

“GLOBAL REACH,” A Sermon delivered by the Reverend Dr. Geoffrey G. Drutchas, St. Paul Untied Church of Christ, Taylor, World Communion Sunday October 3, 2021

Congregation, what a world! What a very troubled world! If it's not the pandemic, it's another hurricane. Or the immigration crisis on our border. It's enough to start singing as Broadway star Anthony Newley long ago once did, “Stop the World, I Want to Get Off.” And to wonder, really wonder, when God will at last bring the curtain down on all that is to usher forth his ultimate kingdom.

Many of our young people seem particularly hard-hit and bit by discouragement. They despair about our future. Some don't see a future at all for themselves or the rest of us. I hear consternation, if not outright reluctance, expressed about having children, bringing kids into the world. Perhaps because folks are trying to deaden the psychic pain of what they perceive as a grim present and future for us all, drug and alcohol problems are way up. It *is* a sad commentary on our times when the best-looking stores in some of our Downriver communities are those of marijuana merchants. And through its advertisements the gaming industry, especially our online casinos with all the pretty ladies touting betting deals, seems to financing just about everything on TV and the internet.

Yet, keeping perspective, it's important to remember and appreciate the fact that this world, fallen since Eden's idyllic days, has *never* been perfect. (*Genesis 3:1-21*) The study of human history underscores that we have always had our big troubles. This was no less true in Biblical days, recorded by Old and New Testaments alike, extending over more than two thousand years. Consider, for instance, how Cain slayed brother Abel, and Noah and his family confronted the Great Flood--that cataclysmic event which some archaeologists believe may have created the Black Sea to the north of Turkey. (*Genesis 4:1-18; 7:1-24*)

Perhaps what is unprecedented is the magnitude and consciousness of today's challenges. Because of advanced communications and rapid transportation which allows humans to jet from place to place with hardly a second thought and for vacation no less, the entire globe is more intimately interconnected than at any time before. The human penetration of almost all corners of the globe has ended the social and cultural isolation that we once knew and even enjoyed. It is harder to remain ignorant or oblivious to problems beyond our own.

This certainly goes for us the United States. Once we benefited from our sheer geographical distance from other nations on the far sides of the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans, even when we were fighting the two World Wars of the 20th century. Yes, distance helped protect us from foreign attack. But no longer. The events of 9/11 two decades back, commemorated with sadness just this past month, showed that.

Today, our planetary climate problems and global pandemic further confirm it. So do those nuclear missiles that North Korea periodically launches our way. What this means is that while our present generations are absolutely no different than our forebearers in having problems to face, the *scope* of those problems may be broader and deeper. What this demands of us is greater creativity and a clearer, more resolute faith in working out solutions. If we want a more peaceful, less troubled world, we need to demonstrate greater allegiance in every way to the “Prince of Peace.” (*Isaiah 9:6*)

I am personally struck by the interconnectedness of many of the problems we today confront. Take the specter of massed immigration at our southern borders. It is being fed by climate change that is now producing severe, extended drought in Central American countries like Guatemala, El Salvador, and Nicaragua, plus destructive hurricanes and tropical storms in the Caribbean islands, like Haiti. It is further destabilizing these countries which were already politically chaotic and economically impoverished. They are not well-equipped to handle the recent climate catastrophes.

Christian missionaries abroad in the field report high levels of hunger and malnutrition in most of these countries. In Guatemala, for instance, 25 per cent of family households are reportedly unable to secure food to meet basic needs. Particularly hard-rendering for me was one missionary’s account I heard via podcast of near-starvation in Guatemala’s highlands. Seventy per cent of Mayan kids under age five—about the same age as my own grandson—are showing stunted physical growth because of chronic malnutrition. The only meal that some Guatemalan kids are receiving comes from school lunches provided by church-based aid programs like those which our own United Church of Christ sponsors overseas. For our Central American neighbors, all this is contributing to deeper poverty, further political and social instability, and, ultimately, rampant crime and street violence.

