

Morning Worship
General Conference 2008

April 25, 2008

Preacher: Bishop João Machado, Mozambique Area

Liturgist; Mateus S. A. Francisco, Western Angola

(Mateus S. A. Francisco)

Brothers and sisters, our Scripture reading we find in the Book of Ezekiel 33:1-7.

Galatians 5:7-10.

Now I invite the congregation to stand for the reading of the gospel. The Gospel according to Matthew 28:18-20.

This is the word of God for the people of God.

(Audience)

Thanks be to God.

(Francisco)

You may be seated.

(Bishop João Somane Machado)

Good morning. *[Repeats phrase in several languages, with audience replying.]* These are all the languages spoken in heaven.

[Speaking in Portuguese with simultaneous translation into English]

To make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world (is the) priority mission for the church. I want to thank the commission that was planning the worship services. They had divine guidance in choosing the theme. This theme is really the reason for the church's existence. After the eloquent message in the opening worship by the president of the Council of Bishops and the Episcopal Address, the magnificent and the pedagogical way that our colleagues provided yesterday, I started to think that there was nothing left to say. All I have to do is say, "Amen."

But I remembered a Brazilian pastor that had been transferred from one church and assigned to a new church. But before going, he had heard that this church was a church that was concerned about itself, looking inwards and only worried about its own self, not really looking to the world around it. They would not notice or see what was happening even 100 yards outside their church.

And around that church was a large community, a slum with a large number of very abject poverty situations. And so when the pastor arrived at the church, he saw that what people had said was actually true. And so the first Sunday, the pastor comes up to the pulpit and starts to preach, and he chooses the text of Luke 4:18-19, and he preached with

dynamism, with eloquence and with spirituality. And after his sermon, he went to the door to greet the members. And all the members were saying, "What an excellent sermon, a very spiritual sermon. Fantastic!"

And so the following week, during the week, he then started visiting them in their homes, getting to know who they were, what they were doing. But on the second Sunday, he came and he preached on the same text and gave the same sermon.

But, so they're complimentary, "Well, thank you for the good sermon." And on the third Sunday after visiting his church and this congregation in their homes, he came back and he preached the same sermon again.

And so the chair of the pastor-relations committee says, "No; something's not quite right here."

So they called together the administrative board and the council to see what's happening: "So let's call this pastor and see."

So, on a Wednesday they called for a meeting. And so the chair of the committee was saying -- started praising him, saying, "We're very glad. You're a very dynamic, very enthusiastic, excellent pastor. But I don't know if you remember your first sermon that you gave us."

"Yes, I do remember," he said.

"And do you remember what your second sermon was?"

"Yes, it was the same."

"And the third one?"

"Yes, I remember. It was the same one. And perhaps the next sermon will be the same one, too."

So he replied, "Yes, and until you can show that you are putting into action the sermons I am preaching, I'm not going to change my sermon."

And so that's why I feel that even though my colleagues spoke so well before me, I can maybe still keep repeating the same message.

In the text that we read this morning from Galatians -- and this is a question that Paul was asking to the Christians in the community of Galatia -- and we know that Paul, in his last two, second and third missionary visits, is the one who founded that Christian community. He saw the birth of that community of the Galatians. And there were some people that had come and settled in that region -- some of the Celts and the Gauls and others. And when he hears that something's not quite going right, that things are not going the way he had started, he then writes his letter to them. He asked, "What happened? You were running so well. Why are you losing steam? You were making disciples in such a fantastic way. What happened? Who made you stop?"

Brothers and sisters in Christ, our church in the decades of the '50's through the '70's, putting this as the priority in everything that they would do and contribute, they contributed greatly in the transformation of the world in that time. I am a product of that

great and glorious period. Many heroes of the faith died in Africa, in Asia, in Latin America, working as missionaries or national church workers.

I have a few names that I would like to mention as an example of that exemplary spirit and period. In the decade of the '50's, we had a missionary that came to Mozambique by the name of Julian J. C. Rea. He was an agronomist. And when he came, he saw that the people were hungry, were starving, because their crops would only produce one harvest a year. So he drew an animal, and he called this animal, this beast, "hunger." And then he drew 12 arrows that were trying to kill this beast of hunger. And each arrow had a name: January, February, March -- all the way through December. And he started showing them, "What can you plant in January? What can you plant in March, in each month of the year throughout December" -- and so helping to see what type of plants are good seeds to plant in the rainy season, what type of crops are best planted during the dry season.

