

On Being a Missionary

Tonight/Today we remember the women of the LWML and their tireless work to engage in missionary work around the globe. In honor of this, I thought it might be good for all of us to review what it means to be a missionary. When we hear the word missionary we immediately think of some faithful soul laboring in some far away country or village. That is to say we equate missionary work with foreign expeditions and relations. And to some extent this is correct. From ancient times, many men and women have taken up the mantle of Christ's call "to make disciples of all nations" and traveled far and wide. This is certainly an honorable endeavor and worthy of our respect and above all our prayers. But lest we feel we can't do the Lord's work unless we are willing to pack our bags and relocate overseas, it serves us well to remember how Christ sent His disciples first to Jerusalem, Judea, and Samaria before ever sending them to the ends of the earth. Before they were to be His witnesses in the backwoods of the Roman Empire, they were to be His witnesses in their own backyard. Close friends, family members, next door neighbors were the first recipients of the Gospel. When it comes to the Great Commission of Christ it is not the 'all nations' part of the clause which is stressed, but rather the phrase 'teach them to observe all that I have commanded'. A mother teaching her children the 10 commandments is as much of a missionary as the person who brings Christ to the colonies of Africa. We are called to be witnesses in our everyday life in whatever station we happen to occupy. If you want to be a missionary in God's kingdom all you have to do is open your eyes. Opportunities abound all around you. The harvest is plenty, but the laborers are few. Life itself provides the occasion we just have to be sensitive to the moments God provides us. Now I realize that not every moment is the right moment. We talked last week about moments in which we should and must remain silent. But there are times when we must speak. Discerning which moment is which requires thought and prayer. It is more art than science, I grant you, and there is no universal formula, which we applies across the board.

By way of example I conclude with a bit of history. When I was out visiting my brother, I happened upon a book of his describing the horrible events that took place in the small town of Sebaste, an ancient city located in present-day Turkey. In 320AD, the Roman Emperor Licinius ordered all his military troops to pay homage to the Roman gods in celebration for their great victory in battle. Forty soldiers went to their commanding officer and informed him that they were Christian and could not in good conscience sacrifice to idols. As you can well imagine the Roman emperor was furious over their disobedience and branded them as traitors of the Roman Empire. These forty men, who had just recently fought so valiantly for the emperor were now sentenced to death. Since it was winter and bitterly cold, the judge ordered the forty to be stripped naked and made to stand in the icy waters of a nearby lake. To tempt them to renounce their faith, a warm bath house was constructed a small distance from the frozen pond; a consolation prize, if you will, for swearing allegiance to the Emperor. One by one, they all died- all except one. For in the morning when the others were being carted away, one of the forty named Melito was found to be close to death, and so he was laid aside on the shores in hopes that he would recant. Upon seeing her son very close to death, his mother-of all people- hastily picked him up and placed him on the cart with the others. She did not beg for mercy, nor try to defend his innocence. Her last words to her son were these: “Off with you, boy, on the good journey of your comrades. Don’t be separated from the chorus and may you appear before the Master with the others.” Melito died en route to be cremated. Something about this mother resonated with me when I read the story. For in word and deed, she expressed the inexpressible and became a true missionary of Christ. Because in that moment, she rightly recognized that suffering, even death, is sometimes necessary to give testimony to the hope of something greater than ourselves. She endured her son’s suffering, and that must have been excruciating, so that his life might be traced in the shape of a cross. St. Paul says in our reading today, “I count all things loss for the excellence of the knowledge of Christ, for whom I have suffered the loss of things, and count them as rubbish, that I may

gain Christ and be found in Him.” By allowing her son to be counted with the others, she was ensuring that he would never be remembered as brave or loyal, but rather as an enemy, a despised and forgotten footnote of the glory of Rome. She herself would suffer from her son’s treachery as her own family name would be tarnished and spoken with contempt. But what is glory or worldly reputations or honor, but foolishness to God.

As for the other men, their names might not be recorded in secular records, but they are written in the Book of Life with the very blood of the Lamb shed for them. For with their dying breath they confessed Christ as Lord and Savior, and themselves as humble servants of Him who was and is the Lord of Life. These men did not choose to die, but rather were called to life in Christ. Their trust was in the One who lived and died for them. To die for their faith became the cross God laid upon them and they took up their cross and followed Christ to death and then onwards to resurrection life. Perhaps we will someday have the privilege to suffer for the Lord. Perhaps not. But true witness, true missionary zeal, true martyrdom does not require travel or eloquence of speech or even death, but only that we live for a higher purpose, answer a higher calling, and count our lives as nothing if not lived in service to Christ. Amen.

In Christ,

Pastor Jeremy Mills