Quite understandably, as migrants seek asylum in the United States because of the “perfect storm” of climate catastrophes, political problems, and gang-related violence in their home countries, many Americans fear that they are simply going to bring chaos and disease with them. And all this in the midst of our own COVID pandemic. I’m sympathetic. It’s very easy to become overwhelmed by such fear, allowing it to overtake compassion on our part.

Unfortunately, I also hear fellow citizens talking as if those of us in America are on some kind of lifeboat that others, struggling to board, are about to swamp mid-ocean. To save ourselves we have to fend them off with a paddle if necessary. It’s a graphic, if not compelling, image—isn’t it? However, the limitation of this lifeboat metaphor is that in real-life we can’t row away once and for all from the interconnected problems that have precipitated the migrant refugee crisis. In fact, the way things are going with climate

change and its impact in our interconnected world, the problems besetting us now, nationally as well internationally, are most likely to further grow, even metastasize.

We need to think this out better. Can our own nation really shut itself off from the rest of the world? Since the turn of the 20th century we have been economically interdependent with other countries. We may have fantasies of fully returning to strictly “Made in America” days. Certainly the supply problems that have cropped up in the midst of the pandemic should encourage us to seek greater manufacturing independence where that’s feasible. Yet is there any real prospect for pulling back the hands of the clock and turning away from global economic interdependence in any fundamental or lasting way? I don’t know any intelligent person who imagines we can. Our nation shares the same planet with many others. Gone are the days when we could even afford to re-isolate ourselves from the rest of the world.

Of course, in the face of what’s what, domestically and internationally, we can choose to pretend it’s not happening. Yes, we can give ourselves over to denial. Folks do it all the time, trying to live in pretend land. But the outcome is usually more anger, frustration, and depression when things don’t work out smoothly as we think they should. There is an alternative. As men and women who take the teachings and promises of Jesus Christ seriously, we can make the choice to be faithful and mobilize accordingly. What this means is doing our best to figure out what Jesus would have us do under fraught and challenging circumstances presented by the facts.

I am a pragmatist. I know there are often limits to available resources. Consequently, difficult, even painful, decisions sometimes have to be made about how we are going share and allocate what we do have. That’s what Christian stewardship is all about. This applies to everything from drug treatment and emergency food and shelter assistance in this country to global aid for those who live elsewhere. Yet I am always haunted by what Jesus said about clothing the naked, feeding the hungry, and sheltering the homeless and displaced. He, who with his mother and adoptive father was once a political and religious refugee in Egypt in the days of the evil King Herod, taught us to look for his face in the face of those in profoundest need. (*Matthew 2:18-33; Matthew 25:31-46*) Indeed, as you may remember, Jesus declares that “whatever you do for the least of these, my brethren, you do for me.” (*Matthew 25:40*) Elsewhere in the Gospel according to Luke, Jesus adds: “Whoever has two coats must share with the one who doesn’t have any and the person who has food must do the same.” (*Luke 3:11*) This is a mandate to all of his followers to go out of our way to be thoughtful, caring, and generous.

Remember too how Jesus commends to us the example of the Samaritan who goes above and beyond anything expected of him to help some poor soul waylaid by brutal robbers? (*Luke 10:25-37*) In sharing that parable for all to hear, Jesus expanded upon the whole

idea of neighbor as first contemplated by the Old Testament Book of Leviticus where it decrees that we should love our neighbor as ourself. (*Leviticus 19:18*) By Jesus' moral and spiritual reckoning anyone in need should be regarded as our neighbor. Thus, closing our hearts down or putting boundaries on our love and concern are not viable options for us *if* we want to stay right with God and how he wants us to live.

