

Mission: The Greatest Commandment

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*Sawatdee ton chaw... khopkhun ti rapchan ben kaek phutetsana mae wah chan mai chai
kaek lae pokati mai chai phutetsana*

Translation: Good morning. Thank you for welcoming me as a guest preacher today, though I'm not actually a guest and I'm not the usual preacher.

We considered how we could give more of a Thailand mission experience today. I said we could turn the heat up to 90 degrees, but that isn't very economical in Indiana in November. Church in Thailand is usually two hours with an hour of preaching... but I know there's a Colts game at 1:00 today and I figure some of you want to be there. In fact, I'm going to the game today too, so I don't intend to preach an hour but it is hard to share my lifelong passion for mission and Thailand in 15 minutes. I can't share a bunch of stories today but it's not hard to get me talking about Thailand if you ever want to hear more, and preferably we could share that over some Thai food (not silk worms!).

I am glad for this opportunity to share some of my story and experience in missions, which is a big part of my story, and about Thailand where I lived for 9 years. But I am here now, of course, and part of this church and also have an eye on how we do mission here. In preparing for today I've considered the questions "What is mission?"; "Why do we do mission?" and "How do we do mission?" Answers to those questions have continued developing for me since I first felt called to missions over 20 years ago.

When I was about to turn 19 years old, I was in my freshman year of college at the University of Evansville. I was biology major, considering healthcare, then in the spring of that first year, I decided I wanted to be a missionary. Rather, it wasn't so much that I decided this; it was more a realization of calling. That was the sense that I had, that this was the life for me, and I set my sights on being a long-term missionary overseas. The previous summer I made the decision to follow Christ in a more focused way, as the center of my life. That led to my calling in ministry and my first mission trip the summer of 1996, a week-long medical mission trip to Jamaica. Each step I took in missions confirmed that path for me. But I also want you to hear from me today, that mission isn't only a special calling for a few. It isn't short-term and it doesn't depend on geography. Mission is part of following Christ.

The "Great Commission" influenced me, from Matthew 28:18-20 when Jesus said to the disciples 'Go and make disciples of ALL nations, baptizing them..., teaching them to observe ALL that I have commanded you.' At that time I decided to obey this command to GO, but I didn't know where, I felt called to those who were spiritually and physically poor, that was as far as I had it narrowed down initially. It was following step by step.

After I graduated with my biology degree and I was all ready to sacrifice everything for God, I moved to Hawaii...you know, to suffer for the Lord. I went for mission training. It was actually practical- since you're halfway to Asia, you get used to being hot, having geckos in your room and ants in everything. I joined Youth With A Mission (YWAM for short) because they had integrated training in missions and healthcare. I trained in Discipleship Training School, Primary Health care and Community Health Development with a two-three month outreach/field assignment after each quarter, in the Philippines, Thailand, and Cambodia. When it came time to decide where I would live and serve long-term, I felt led to Thailand, and specifically to work with minority people groups on the Thai-Burma border. I moved to Chiang Rai, Thailand in 2003.

Burma, also known as Myanmar, has persecuted its minority groups for decades. The worst situation is right now with the Rohingya who are fleeing by the thousands- around 600,000 people have fled into Bangladesh. A lot of minority groups from eastern Burma have moved into Thailand over the years, but don't have citizenship there; they really are stateless (which means they don't have rights in any country). Being born in those two countries does not mean automatic citizenship.

In Chiang Rai I learned the language and culture, how to live and do ministry in Thailand while working with a girls' home, then in 2005 I moved to the Thai-Burma border area in northern Chiang Mai province to start a community development ministry among the Shan people, and other minorities from Shan state across the border from us.

Some context: Thailand is 90+% Buddhist, though there Buddhism is really mixed with animism, or spirit-worship, and 5-6% Muslim; less than 1% of the population is Christian. Among the Shan, the population of Christians is lower than that, around ½%. I have great respect for these religions, admittedly more so now than I did in my early missionary career. I never told anyone they are going to hell. I'm pretty glad that it's not my job to decide that or to know that. But I do think that we have good news of a loving God who is gracious and forgives us and gives us hope. I think there are a lot of people who need and want hope, and many can find that in Jesus. That's basically my theology of evangelism. But mission is more than evangelism, or at least I think it should be or we're only sharing part of the Gospel, in my understanding.

I helped start a ministry that became a non-profit organization called Full Life Development (Krongan Patana Chiwit Sombun in Thai). The name comes from John 10:10, where Jesus said he came that people may have life and life abundantly, or life to the full. I'm captivated by this idea of full life, and that God wants that for each of us. I don't take that to be about an abundance of material possessions, which may or may not include a truly full life. I believe God desires our total well-being, so I focused on integrating physical and spiritual ministry.

I am still the part-time Executive Director of Full Life Development. The ministry on the ground in Thailand is led by my co-worker Jom who has served with me since 2008. Jom is Shan. He left Burma when he was 14, then lived as a street kid in Chiang Mai, Thailand until someone came and asked if he wanted a place to live and the chance to go to school. He lived at a Shan Christian Children's home which is where I met him when he was in his early 20's. He has a heart to serve his people. In 2010, Jom and his childhood friend, Pastor Tee, who also grew up at that children's home, started a Shan church. It hasn't been easy- the church has had to move

several times, because there's no funding, they don't own a building, and aren't always welcomed as Christians to rent a house to use as a church. Pastor Tee had a life-threatening head injury in a motorbike accident a few years ago. He has trouble speaking but still preaches. The church has just about 6 families in it, but they are faithful and we partner with them in that ministry.

