

Rideau Park United Church, Ottawa
September 22, 2019 – Elizabeth Bryce

Readings: Philippians 2:12-19
Matthew 25:31-40

Sermon: God's love set loose in the world

Last summer, my brother-in-law and his family had an unexpected encounter. They were at church at Beacon United in Yarmouth Nova Scotia. That morning there were some visitors.

These visitors happened to be visiting Canada from Korea. They started a conversation with Stephen's brother David, and told him they were looking for anyone who had a connection with Alice Sharp, a Methodist missionary who had served in Korea, but who had been born in Chebogue, just outside of Yarmouth.

"Well, I'm related to her!" David exclaimed (and also Stephen and Judy and Janet and Steen...it's Nova Scotia, you know they're going to find a connection somewhere.) "Alice Sharp was my great grandmother's sister – but we don't really know much about her."

Lo and behold, great-great aunt Alice is actually very well known in Korea. Alice went from Nova Scotia to the US to study, where she married another Methodist missionary, Robert Sharp. They were sent to Korea in 1900. Robert died within the first two years of their deployment, but that did not stop Alice. She remained in Korea until her retirement in 1939. During her time there she set up a number of girls' schools, and she inspired many Korean women to use education as a means to independence. The reason Alice Sharp came to be so well known, however, is because one of the students she taught was a young woman named Yu Gwan Sun. Alice recognized the young woman's potential and she convinced Yu Gwan Sun's father to let her continue her education.

The nation of Korea was going through difficult times early in the twentieth century. Allied with Japan against Russian expansion at the turn of the century, Japanese armies made Korea their base of operations, increasing their occupation of the land and oppression of its citizens. By 1919 there was a growing independence movement, and one of its stars was the same Yu Gwan Sun, who had been taught by Alice Sharp to value freedom and independence.

Seven thousand people were killed in the Independence movement, and Yu Gwan Sun, only 16 years old, was one of those martyrs, arrested for organizing the first march for independence. Her story became an inspiration for the freedom fighters that followed after her. And so, in turn, did Alice Sharp's story within the Methodist church in Korea.

Back to Nova Scotia in the summer of 2019, the Korean visitors had come to Yarmouth looking for some relatives of Alice Sharp so that they could invite them to go to Korea for events marking the 100th anniversary of the first Independence march. I'm not sure Stephen and David fully understood the stature of their great-great aunt. They have

been honoured by local politicians, hosted by bishops and leaders of the Methodist church in Korea, their picture in the local newspapers. And they have been invited to go back next year to attend the opening of a museum which is commemorating Alice's missionary work.

When you go out into the world, to help other people, you never know what God's love is going to do, once it is set loose on the world. You might inspire a young hero. You might become part of a much larger movement. You might make just one tiny little difference. But inspired and multiplied by God's love, your humble efforts could be remembered and celebrated for generations.

What does "mission" mean to you? Does the word missionary conjure up images of Victorian era Christians trying to force indigenous peoples into wool suits and corsets, or burn down their shrines and holy places, supposedly bringing the light of the Christian gospel to heathens in dark continents?

In spite of inspiring stories like Alice Sharp's, most of us are well aware that – along with their infinite faith building schools and hospitals and churches – the missionaries brought with them the racism and arrogance of colonial attitudes. Their work often crushed and suppressed the very indigenous people they hoped to save. They left a heritage of spirituality and culture lost and damaged, if not crushed out forever.

In the stories of the early Christian church, we hear about the work of the very earliest missionaries – the apostles Paul and Timothy, are the missionaries mentioned in the epistle this week. The word mission comes from the Latin meaning "sent out" – one who is sent out into the world – to spread the word, or the work, of the gospel. In Paul's letter to the Philippians, he tells them that they are already signs of God's love in the world – they don't need him to come and teach them or to show them the way. But he would love to see them again, and he will send Timothy to them, so that together they can continue to build up the love and healing of the Spirit wherever they go.

Somewhere along the way, the church became less rooted in sharing the love of God in Jesus, however, and became more invested in building a Christian empire. And that is a legacy that still follows us today. As a United church we are constantly being called to examine our own arrogance and racism, not only overseas, but most recently by our own UC members who are visible minorities, disabled, and indigenous. Much like the current political conversation swirling around us, our own members often remind us that they don't see themselves reflected in the leadership and decision-making of our denomination. We assume that everyone looks like us, eats like us, sounds like us, worships like us. Racialized members of our church have told us how hard it is sometimes to be part of the church.

I have often heard it said at United Church meetings that now WE are the ones who need the missionaries to come to us, Christians from Asia and Africa and the Caribbean and Central America. Because they have a lot to teach us about faith in action, about compassion for each other, and being Christ's disciples in the world.

When I was a child, we often attended my grandparents' church. And I was a little jealous of their missionaries. Because their Sunday School children each got a

personalized piggy bank, shaped like a little church. And every week, the teacher would hand out the little churches, and everyone would take a few coins out of their pocket and put it in the piggy bank to help their friends Pastor Joe and Mrs Linda do their missionary work in some part of Africa.

Heaven forbid if you didn't bring coins. I was never prepared and I felt the shame of letting Jesus down. And then they would sing something about giving the children overseas angel's wings that were fit for heaven, or something like that. I mean, really – I was **so** jealous. I wanted to be a hero too, I wanted to have my own missionary to help.

In the gospel reading, we hear Jesus' parable about everyday missionaries much closer to home. This is the kind of mission that is already seen by God, but which is often overlooked or underestimated by the very people who have brought it about. In the parable when God greeted those people in the kingdom of heaven, God thanked them for helping in their own time and space. They replied, asking: "But when? When did we help YOU out?" God tells them, "When you helped any of my children – the least of the world – when you fed them, or clothed them, visited them, comforted them or sheltered them, you helped me."

When God's love is set loose on the world, we never know what will happen. We never know how God will make what YOU do a miracle.

Just think of all the things that people do to make the world a better place. And then multiply it over and over. Walking in walkathons and marching for the environment, volunteering and donating to the emergency food centre, running in charity marathons, coaching teams or leading youth groups, simply lending a helping hand to neighbours and family members and strangers in a time of need. We may not say out loud that we are doing it for Jesus or because of our faith, but we are all missionaries in our own way, setting God's love loose in the world.

Meanwhile, in the United Church, we don't have personalized piggy banks, nor been greeted by photos of one particular missionary that we are supporting somewhere in the world. But we have a real connection to what God's love is doing when it is set loose on the world through our Mission and Service Fund.

With more and more exposure to the church, I have seen the impact that our mission dollars have in a real way. When hurricanes and earthquakes strike, the United Church provides immediate response. In communities where there is poverty and isolation, there are outreach ministries working to alleviate the suffering. In hospitals busy staff sometimes don't have time to listen, we fund pastoral care programs. At universities where students sometimes feel unheard or unimportant, there are chaplains who are working to connect students to each other and to their own spiritual resources.

Sometimes we wonder what a little bit of money here, or a little bit of time there, are really doing for some of the deep-rooted problems in the world around us. Our global partners have proven that a little bit of help can go a long way. They take what we have given and they make miracles happen.

Like the people in Matthew's parable, or relatives of a teaching missionary who served a century ago, we may not always be aware of how we have already reached out into the world and put God's love into action. But we live in faith that God will take all that we do, and multiply the blessing. Thanks Be to God!