Obviously, as unabashed do-gooders, seeking to be faithful to Jesus, we want to *do* good unto others, not just feel good about ourselves. Thus, here and abroad, in the spirit of Christ, it's always critical for us to empower, rather than enable, people, so that we don't foster dependencies that discourage personal resourcefulness and self-reliant solutions which are usually the most effective solutions of all. On this score, I don't think there's anything wrong or shameful about exercising what in popular parlance is called "tough love." Yet, in our avowed faithfulness to the Christ and a God whom we can't fool, how important for us to *always* have the moral integrity and honesty to recognize in ourselves the big difference between tough love, where we remain genuinely concerned for the person in trouble, and a love and faith deficit on our part where in the face of suffering we don't sincerely care at all. A callous, stingy spirit does not honor Christ and his way.

I think we all know that being a generous Christian is not just about helping others out with the material things they need in a pinch. It should also be about witnessing to a way of life through Christ that helps individuals and whole societies better deal with their problems here and now, while equipping them with salvation for eternal life. Our entire world will only become the more just, equitable, peaceful, loving place God wants it to be if more people have Christ in their heart to help combat the selfishness and sin that lends itself to greed, violence, and disorder of every kind. (*James 3:13-18*) This is why Jesus calls upon us to spread and share his gospel word which has a unique power to restore hope, purpose, and positive meaning to human lives.

In his final earthly appearance to the apostles and disciples after Calvary's cross, Jesus delivers what has come to be called "The Great Commission," entrusting us with a great responsibility. "Go," Jesus declares, "throughout the whole world and preach the gospel to all people." (*Mark 16:15*) He underscores that it is a matter of life and death, spiritual and otherwise. Indeed, he says: "Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved; whoever does not believe will be condemned." (*Mark 16:16*) Most importantly those who do believe and embrace his way of life will be able to bring great healing to others even in the face of poisonous evil. (*Mark 16:17-18*)

In his own life, the Apostle Paul personally experienced the truth that Jesus imparted with the Great Commission. Thanks to his faith in Jesus Christ, his whole life got turned around right. Through a mystical encounter with Christ on the road to Damascus he was transformed from a mean, angry, and hateful bigot and vicious bounty hunter into a

human being with a wider vision of God's love and justice and a zeal to share a new way of life through Jesus full of grace and compassion. (*Acts 8:1-3; 9:1-25*)

Did you hear all the promises that the Apostle Paul reiterates in his Letter to the Romans as read this morning? "For it is by faith that we are put right with God," he announces. "It is by our confession that we are saved," he adds. (*Romans 10:10*) "Whoever believes will not be disappointed," Paul assures us. And "everyone who calls out the Lord for help will be saved." (*Romans 10:11, 13*) Paul then emphasizes how essential it is for who know Christ to let others know about him, not just through the witness of our works, but through our spoken preaching and teaching.

Paul's words are eloquent, stirring, and challenging. "And how," he asks, "can [people] believe if they have not heard the message? And how they hear if the message is not proclaimed? And how can the message be proclaimed if the messengers are not sent out?" (*Romans 10:14b-15*) The bottom line of the Apostle Paul's oration to the Christians of Rome is that if they want to see a better world and a better people all around them, they need to proclaim the word and way of Jesus Christ.

Congregation, the world—the whole world—needs the wisdom and truth of Jesus. At a time like our own when our problems have global reach like never before our message of Jesus Christ needs to reach out globally as well. In this mass communications world, folks may have heard about Jesus. Yet they have still not "heard" Jesus. If and when they do, our planet will be transformed for the good, for the better. And we will have the spiritual means to solve the problems of our planet so that it does not become a "living hell," but is preserved with some good measure of peace, compassion, and justice, even while always awaiting the day when God's kingdom comes and Jesus return to usher in God's final reign of peace. In our daily life, we need to speak up for Christ, as well as promote his teaching in the larger world. "Think globally, act locally," is a good motto for us all in Christ.

On a sabbath, celebrated as "World Communion Sunday," may we join with other Christians around the globe in a commitment to do our part to witness to Christ in word and deed so that his way and his spirit might illumine the path that our entire planet needs to trod. **Amen.**