In the area of health, we know Dr. Stauffacher, who came from Sweden; Dr. Flaxmayer, who came from Germany; and Dr. Simpson who came from the United States. He is still alive. And they dedicated and gave their lives to help save the people.

We know Bishop Dodge, known in Africa as "the revolutionary bishop." He helped give the idea of what it means to be a citizen, what it means to be free.

We have a missionary that worked a lot in Angola, by the name of Chad. He also was an agronomist, and today in Angola there is a mango, a special type of mango that is known as the Chad mango.

There are many other names that I could mention, but I also want to mention the names of some of our own African leaders that emerged in this period. Bishop Chango from Congo and Bishop Sanduzi from Mozambique: these are also the first African bishops that emerged, and these are part of the heroes that passed on this mission to us today. And as a result of all this effort and this work, many of the children that were born and raised through this process were the ones that helped lead to the independence of these many African nations today. In Mozambique we can talk about Eduardo Muduni Arizetta in Angola, Nelson Mandela in South Africa, Patricia Lamumba and many others. This is all the result of the dynamism of our missionaries and our church workers.

So Paul is asking us, you, as The United Methodist Church: "What happened? You were running so well. What happened to you? What's the problem that led you to stop running so well?"

There is not an easy answer to that question. But if I can try to attempt an answer, I think one part is the church ceased doing good. The church started leaving aside doing good, stopped loving God. The three rules, the three simple rules, are very important for the life of the church, and that's the only way we can have true disciples of Jesus Christ and transform the world.

When I came in 1984 for the first time to the United States, I came to the General Conference, not as a delegate but rather as a member of the commission that was starting the creation of Africa University, as a new pastor, just fresh out of school. So I was in Africa, and we kind of thought, "We are coming to the Jerusalem of the church."

I found a wonderful theme for the General Conference -- that was the theme that was being developed by the conference. And so when I went home, I took on this theme and started working on it full-steam, and I asked my bishop to translate the materials that had come from the conference. And so the bishop translated those texts, and I started teaching that in my small church, and in the school I was teaching the students of theology at the time also what it is to be a congregation with vitality, what it is to be a disciple with a burning faith.

And what happened was that my small church started to grow. In our small church in '84, we were 15,000 members; and by '88, we were 30,000 members. Throughout the whole country.

Brothers and sisters in Christ, in my 20 years as bishop and as a member of the Council of Bishops here, I see that this church is blessed with women and men, laity and clergy, with people with tremendous gifts and talents. So, what's lacking? What's missing? We need to do what we say. It's the action that is missing.

Yes, the world does need transformation. And it's important to note that the choice of this theme was very wise, and also we need to be certain about the choice of the people to carry out this urgent mission, to make true disciples of Jesus Christ. The Methodist Church proposes to make disciples of Jesus Christ; but not just disciples -- true disciples of Jesus Christ. And only in this way can we truly transform. But to transform, we need to be transformed.

We cannot say we are going to go out and transform the world if we are not transformed ourselves. I remember one of our recent General Conferences, the wonderful worship of reconciliation and forgiveness and reconciliation to where people from the different colors could come together. And I saw the spirit of God over that worship service, and the words and the exchanges that we gave, asking for forgiveness from each other. I saw that was the time that the church could truly be united and reconciled.

But years later, as I come back, still it seems that we can only speak with words, not with actions yet. Churches can still say, "We don't want this pastor, because he is of this type or that type, or one group or the other."

So can we really be transformers?

The prophet Ezekiel says that we as The United Methodist Church need to be the sentinel.

When are we going to sound the alarm or blow the trumpet to warn the world that is filled with injustice, where the powerful can subjugate the weak and decimate generations in the name of their own freedoms?

Who is going to sound the alarm or blow the trumpet warning that the children continue to die every day? Every thirty seconds a child is dying of malaria in Africa.

Who is going to sound the alarm warning that 500 persons a day in Mozambique are becoming infected with AIDS and HIV?

Are we doing enough in favor of those who are dying from the wars in Iraq, Afghanistan, Somalia, Burundi, Sudan, and so many other places?

What prophetic voice can we give to the problems in Zimbabwe and Kenya and Congo and other places?

How can we give voice to that?

A world with hope is only possible when the church goes back to engage in its principle mission of making disciples for Jesus Christ. The transformation of the world will only come through true disciples.

And now, United Methodist Church, God speaking through the prophet Ezekiel, I appoint you, here at this General Conference, to be the sentinels for all of God's people spread throughout the world. Amen.