

# ***Christianity at the Crossroads: Your Second Family is Making a Difference***

**A Sermon Preached by  
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*When they saw [Jesus], they worshiped him; but some doubted. And Jesus came and said to them, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age."*

*Matthew 28:17-20 NRSV*

One of the many things we know about Jesus are his last words: "Make disciples of all nations." And for the past nearly 2000 years Christians have been trying to live out this Great Commission. The story of Jesus Christ has been told again and again, first in Jerusalem, then in Judea, and Turkey, Greece, Rome, Syria and Egypt, "to the ends of the earth." In 2010 it's hard to imagine a place on earth where Christians haven't been. On any given Sunday you could participate in a Chinese Bible Study in a house church, sing in a praise worship service in an open air chapel in the Philippines, or witness healing miracles being performed at a Christian Hospital in the Congo. The Bible – at least major portions of it – is now available in over 700 native languages. The ranks of people who call themselves Jesus' disciples have grown from a low of eleven to over 2 billion today. Isn't it thrilling being part of a family of faith that's that large? Imagine all of us sitting down at one great big communion table with Jesus as our host! Imagine what it will be like when we are all praising God together in Heaven with one voice, one heart, and one mind!

We have come a long way from the dusty streets of Jerusalem to the paved drives of Carlisle. And we have a long way to go.

While Christians have been pretty much everywhere on earth, we haven't always left a good impression. And in some cases we've made things worse – not just in past centuries, but even today. And while the Bible is available in almost every major language, millions upon millions of people who speak *minor*

languages still have no Bible that they can read and understand for themselves. And for as many Christians as there are in the world—about two billion, there are about twice as many (four billion) who aren't Christian, and half of them aren't affiliated with *any* major religion at all. We haven't fulfilled the Great Commission yet.

Through the power of the Holy Spirit, we have done amazing work spreading Christianity to the farthest corners of the earth, but huge gaps remain. We need to fill in the blank spots in between the corners. We also need to build up disciples in places that we traditionally think of as Christian, places like Europe, Latin America, and the United States. Yes, even the United States is a mission field today.

The story of Christianity around the world isn't a story of steady progress, of Christians reaching more and more people every day. It's more like two steps forward and one step back. In some areas we are losing ground to other faiths or no faith at all. I do not know whether there will be more Christians in the world twenty years from now or not. I do know that decisions *this* generation of Christians makes will help to determine how large the next generation of Christians is.

Just as every part of the world has its own distinctive bread, so every part of the Christian world has a slightly different take on "The Bread of Life." Christians in different parts of the world see Jesus slightly differently. One of the reasons for this is that every particular national church faces unique challenges in its local context. In China, it's the growth of materialism under the control of communism. In the "Stan" countries of the world – all those nations with hard to pronounce names that end in "Stan" – it is lack of traditional education combined with wide exposure to radical Muslim teachings. The way Christians respond to the unique challenges in these places will influence whether Jesus gets a hearing from the local people and whether, having been heard, anyone will even care about what the church is offering – a relationship with him. In other words, Jesus is the answer, but different people are asking different questions; churches like ours, ones that believe in mission work, need to be sensitive to that.

On this World Communion Sunday I want to look at a two places where God's Spirit is at work in amazing ways. These are places that happen to be facing great challenges. These are places that this congregation is coming to know pretty well: Lithuania and Honduras. The challenges the church faces in each country are unique, but the prescription is pretty much the same everywhere, including here: *the church simply has to be the church.*

Lithuania, where Eric and Becky Hinderliter serve on our behalf, is, of course, part of Europe. Europe is a place that we think of as the center of historic Christianity, especially Presbyterian Christianity. And in many ways this is a pretty accurate picture of Europe... one or two centuries ago. If we take a closer look at these nominally Christian nations *today* we might see a lot of apathy toward the church and in some cases outright hostility. The Pope's recent trip to England was notable not so much for it being the first time a Pope had ever visited that country but for the fact that he had to apologize repeatedly for the sexual abuse scandals of recent years. Those scandals have left the church very weak there. France has banned Muslim headscarves from public schools – and Christian cross necklaces as well. It's unclear if this is an effort to promote religious tolerance or to remove religion from the public sphere altogether. And those great European cathedrals that we love to visit? Most of them are empty of almost everyone but tourists when we're there, aren't they? They are more 'museums of Christianity' than thriving houses of worship. Europe is coming close to being a continent of Christians in name only.

What happened?

Two “-isms”: materialism (especially in western Europe) and communism (especially in Eastern Europe). In the end, materialism has probably done more lasting damage and remains the bigger threat. That's why Jesus preached about the dangers of greed more than any other topic.

Under communism Eastern European governments tried to replace the church with the state and nearly snuffed out Christianity and Christian values. Have you heard the old adage that the church is just one generation away from extinction? It's true. Communism is largely dead but it has left behind two generations of people who have never seen a vital church, heard a life-changing sermon, or belonged to a caring Christian fellowship.

