

## “#yesanyway”

The Reverend Rev. Dr. Hunter Farrell

Date: November 12, 2023



It would take more than a Sunday morning—and a much better Biblical scholar than I—to plumb the depths of this text which addresses one of the secrets of the Upsidedown Realm of God: not only are the poor, the marginalized, those who suffer somehow closer to the heartbeat of God, we ourselves are closest to God when we are at our weakest, our most insecure, when we’re in deep water and don’t think we can make it out on our own. Paul’s experience of Jesus Christ was through the door of suffering, and he often reflects—especially in his stormy relationship with the conflictive Corinthian church—on the power and kindness and beauty of God through the lens of those who have been marginalized by society. Biblical scholars have for centuries wondered what Paul’s “thorn in the flesh” was: a chronic illness, a speech impediment, an unsightly disfigurement? We simply don’t know. But that experience of marginality gave him a precious gift: it seems to have served as an antidote to the pride that his impressive educational pedigree and Roman citizenship might have caused. In unexpected ways, the very focal point of Paul’s deepest suffering somehow became an opening door that allowed him to receive God’s grace and to allow God’s grace to flow through him.

But I’d like to take this lens of marginality and use it to reflect on First Presbyterian’s work in global and local mission as you engage in mission in at Loaves & Fishes, Room in the Inn, Habitat for Humanity, or your long-term partnerships in Cuba, Haiti, Mexico and Russia. The starting point for me is an orientation of the heart that we have experienced in so many of you: a deep longing to make a difference in the world. You see human need and the underlying root causes of injustice and you are moved to reflect, to pray and to act. Let’s break that down a bit:

1. What are the qualities that enable a person to make a difference in the world? What characteristics help one engage in faithful and effective service?

- Is it an uncommon willingness to sacrifice? Dr. Don Carlson was an Evangelical Covenant Church missionary who, because of his love for the Congolese people, refused to leave his post in 1964 as the newly independent nation exploded in violence and Simba rebels shot and killed him.
- Or is it their strength of character? Mother Teresa labored tirelessly for years among the poor in the streets of Calcutta in conditions that would turn most of our stomachs? She had the strength to do what few of us could image doing.
- Or is it the capacity to persevere? Mariah Fearing was born into slavery in Alabama in the 1830’s and didn’t learn to read and write until she was freed at age 33. She applied for missionary service to the Presbyterian Church, U.S. at age 56. The Board rejected her application. But she refused to take ‘no’ for an answer and raised funds for her own support from African-American congregations across the South, got on a sailing ship for the first time in her life, sailed to the Congo Free State in central Africa (today known as the DR Congo), traveled up country, and learned the Tshiluba language so well she became one of the translators for

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what has become the Bible of choice for millions of Congolese Christians. Throughout her life, Mariah Fearing just kept on persevering.

2. So, what are the qualities that that allow us to be able to make a difference in the world? While sacrifice, strength of character, and the capacity to persevere are all helpful, none of us possess those virtues in ways that would put us in the league of such poster children for missionary virtue—“I’m no Mother Theresa!”, we might say. But along with these qualities, I would argue that the impact of a Christian’s life is directly related to their awareness of their own weaknesses, their own inability, and their willingness to put themselves in a place where God can use them anyway. In my experience of 35 years of working in mission, I have become convinced that the most impactful people who change the world are the ones who are most aware of their own inabilities—of their own contradictions and brokenness, of their paralyzing doubts and insecurities—but who say #yesanyway to God and rely on God to use, to transform, to complete, their weakness.

3. From your study of Scripture, you know that:

- God chooses not powerful Egypt or Assyria, but the people of tiny, weak Israel, to be God’s chosen people;
- God calls not the older, more stately sons of Jesse, but the youngest son—the shepherd, David, to become the greatest King Israel would know;
- God sends Jesus to be born into the world not as a king or conqueror, but as a brown-skinned carpenter’s son in a remote province suffering brutal occupation who is forced to flee with his family as a refugee,
- Jesus called as disciples not powerful princes or seminary graduates with a 4.0 GPA, but a ragtag crew of fisherfolk, a tax collector, a political extremist and others...and they became the beginning of the spreading circle that would “turn the world upside down”.
- In our text, Paul surprises us. His resume was impeccable: He was a Pharisee, a Roman citizen, and in his own words, “as to righteousness under the law, blameless” (try putting that on your next job application). Yet he recognized that God used him most powerfully in his weakness: “So, I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me. 10 Therefore I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities for the sake of Christ; for whenever I am weak, then I am strong,” says our text from II Corinthians 12.

