

Rev. Dr. Cornel Barnett
Redwoods Presbyterian Church
Larkspur, California
January 31, 2016

1 Corinthians 13:1-13
“Stories of Faith”

My sermon last Sunday drew from the 2015 Mission Yearbook for Prayer and Study. I mentioned then that I would dedicate two or three sermons to this resource having experienced the magnificent ministry of our denomination throughout the country and world in my devotional use of the resource last year.

I have called this sermon “Stories of Faith” because that’s what one reads in the yearbook. Each day’s submissions come from a different presbytery (our regional bodies) throughout the entire USA and from Presbyterian Church (USA) global missions and work of mission partners around the world.

The articles are submitted by individuals living in the locales or by denominational workers with oversight for the areas. We get the cultural flavor and nuances of these different areas.

What comes to mind for you when I mention “South Louisiana?” (Cajun, bayou, shrimping, wetlands, sitting on a porch). All these names appear in the mission yearbook article from the Presbytery of South Louisiana, from our Presbyterian sisters and brothers in the land of catfish and water snakes.

The picture that accompanies the one page article is of two boats with nets displayed and the caption reads, “Shrimping on the Grand Bayou.” The ministry in the area is stated as follows, “The Louisiana coast has the fastest-disappearing delta in the world, having lost land equivalent to the size of Delaware. Damaged ecosystems include vast fisheries that extend to the Atlantic Ocean, habitat for migratory birds, and small farming and fishing communities.

“The Wetlands Theological Education Project was created two years ago to address this social, ecological, and spiritual crisis through theological discussion, public advocacy, and hands-on projects and other tangible response.

“‘We lost more of our homes in the last storm,’ says Chief Naquin of the Biloxi-Chitimacha-Choctaw tribe. ‘We have lost 90 percent of our land mass in my lifetime.’ The tribe has been working on relocation to retain their cultural, religious, and family connections as well as their traditional livelihoods.

“Faced with many communities needing to relocate and other communities growing to accommodate the displaced, the Presbytery of South Louisiana and its 55 congregations are seeking to be present where God is working.

“Consultations involving congregations, the presbytery, and partners like the Louisiana Interchurch Conference are addressing issues of pending exile for some communities, vanishing ecosystems, and how communities receiving the dislocated can best provide hospitality.

“Please visit Wetlands Theological Education Project on Facebook.’ Patsy, of Bayou Blue Presbyterian Church writes, ‘We want you to sit with us on our porch and enjoy this part of God’s world with us.’”

Yes, that sounds like Southern Louisiana. God’s people are doing God’s good work of love everywhere. It’s encouraging.

I mention “love” because that’s the lectionary text for the day as Suellen just read. It is said that the church’s ministry is commentary on Jesus’s commandment to us to love God and neighbor. Paul in his letter to the Corinthian church provides one of the best definitions of love. If you haven’t done so, meditate on the chapter by Paul. You’ll never be the same again. I could have entitled my sermon, “Stories of Love.”

You will be amazed with the kinds of stories one reads about in the mission yearbook. The following story comes from the Presbytery of Beaver-Butler in Pennsylvania which borders Ohio and West Virginia. It’s a story we in California can identify with.

Agnus Peebles, a member of the peacemaking committee in the presbytery, writes, “When friends in his small, semi-rural community in Butler County told Jason Bell that their wells were no longer producing usable water, he heard God’s call.

“He began to work on two fronts: seeking immediate help and working for a long-term solution to the problem.

“A message to churches in the area brought supplies of bottled water and money to purchase more. Neighbors offered shower and laundry facilities. White Oaks Springs Presbyterian Church and its pastor, Rev. Lee Dreyer, volunteered to coordinate the ‘water bank,’ from which 35 families each get weekly deliveries of 20–25 gallons.

“Through newspaper articles, letters to editors of local papers, and appeals to local, county, and state government agencies, Jason and the homeowners are working for a permanent solution to the problem. After two years, there is no end in sight. Support continues, not only from presbytery congregations but also from people as far away as Philadelphia and Buffalo. Jesus said, ‘I was thirsty and you gave me drink.’”

Another story: Recently, I stopped at a busy intersection in San Francisco and marveled at the variety of racially and ethnically diverse people who crossed the road in front of me. I heard different languages as a mother with a stroller hollered at her slow-walking child, two women speaking excitedly to each other oblivious of their surroundings, and a man speaking on his cell phone. Wow, only in San Francisco (or LA, New York or Chicago), I thought.

Not so. The Mission Yearbook carries this astounding story from Cimarron Presbytery in rural Oklahoma of all places. “The town of Guymon, in the far western panhandle of Oklahoma, is home to feedlots and meat-packing plants that provide opportunity and a livelihood for thousands of immigrant workers. One result: 27 different languages are spoken at Guymon High School. This is Oklahoma!

“In 2013, ‘Main Street Guymon’—a nonprofit organization promoting local development—held its first Azuma street festival to showcase the various African cultures represented by some of the area’s newest residents. First Presbyterian Church of Guymon was instrumental in planning the event, which has won two state awards.

“Shortly after Azuma, the South Sudanese Christian Fellowship at First Presbyterian was born. The group, which uses the Dinka-Bor language in worship, fits well into the Presbyterian tradition: because its members are from an area originally evangelized by Catholics and Anglicans, they are used to orderly worship!

“Rev. Deborah Hollifield, pastor of First Presbyterian, preaches in English on Sunday afternoons while someone translates.

“Most of the women in the fellowship are under 30 and have several children. Many attend ESL classes so they can get a driver’s license and provide their families much-needed mobility. The men, aged 25–35, are former ‘lost boys of Sudan’ who were relocated to the United States—and granted automatic citizenship—between 1999 and 2005. On arrival, the youngest went into foster care; the older ones were granted refugee status.

“About 60 South Sudanese regularly worship with the fellowship, including some from as far away as Dumas and Amarillo, Texas, and Liberal and Garden City, Kansas.

“The Presbyterian Church (USA) office of African Emerging Ministries has helped buy Bibles in Dinka and Bor, and associate Sam Atiemo traveled to Guymon in the fall of 2013 to offer guidance and encouragement. With help from the Presbyterian Church (USA), the fellowship will be connecting with other new-immigrant ministries.”

I’ll leave it there for now and pick up again next Sunday. The good news for us is our celebration of these stories of mission and ministry and challenge for us to continue

God's good work among us and for our neighbors and world. In so doing, we practice faith and love. Amen.