That's why it's so important that Eric and Becky teach at a *Christian* college in Lithuania, one of the very few *Christian* educational institutions that exist there. The students there don't necessarily need to hear the Bible read to them – they've been exposed to it before. They need to see that Christians are alive and well; they need to see how followers of Christ live; they need role models who can make Jesus' love more than just words on a page. Eric and Becky ostensibly teach business skills at the college, but what they are really doing is making disciples. And by reaching a group of young people, people who will lead Lithuania in due time, Eric and Becky are slowly changing that country. *And we get to be part of it.*

The challenge for the church in Honduras is a little different. For years the gospel of salvation by faith alone has been preached by well-meaning missionaries. This has brought great comfort to people when it comes to eternal life. But it doesn't give them much help with their day to day living until then. For too long the church has focused on the *hereafter* when what the people need the most help with is the *right now*.

That's where our missionaries Tim and Gloria Wheeler come in. They work for the PC (USA) through the Heifer Project. They are teaching the people they work with that God cares about – not just their souls – but their health, their kids, and their empty stomachs. Much of what they do is the same kind of work that Jesus did: feeding people, accepting them, and empowering them through education.

We've worked with Tim and Gloria for years, but we've recently partnered with them in a special way in focusing on the people of a tiny village called *Cerro Azul* – “Blue Hill.” They are landless people squatting on municipal land—the poorest of the poor, explain Tim and Gloria—with no homes of their own.

Perhaps you've heard Tim describe the beginning of his work with them:

*Gloria and I were facilitating a workshop ... centered on self-identity... One of the questions put to the group was for them to describe the happiest moment of their lives. Many had problems answering the question. Many have lived such a difficult life that happiness was not a common feeling. ...I turned to the man sitting next to me, Jose Flores, and noticed a mixture of emotions on his weathered face. Maybe the lines on his face told the story of his life. ... It was a cold day and a slight breeze ran across the room. Several of the participants shivered, the kind of shiver that is sharpened by an empty stomach and a threadbare shirt.*

*The next question was what was the saddest moment of their lives. Answers came quickly this time. The atmosphere started to warm, helped by chicken soup which soothed our souls. ... [We] wanted them to believe that they could change their lives, that they would have an opportunity they had never had before, and yes, that God was with them, and that we would be with them, too.*

*To top it off we explained how they would build their own houses. They looked at each other in disbelief. They knew that they didn't have the skills. Gloria explained that neighboring village leaders would come to teach them, people just like them who had*

*themselves learned the new skills necessary to build their own homes. By the end of the day we noticed an easier attitude among them, and a few smiles, and we also knew then, that we were supposed to be there with them that day—to reach out and walk alongside some of the most vulnerable people we had ever gotten to know.*

I'm pretty sure that once Jose Flores moves into a home of his own, one he built with *his* hands and *our* help, he won't have any trouble remembering the happiest day of his life.

*And we get to be part of this work.*

One of our own young parishioners, Adam Osborn, is in Honduras right now working with the Wheelers and the people of Cerro Azul. And we're putting together a group now to go this spring.

When the church *is* simply the church – no more and no less -- feeding the poor, keeping promises, and being real with people – eyes open, hurts heal, and hearts grow. Everywhere the church has grown it has been because we stuck to a simple plan of offering practical hope through Jesus Christ. Making disciples isn't complicated.

But it is expensive. It costs about \$125,000 a year to support the Hinderlites and the same again for the Wheelers. Our congregation is one of many that partners with them and together we are making a difference. When you give to God's work here in Carlisle, those dollars don't just sit here. They go out in a ripple effect to Lithuania, Honduras, and at least 50 other countries around the world. Don't think of this giving as charity; it's not charity when you're caring for your own family. Mission work is simply brothers and sisters in Christ helping each other. We may speak different languages, but our heart song is the same. As we come together at this communion table today we're dining with the people Cerro Azul, Lithuania, and more -- all the places where the church is simply being the church, doing what we do best, doing what Jesus asked us to do. Amen.

*Note: In the audio versions of this sermon you can hear brief Skype interviews with Eric Hinderliter and Tim and Gloria Wheeler. These interviews were conducted during the sermon itself at the 10:30 worship service.*

*Dear Friend,*

*I hope you have been blessed by this message. You can request a free CD recording of this sermon by contacting the church office. We also have a complete*

*sermon archive (including audio-files and PDFs) on-line at*  
[www.GrowWithSecond.org/sermons](http://www.GrowWithSecond.org/sermons)

*Second Presbyterian Church is a thriving congregation celebrating over 175 years of service to God and God's people. It would be our joy to help you grow in faith, hope, and love. Please consider being our guest for Sunday worship at 8 or 10:30am. Children's Church and infant and toddler care are always provided.*

*Jeff Gibelius, Pastor*

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