

### 5.24.20 Er7 God's Mission for Witness

- During this pandemic when many of us are spending so much more time at home, I have heard many people are taking on special projects
  - Some people have the goal of housecleaning every closet, and every room of the house
  - Others have all kinds of projects outside – planting flowers and bushes, building patios and decks, and powerwashing the house
  - And other people are sewing or exercising
  - Me? I'm reading my way through a pile of books, mainly fiction
    - Here's one of the books I picked up for pennies-on-the-dollar at an already-been-used bookstore near us
    - If you're not familiar with this series of books by Sue Grafton, they are series of stories featuring Kinsey Millhone, a quirky private investigator
    - Not only are they good stories with the same central characters in each book, but what they are known for is that the Author, Sue Grafton, set out to write in sequence, a series of 26 books, the title of each one starting with a letter of the alphabet from A to Z
    - This book uses the letter Y, but it is her twenty-fifth and last book, because you see, Sue Grafton died just one book short of completing the series that she wrote over much of her life
    - And to me, it's kind of sad – she had a great plan, well developed characters, an imagination that produced story line after story line and frankly, a vast variety of ways for people to be murdered – but it's kind of sad that she came SO CLOSE to the end, and then died just one book short of her goal
- That's part of what it means to be human, isn't it?
  - We make plans, and sometimes we are able to accomplish them, and other times we just are not able to complete them
- If not having a guarantee to complete the plans that we dream is part of being human, it's quite different for God

- *God is God, and God is able to accomplish what God sets out to do*, and we can see that in our first reading for today, the lesson from the first chapter of the Acts of the Apostles
  - In this reading from the very beginning of THIS BOOK, we hear God's purpose and God's plan: "you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in Judea and Samaria, and to all the ends of the earth. [1:8]"
  - In other words, starting from Jerusalem, God would send out witnesses to share the Good News of Jesus Christ crucified and raised for the forgiveness of sins and for the promise of life – God would send out witnesses starting in Jerusalem where Jesus Christ was crucified and raised
  - Then witnesses would be sent out beyond Jerusalem to the north country of Judea to villages like Bethlehem and Nazareth
  - Then witnesses would go out beyond there to Samaria where foreigners who were regarded as hated rivals lived
  - Finally God's witnesses would take the sin-forgiving and life-changing Good News of Jesus Christ to the very ends of the earth
  - And sure enough, if you sit down and read the whole book of Acts, you will see that through God's witnesses, the church of believers grows and grows and grows – people of Jerusalem, an Ethiopian official, a Roman centurion, assorted women, Greeks, Macedonians, and even Paul a former persecutor of the early church – they are all brought to faith in Jesus Christ... and Paul ends up preaching while under arrest in Rome, the capital and very seat of power in the Roman empire
  - In short, *God planned to send witnesses from Jerusalem to the end of the earth, AND GOD DID IT.*
  - *And God did it by sending power from on high, the Holy Spirit, to inspire believers after Jesus ascended into heaven*
- We live in a very different time
- God's witnesses have already gone to the very ends of the earth, and now the mission of God is for God's people to continue to be witnesses in every corner of the world

- As the season of Easter draws to a close, and it is also Memorial Day weekend, let me tell you about two of the saints in our lives

- I had just been ordained and was a few days into serving my first congregation when one evening the doorbell rang
- There stood an older couple – he was wearing a clerical collar and she was holding a chilled bottle of wine, so of course we invited them in
- They introduced themselves as Don and Mehta, and it turns out he was serving a small congregation just down the road
- They were nice, and unassuming, but as we got to them and their story, we discovered that they were amazing people
- Don was fluent in both Chinese and Japanese, and together they had served as missionaries in China after World War Two, and then they had to flee the village where they were serving – dragging their young children in a cart to escape Mao Zedong’s revolutionary army as it advanced across China
- After escaping from China they were set to Japan where as missionaries, they served with the tiny church in Japan while it recovered from the war
- After serving in China and Japan, they came back to the states and Don enlisted in the Navy where he served as a chaplain and at one point was in Vietnam during the Tet offensive
- Then years later, after retiring from the navy, Don went to the bishop of the Northeastern Pennsylvania Synod and said that with his navy pension, he didn’t really need much money, so he would be glad to serve a congregation that wouldn’t normally be able to afford a full-time pastor, so they went to a parish that was so rural, that Mehta said that it just made her day when she could look out her kitchen window and see a deer, or even a bear
- And meanwhile, Mehta became an accomplished painter
- Now Don and Mehta among the heavenly saints, but I tell you the story of these wonderful friends and

witnesses, because I personally have not known anyone else who during their lives saw and experienced such a broad sweep of the world and Christ's church

- In Acts, from Jerusalem to the ends of the earth, and in this day from Jerusalem to the United States to China, Japan, and Vietnam, and back to rural America – IN ALL PLACES God plans the spread of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, and God carries out and accomplishes that plan through the witness of the church of Spirit-inspired believers
- We at Jerusalem are just one small part of this whole church, and our neighborhood is one but small part of God's whole world
- Yet both God and the rest of the church are depending on us, praying for us, and supporting us as we are called to be Christ's witnesses in this place
- And the opposite is true too – we are depending on, praying for, and supporting the rest of the church as it carries out God's Spirit-empowered mission to share Christ throughout the world beyond the reach of our lives