

Holy Trinity Episcopal Church

Midland, Texas

A Sermon on May 1, 2016

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In February of this year, I was privileged to once again visit the Dominican Republic for their diocesan convention and especially privileged to hear and meet Michael Curry, the new Presiding Bishop of the Episcopal Church. Bishop Curry's message proclaimed that first and foremost, we are "Jesus People". We all love to envision Jesus cradling us in his arms like a lost sheep and we know our needs for consolation, nurturing, and worship. What is a bit harder for us is that we are called as Jesus People to find and carry out our own mission in this world.

We all like the concept of being a babe wrapped in the arms of Jesus. What we have a harder time with is going out into the world as the feet and hands of Christ to share the love of Christ and bring about his kingdom. Are we called to be successful in this work? No. We are, however called to be faithful.

Our first lesson describes Paul's call to mission in Macedonia. Seems to me that it was a bit easier for God to get Paul's attention this time. My experience of some 20 years ago is as follows:

As usual, I was in my office about 6:30 a.m. preparing for the day to come. I suddenly knew that I needed to become involved in mission outside the US. Did I hear "THE VOICE OF GOD?" No. Did I know without doubt what I was to do? Yes. I waited patiently until 8 a.m. (9 a.m. East Coast) and called my longtime friend Hugh Magers at the 815 headquarters office in New York. My conversation with him was similar to this. "Hugh, I need to get involved in mission outside the US. I know there are places where the church is growing and vital and primarily needs help with time and treasure from other Episcopalians. I also know that there are places where the church is static or dying. These areas need someone to provide consolation. My personality fits with the places that are suffering growing pains rather than those that need comfort for the dying." Hugh's response was "You need to get involved with Bishop Julio Holguin in the Dominican Republic through the Dominican Development Group in Florida."

I then called Bob Stevens who was Executive Director of the DDG and asked how I could become involved. Within a couple of months, I was on an exploration trip which visited several sites throughout the Diocese to see the breadth of the mission being carried out there.

I was immediately hooked and joined the DDG and was team leader for a group from Holy Trinity. Our first project was to repair hurricane damage and re-roof a house at the Episcopal Diocesan Camp in the mountains of the Dominican Republic. I have since worked on many work teams from Florida, Georgia, Michigan, north and South Carolina, and many others. Projects I worked on ranged from building concrete forms for new churches and schools, to building church furniture and pews. We also have teams that do medical and dental work and VBS teams. We typically have 60-70 work teams a year that involve about 1,000 Episcopalians from the US.

A typical statement for a first time team member is “I went to the DR to show them how we do things in the US, but what happened is that I was profoundly changed by learning from the people there how to truly worship and share.”

I have had many of the 3 am discussions with God about “Why am I here in the DR?” and “can I really make a difference in a world where evil and poverty seem to be in control? Why not just send a check and spend my time entertaining myself?” I am continually reminded that doing what I know is faithful is the best response. As our Presiding Bishop said in his Holy Week address, whether we voice it or not, it is easy to fall into the trap of “might makes right” and “to the victor go the spoils.” Christ tells us that we are to be a compassionate people and do our part to bring about His kingdom on this earth. I am reminded of the parable about the Master who is leaving for an extended time and he entrusts talents with his servants. Upon his return, he asks for an accounting of the talents. Some were lost, some were invested wisely and made a great return. Some were buried to avoid loss and the Master especially detested this response. As people living in the richest nation on earth, we all need to account for the talents we have been given and realize that much is expected of us.

Challenges of my mission included that although I was 50 years old at the time, I knew no Spanish. I had lived in parallel with Hispanic culture all my life and had never embraced it. My engineering mind works like this. Hispanic culture primarily values Family, Church, Friends, Music, Humor---So what's the problem? With lots of help from Bernardo Martinez and lots of laughs, I moved to my current level of Spanish mastery On a good day, about 5<sup>th</sup> grade level, but somewhat functional.

After looking more into Texas history, I saw that Texas was part of Spain and Mexico about twice as long as we have been part of the United States. I for one am not willing to give up that part of my heritage. I have come to love Hispanic music, especially Mariachi music and Cuban music. Three years ago, I got to travel to Havana and it took me less than 15 minutes from checking into the Hotel Rivera to be on stage singing "Lagrimas Negras" with a band of young Cubanos.

The Diocese of the DR is a special place. Last year, we dedicated 6 new churches in the diocese. We have 27 schools, several clinics, albergues to feed children in the poorest bateys, vocational schools, clean water and sanitation projects. We are partnering with Food for the Poor and others to build 100 homes for the poor, and we are partnering with Carnival Cruise lines to provide meaningful mission work for people taking cruises.

None of this would be possible without the leadership of Bishop Julio Holguin. He has a vision for the Diocese that includes both substantial growth and financial independence. Through his leadership, we have established an endowment of about US\$7 million, and income from this already provides 55% of the Diocesan budget. We are currently working to increase the corpus of the Endowment to US\$10 million. The Dominican Development Group has one employee (Executive Director Bill Kunkle) and the sole purpose of the DDG is to co-ordinate efforts of US dioceses with the Diocese of the DR. We ask Bishop Holguin what projects need our help and work to send funds and teams to accomplish diocesan goals.

We have sent fire trucks, ambulances, school supplies, medicines, and many other items to the DR. One current project involved procuring and shipping 2 sets of concrete forms for outdoor latrines. These forms can be used to construct several

thousand latrines from fiberglass reinforced concrete. These latrines have a commode in them so that either water supply or a five-gallon bucket can be used to eliminate flies, insects, and pathogens. The first village we are working in needs at least 60. Part of the impetus for this project came from medical teams telling us that they were treating the same patients for the same parasites every year because of impure water and poor sanitation.

Jesus was not crucified in a cathedral between 2 candles, but rather on the town garbage dump between two thieves. Jesus calls us to minister to the world as it is, warts and all, rather than stay safely within the walls of our own churches, cities, and country.

I will give much more information about the dynamic Diocese of the DR during the Adult Study later today, but I would like to close with another paragraph from Bishop Curry's Holy Week Address.

*So go forth into this world. Don't be afraid. And don't be ashamed to be people of love. And go forth into this world and help us change it from the nightmare it often is into the dream that God intends.*