Now, I have to confess I still haven’t matured into a place where I am happy with insults and hardship. Not in the moment, anyway. But my heart knows that God seems to be particularly active in the margins of human history—not the center! That’s how the first Christian communities formed:

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*<sup>26</sup> Consider your own call, brothers and sisters: not many of you were wise by human standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. <sup>27</sup> But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; <sup>28</sup> God chose what is low and despised in the world, things that are not, to reduce to nothing things that are, <sup>29</sup> so that no one might boast in the presence of God.*

God uses the weak things of the world to confound the powerful, so that no one can boast, so that no one thinks too highly of themselves, so that no one can fool themselves into thinking that it's their mission and not God's mission. You and I both know that Christian mission has not always been carried out in a spirit of humility. In the colonial era, when European nation-states needed a moral argument to justify their theft of native lands and natural resources, they invited priests and chaplains aboard their trading schooners and slave ships as moral “cover”—and the mission of Jesus Christ became deeply compromised by the colonizers' political and economic agendas. To millions of people today—to Muslims, Hindus, indigenous peoples and many other groups around the world, Christian mission is synonymous with European colonialism, forced conversions, and notions of white supremacy that privileged white European languages, cultures and religion over that of every other people's. Colonial mission was top-down mission—mission from a position of power and control that fed streams of white supremacy and racism that have been a part of our culture for centuries: “you must become like me to be acceptable”. Tragically, if you look at the ways many congregations engage in local and global mission today, we continue to reproduce the heresy of colonial mission—we attempt to get them to be more like us and are surprised when they fail. In a sense, it's not our fault—these are the scripts that our parents and grandparents tucked into the cultural backpacks each of us carries. Now, I need to confess to you this morning that I'm as guilty as anyone of engaging in colonial mission, rather than in mission in the way of Jesus.

I was in my twenties when I began as a mission worker in what's now the DRC, and you'll have to excuse me, but I was incredibly qualified! I was missional hot stuff: MDiv in Cross-Cultural Studies at Fuller Seminary, advanced degree in religious anthropology at EPHE in Paris, I spoke several languages and quickly set about to learn the local language, Tshiluba, spoken by about 2 million Congolese Presbyterians. But when Ruth and I arrived for work, I soon discovered that all my academic training had done little to prepare me spiritually and emotionally for the oppressive reality our Congolese neighbors faced each day:

- People in our city struggled to survive on less than \$2/day
- Infant malnutrition and death was a daily reality. I've never seen so many babies die in my life.

It was a quick trip from “missional hot stuff” to an emotionally broken young man—I was hardly able to get out of bed in the morning. I had fallen through the trap door of my hastily constructed understanding of mission-- and I was overcome with a sense of hopelessness and inadequacy.

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And that’s when it started. Badibanga, the youth leader from a local church, came by to visit me and gathered a group of church members to hold an all-night prayer vigil in our house, praying for healing and blessing. Kihani, one of my students from the Seminary, kept coming by to pray for me. Slowly but surely they toppled my hierarchical understanding of mission, helped me learn to laugh at myself, and brought me back to health and wholeness. My students became my teachers. My juniors became my elders in the faith. The “objects” of my mission became the ones who evangelized me, pointing me back not to my strengths or my resume or high sense of calling, but to the sufficiency of God’s grace through Jesus Christ. PAUSE

So much of mission is done like a “mission strut”—you know, where we bring our strengths and great ideas and our benevolence and our high tech gear and Ziploc bags to solve poor people’s problems. Yet God desires us to slow down enough that we drop to our knees. Could it be that the heavy burdens you may feel right now—overwhelmed, with work or the search for a job, burdened with responsibilities to tend to, and friends and family to care for, or doubts or insecurities or depression—could it be that these burdens in fact open up a space to shift gears—to rely not on our own smarts or strength, but on God’s? What Ruth and I have seen in our 20+ years of friendship with this church is Broad Streeters allowing themselves to be formed in the margins:

- Though global travel is not your thing, something about the upcoming First-Charlotte trip speaks to you and you say #yesanyway.
- You encounter a young homeless mother as you enter Room in the Inn for your volunteer shift. Your head says, “keep moving”, but the Spirit says, stop and listen. You say #yesanyway. And you’re able to connect her with needed medical care through your contacts in the church;
- Even though gathering people together—though “leading” is way outside your comfort zone, you say #yesanyway. And get people together to address a concrete problem facing the people living in poverty in Charlotte.

Today we remember our place at the Lord’s Table is guaranteed not by our achievements or pedigree, but by the gracious invitation of our God. The God who knows our brokenness and our shortcomings, our fears and our failures and says #yesanyway to us by sending Jesus Christ to offer His life for the forgiveness of sins—that is the God who offers you your place at the table and gives us the bold humility to go out and change the world.