

The Great Commission ... Don't Stop

Sermon by Dicken Tsoi

Damascus United Methodist Church

Exodus 20:1-4, 7-9, 12-20; Philippians 3:4b-14; St. Matthew 21:33-46

Sixteenth Sunday After Pentecost – October 2, 2011

When I was asked to give a sermon on the World Communion Sunday, my thought went back to the place where I came from. I grew up in Macau, a small city in southern China and the last European colony in that region. It was returned to Chinese rule in 1999.

I became a Christian in Macau and met my wife Isabel at a church. At the entrance to the sanctuary of that church was a plaque that said “The Gospel Arrived Through Here”. It was referring to the location where Robert Morrison, the first Protestant missionary who came from London baptized the very first Chinese (Protestant) Christian. That man had the same family name as mine: “Tsoi”.

Sometimes I would think back to the turning points that changed the course of my life: when I decided to come to the States; accepted to the University of Virginia; granted visa to the States; got my first job and green card; started a family; and began to attend DUMC three years ago. We all have experienced changes in our lives, and one thing led to another. We could only plan one step at a time, and people would say “it is what it is”. But what I see in my footsteps is they were led by the one who has the master plan. God has a plan for his Great Commission:

(But when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, you will receive power and will tell people about me everywhere – in Jerusalem, throughout Judea, in Samaria, and to the ends of the earth) Acts 1:8

Paul had some turning points in his life. His conversion on the road to Damascus was one of them, and there was the big decision of whether he should stay in Asia or go to Europe during his second mission trip. One evening a vision came to him and he was led West to Macedonia. He traveled and established churches in that region until he ended in Rome and was martyred years later. The political environment in the center of the Roman Empire was very hostile to the believers, and for centuries they suffered great persecution. In those days someone would have suggested it could be better if Paul went East instead.

Yet Paul's work did not stop after his death, nor did the flame of Christianity get snuffed out by the heavy handed crack down of the emperors. Believers grew in number and their faith got stronger. Then came the turn of the tide and Christianity was adopted as the religion of the Roman Empire. Some say Europe and the conquered regions were Christianized with a top down approach of converting first the nobles, and then the faith was imposed on the general population. Like it or not, it was how it was.

During the golden age of discovery in the 1400's, Europeans navigated the world to conquer and trade, and missionaries went with them to evangelize and establish churches. Europeans discovered what they called the new world, and the continent has now become a new stronghold of Christianity. So Paul's traveling to Europe was not that bad an idea after all. The Great Commission has not stopped because of man's persecution, but survived the dark winter to blossom in the spring. So, how about the even older world to the East of Europe?

In the mid 1500's some Portuguese arrived at Macau to trade. They traded everything, including kids they captured to be sold as slaves. Later Matteo Ricci the Jesuit priest went to Macau to learn the Chinese language and customs. He was able to master the language and even the Chinese classics, and was allowed to serve the emperor in Beijing. In Macau, Catholic priests built churches and converted local residents, and that angered the traditional and proud Chinese who viewed that as imperialism and cultural invasion.

Three centuries later, the British fought the Qing dynasty over opium trade. John Morrison, the missionary's son, helped the invading British to negotiate the treaty that ceded Hong Kong permanently. That was a big slap on the face of the Chinese, and European missionaries soon became the target of zealous Chinese nationalists.

The year was 1900 when the foreign powers were chipping away the dynasty's sovereignty. They defeated China in several wars, forced it to import opium, and impose unequal treaties. In response to the imperialistic actions of the foreign powers, a secret society known as the Boxers was legalized. These men practiced martial arts and spirit possession, and claimed to be impervious to firearms. They targeted all foreigners including missionaries and their children, and massacred Chinese Christians. In the Boxer's uprising during the summer of 1900, 239 foreign missionaries were martyred along with 32,000 Chinese Christians. The conflict ended with an Eight-Nation Alliance invasion and occupation of the capital city. A peace agreement was then signed and the Qing dynasty had to pay fines in silver that worth more than \$60 billion today. The US was part of the alliance but had used the reparation money to establish a scholarship program. That gave birth to the renowned Tsinghua University in Beijing.

The Boxer Rebellion had weakened the dynasty. Later Dr. Sun, a Christian raised in Honolulu and Hong Kong led an uprising against the Qing government. October 10 this year marks the 100th anniversary of the last conflict that brought down the dynasty. The first republic government was then established and that ended 4000 years of absolute monarchy in China.

Christians were again persecuted when the Communist Party took power 40 years later. A revolution that lasted 10 years started in the 60's and that was supposed to replace God with the chairman in every soul. But that did not happen and the number of Christians grew 100 fold.

Today the Chinese government's official estimation of Christian population in China is 25 million. It is however very difficult to estimate the membership of the underground (or known as house) churches. They are constantly harassed and persecuted by the government, but grew tremendously. The estimation of Christian in China ranges from 80 to 130 million. People are hunger for the word of God. They love singing hymns and can sit through 3 hours sermon without complaint.

A lot of Chinese are converted when they work as laborers or merchants in foreign countries. Many Chinese missionaries go to evangelize them in Europe and the Middle East. After they received Christ they are committed to witness for Him when they return home.

There is also the "Back to Jerusalem Movement" in China, with the first priority of reaching the western provinces including Inner Mongolia, Xinjiang and Tibet. House church leaders who received basic training buy their one-way ticket to those areas. They have the commitment of "sacrifice, abandonment, poverty, suffering and death" for the sake of the Gospel and their vision is to reach Muslim nations all the way back to Jerusalem. They believe that in the last days before Christ's return, it is the duty of the Chinese church to take the message of Christ back to Jerusalem in order to complete a full circle of the Gospel.

As in today's parable, the tenants of the vineyard rejected and killed the servants sent by the master. When finally the son was sent, they killed him. The rejected stone has become the corner stone of the new creation, which is the New Testament church. As for the missionaries, they have regarded everything as loss because of the value of Christ. They heard the call and saw the vision, and they are willing to be part of the master's plan. Great things are happening in China but Christians there face huge challenges. Do you want to be a part of it? If yes, keep a close watch on what is happening and find ways to make a difference. Extend a hand when an opportunity arise, and above all, pray for them.