. He simply entrusted us with his car – sight unseen, knowing that it would advance the work of Christ in his country. And remember, a car is not a small possession in the Czech Republic! THAT is hospitality!

Hospitality comes in many forms, but is most deeply felt when breaking bread together. How many of you eat lunch after church? Either at home or at a restaurant? If we really want to be a welcoming church, consider this. Imagine if instead of just shaking the hands of a first time visitor or a new member at the door, and smiling as we hand them a bulletin, we invited them to join us for lunch. Imagine if it was our culture in this church to seek out new relationships, to want to know each other more deeply. Imagine the friendships that would form. Imagine the bonds that would be established in this family of believers if we sought one another out and broke bread together. We experienced this type of hospitality from our host congregation in the Czech Republic. Lasting friendships were born!

## **Number 6. Language**

Language matters! When we arrived in the Czech Republic with our few broken Czech phrases and our two useless phrasebooks, the members of our host congregation could have said, "Sorry, if you come to the Czech Republic, you need to speak Czech." That would have been their right. But they didn't choose to do that. They bent over backwards for us. They added English verses to their praise songs. They translated for us. They did whatever they could to make us feel welcome. And it mattered. What would have otherwise been a lonely, isolated time became an experience of sharing and cross-cultural exchange. All these lessons I am sharing with you today were possible because the Czech congregation understood that the language of God is universal, and it transcends the languages of man. They took a barrier to communion with God and with one another, and they released it.

We too have an opportunity to offer hospitality in our own community. It is for this reason that I have signed up for the Spanish as a Second Language class being offered here at SUMC this fall. It is not too late for you to sign up too!

## **Number 5. Music**

Make a joyful noise unto the Lord! It didn't matter if it was one guitar, a whole praise band, or a group of youth singing a praise melody to God before dinner. Music was present in the Czech church. And here's the neatest part – the Czechs didn't confine themselves to the traditional "praise band" instruments. If they had someone who played the flute, they'd throw in a flute. A violin, they'd add in the violin. Perhaps the neatest music experience I had was at bike camp, when contemporary praise songs were being led by a violin and a bassoon. It was a bit unusual, but it was beautiful!

How often do we fret about our music, our prayers, our clothes, our everything being polished and perfect when all God really wants to hear is the music in our hearts!

## **Number 4. Prayer**

The prayer didn't ever end at Amen! Prayer in worship was a collection of prayers, raised by different members of the congregation, one building on the next, each accentuated by an Amen. And prayer was sprinkled throughout worship – not just as petitions to God, but as expressions of praise, as heartfelt pleas for forgiveness, as responses to God's grace, and yes as requests for God's mercy and intervention.

How often, as we responsively read the call to worship, or as we recite the Lord's prayer, do we allow God to move us to a resounding expression of Amen? And sometimes prayer needs to be done on one's knees. I learned this at youth camp, on the hard wooden floor of the meeting room. Sometimes prayer needs outstretched arms. And sometimes prayer needs to be spoken while holding the hand of your neighbor.

## **Number 3. Evangelism**

Perhaps the most powerful worship service I attended in the Czech Republic was not intended for me. It was intended for non-believers, for seekers, for those with questions. You see, the Czech church understood that it has a mission. It understood that it is an island in a sea of unbelief. It has a beautiful gift to share with its world. Evangelism is engrained in its purpose for being. Not so the church can boast about its growth or its successes, but simply because Evangelism is the heart of sharing the most beautiful gift the world has ever known with a world that desperately needs to receive it.

The seekers service was narrated by the church lay leader, who explained every part of worship, why it was done, what the church believed in relation to that part of the service, and why we as Christians are moved to do these things. It was educational, it was non-threatening, and it was hugely successful. The Czech church is reinventing itself by shedding the trappings of failed religious institutions of the past, and by focusing on Christ. This kind of evangelism is contagious.

## **Number 2. God Has Bigger Plans Than My Imagination**

While I was called by God to the Czech Republic for many reasons, perhaps the most prominent was that he wanted me to hear the story of one young lady at youth camp, and to be His voice in her life. As I counseled this sweet girl, she shared with me the abuse she had experienced as a child from her father, until her brothers kicked him out of the house. She told of her father's death and brother's suicide, and of her broken relationships, and she came to me for advice. And this is where God stepped in. Because this conversation went through a translator, it ran at half speed. This forced me to prayerfully consider every word I would speak, and it gave God time to pre-empt my own rash answers and place His words in my mouth. It was a surreal experience. The words I spoke were truly not from me. And it was only possible because God had sent me 5000 miles to counsel in a language I could not understand. One small miracle that God wove together at just the right moment in just the right place. I never could have imagined it into being. Eight weeks of such moments made real to me the holiness of God in His divine orchestration of events across continents.

## **Number 1. The Sun Never Sets on Jesus!**

As I would get up and get ready to go to church on Sunday morning, I would realize it was 2 AM in Sterling, and it would be over 6 more hours before you would begin to worship here. Then I got to thinking about the other missionaries we met during our training for this mission, and about all the places they were serving. It quickly became apparent that every Sunday, there is a constant voice of celebration and worship by Christians the world over, singing praise to God. First in the Pacific, then in Australia and Asia, then Europe and Africa, and finally the Americas. From north to south, from East to west, in every nation, every language and every culture, the name of Jesus is lifted high! And every weekday there are Bible studies, prayer groups, choirs and youth groups, missions and seminaries, lifting praise to God every minute of every day. Truly 365 days a year, 24 hours a day, the sun NEVER sets on Jesus. We are part of a great cloud of witnesses. We are part of a world community of brothers

and sisters in Christ sharing our unending and everlasting praise of the one who was and is and is to come. All Glory and honor and power be to the maker and sustainer and redeemer of heaven and earth. There is no greater privilege than this!

This is what I learned in the Czech Republic.

Amen!

Ok, so the sermon doesn't end at amen either.

So, what about you? What mission is God laying on your heart? Is he giving you a passion to know and to serve the Hispanic community in Sterling Virginia? To feed hungry children at Rolling Ridge Elementary School? To tutor a child at Rolling Ridge? To build homes and hope with Habitat for Humanity here in Loudoun county or far from home? To join our Disaster Response Team? To go on a mission trip to repair homes, pack relief supplies, harvest crops, work in an orphanage or run a vacation Bible school? To give blood to save a life? To deliver food with LINK? To become a hospital chaplain? To become a short-term missionary abroad? To become a long-term missionary? To teach a Sunday School class? To volunteer in our youth or children's ministries? To cook meals or make quilts for the sick? To visit and adopt a homebound person?

You see, God has already chosen a mission for you. And if you believe in God's promises, and Christ's salvation, then you believe in a thing called redemption. You have been set free by the love of Christ, and this gift of grace is far more valuable than all the treasures of earth. And this gift is to be shared. And our privilege as Christians is to respond by living God's mission every day we have breath.

There are many incredible mission ministries right here in our own church. The harvest is plentiful, but the workers are few, Jesus reminds us. God is looking for workers like you and me. On your way out this morning stop by one of the tables in the narthex and start a new chapter in your faith journey.

Amen!

Community  
Time  
Simplicity  
Hospitality  
Language  
Music  
Prayer  
Evangelism  
The Holiness of God  
The Worldwide Communion of Believers

I urge you to prayerfully consider these points. Ask God how we might be transformed as God's church!

Amen and AMEN!