Our main focus is holistic ministry that addresses the physical and spiritual in an integrated way, focused on the least of these- those most in need. Currently what that looks like for Full Life Development in Thailand is that we work in a few workers' communities. These are families who have moved from nearby Shan state in Burma into Thailand looking for work and need a place to live to provide for their families. In the foothills of the border that's formed by mountains there are a lot of fruit orchards, and we go in to minister in these orange orchards where the workers live on-site in row housing made of cement blocks, one room per family. Very, very basic; cement floors, sleeping on thin mats on the floor, cooking outside, shared outhouses. There are dozens of kids there. Some of them are able to go to school, if they can afford because it's not free, and if they can manage it because it's not in their language; if they're healthy enough because their living conditions put them more at risk of disease; and if someone can take care of any kids that are too small. So some kids can go to school and some can't. We work with all the kids, providing educational support, language and homework help, teaching about disease prevention, and taking kids to the doctor when they need it. We also share the Gospel about a God who loves them and is with them.

Mission for me has always been sharing a Gospel that is not just words, and not only concerned with the soul of a person or the afterlife, but with the whole life of a person, because I believe God cares for the whole person that way, for every person. I started with a concern for people's physical needs. Over time I could also see that people are more than needs. Everyone has gifts, too. Mission can also be seeing that and affirming the gifts of others, especially those who have been marginalized and treated as if they have nothing to offer.

I have been glad to continue my work with FLD and our partners since I moved back from Thailand in 2012. FLD is funded completely by donations, since I started it in 2005, through partnership with currently 6 churches of various denominations (including 2 Methodist, one Lutheran Church, etc.), a few individual supporters, and some annual fundraising events.

If you'd like to see pictures of the beautiful children I've talked about, you can go to our website FullLifeDevelopment.org, or you can follow the Full Life Development Facebook page.

I didn't leave Thailand because I was done with missions; it was because I was married then to an actively drinking alcoholic. We came back to pursue healing for him and as a family, but that's not the direction he took. I eventually had to find new direction, though my lifelong ambition was to be a career missionary overseas. I couldn't do that, but just because my geography changed did that mean I can't be involved in mission? Of course not. As many of you demonstrate here, there are many ways to be involved in mission. And in my understanding, we can't really follow Christ and not be part of the mission He invites us to. A couple people suggested that I was disqualified for ministry because of my divorce, but I didn't believe that was from God. God invites all of us to participate in what God is doing and wants to do for the world and everyone in it, and I believe God "qualifies" whoever is willing to be part of that. Mission is

not only for those who are in full-time ministry or those on the mission team; it is for them and for everyone else.

My next direction after Thailand involved moving to Indianapolis to attend seminary at CTS. I was greatly influenced by all I studied there. My favorite theologian is probably Bonhoeffer, the German pastor and theologian, who wrote his vision for the church as being Christians growing in faith together and following Christ into the world. I came to Meridian Street with that vision, with a passion for the Church and the mission God calls us to. We cannot separate mission from following Christ, and can't be the Church without engaging in mission. It is how we live out who we are called to be and what we are called to do. I'm very glad to be part of mission here at Meridian Street.

Jesus said the greatest commandment is to love God and the second is to love others. I want to read our Scripture passage again from the Message version, and let's listen to it, hearing it corporately as a church:

37-40 Jesus said, "'Love the Lord your God with all your passion and prayer and intelligence.' This is the most important, the first on any list. But there is a second to set alongside it: 'Love others as well as you love yourself.' These two commands are pegs; everything in God's Law and the Prophets hangs from them."

"God's Law and Prophets" refers to what we now call the Old Testament; Jesus was saying that all of their Scriptures, the whole religion boils down to this: Love God and love people. If we love God we need to care about what God cares about. Scriptures show us what God cares about. We read of God's love for us and all humanity. And there are around 2,000 Scriptures about the poor and how we should care for the poor and demand justice for the poor, so I think God has a special concern for the poor and calls us to as well.

The quote at the top of the bulletin makes this point: Nicholas Berdyaev said, "While the problem of my own bread is a material issue, the problem of my neighbor's bread is a spiritual issue." To love our neighbor, we need to care about the condition our neighbor is in. Otherwise we have a spiritual disconnect; we can't claim to be loving God and obeying God and this commandment to love God and neighbor. We need to care about our neighbor's bread, and our neighbor's justice, and our neighbor's well-being, because God does. That person is created by God and loved by God. Mission flows from that understanding of our inherent value and realizing that others have that same value too.

There was a time, around 10 years ago or so, when I was living in Thailand and feeling burned out. I read some articles on missionary burnout and one thing from one of them has stuck with me. The article talked about how we think of serving God and think of ourselves as servants. That can be good and can motivate us to do some things. But that can become hard, because serving can be hard. God calls us and commands us to go and follow Christ, and then doesn't just lead us to nice, easy, comfortable places. Serving can be hard. Doing things FOR God can become tiring. So what is the answer? The article offered the simple truth that we are first and foremost and always children of God. We are loved by God, no matter what we do and what we don't do. When we receive this love from God, a natural response is love for God. From this,

there is enough love for others. It's not always easy to love people; people aren't always pleasant. We need love from beyond ourselves, then our love for others comes from being loved ourselves.

I hope you aren't disappointed that my 20 years in missions and ministry and training and seminary education all boil down to this simple message: Love God and love others. Love is the greatest motivator. It is the greatest guide and priority in our actions. Love will help answer the what, why, and how questions about mission for us. What can we do to love our neighbors? How are we doing at loving God? How are we showing our love for God in our neighborhood?

I want to close with Scripture from I John 4. "Beloved, let us love one another, for love is from God, and whoever loves has been born of God and knows God. Anyone who does not love does not know God, because God is love. ... Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another... We love because God first loved us." (I John 4:7-8,11, 19). This is the what and the why of mission.

I'm glad to be part of living this out here at Meridian Street, as we love God and follow Christ to love others in our neighborhood, city and world.