Sermon – Rev. Dori Kay Hjalmarson

Luke 4:1-21

When Jesus returned from the Jordan River, the power of the Holy Spirit was with him, and the Spirit led him into the desert. 2 For forty days Jesus was tested by the devil, and during that time he went without eating. When it was all over, he was hungry. 3 The devil said to Jesus, “If you are God’s Son, tell this stone to turn into bread.” 4 Jesus answered, “The Scriptures say, ‘No one can live only on food.’” 5 Then the devil led Jesus up to a high place and quickly showed him all the nations on earth. 6 The devil said, “I will give all this power and glory to you. It has been given to me, and I can give it to anyone I want to. 7 Just worship me, and you can have it all.” 8 Jesus answered, “The Scriptures say: ‘Worship the Lord your God and serve only him!’” 9 Finally, the devil took Jesus to Jerusalem and had him stand on top of the temple. The devil said, “If you are God’s Son, jump off. 10-11 The Scriptures say: ‘God will tell his angels to take care of you. They will catch you in their arms, and you will not hurt your feet on the stones.’” 12 Jesus answered, “The Scriptures also say, ‘Don’t try to test the Lord your God!’”13 After the devil had finished testing Jesus in every way possible, he left him for a while. 14 Jesus returned to Galilee with the power of the Spirit. News about him spread everywhere. 15 He taught in the Jewish meeting places, and everyone praised him. 16 Jesus went back to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, and as usual he went to the meeting place on the Sabbath. When he stood up to read from the Scriptures, 17 he was given the book of Isaiah the prophet. He opened it and read, 18 “The Lord’s Spirit has come to me, because he has chosen me to tell the good news to the poor. The Lord has sent me to announce freedom for prisoners, to give sight to the blind, to free everyone who suffers, 19 and to say, ‘This is the year the Lord has chosen.’” 20 Jesus closed the book, then handed it back to the man in charge and sat down. Everyone in the meeting place looked straight at Jesus. 21 Then Jesus said to them, “What you have just heard me read has come true today.”

Whenever anyone asks me about a “normal” day for a missionary, I tell them that if I ever have a normal day, I will let them know.

I hadn’t planned to travel on a Wednesday a month ago, but the night before, my Honduran colleague asked me to accompany him and another leader as they worked on a church pilot project for rural food security. We were going to meet members of a rural church in a town about 2.5 hours away to make purchases and deliver supplies in their village another hour away. We arrived on time to a gas station meeting place, picked up a couple of church volunteers, and drove to the supply store, with the church’s pastor, also a farmer, on his motorcycle behind us. When we arrived at the store, just six blocks away, the pastor wasn’t there. We called him. “I’ve been in an accident,” he said. A moto-taxi had violated the right-of-way, collided with his motorcycle, and sent him flying into a post.

So, our mission for the day changed. We sent part of the group to the supply store to continue pricing our purchases. And we converted our pickup into an ambulance and gave the pastor a ride to the nearest clinic for an X-ray and then to a trauma center, because his collarbone was broken in three pieces. Surgery would be required. It would be young pastor’s

first experience of hospitalization and surgery, his wife was back home pregnant and due any day, and he was doubly worried because a months-long wait for surgery at a public hospital put his livelihood as a farmer permanently at risk.

We found out that the recommended surgery would cost the equivalent of about $1,000. I provided pastoral care to the pastor, along with his sister, who was able to take the day off work. My colleague, the leader of the pilot food project, negotiated with the driver who caused the accident as well as with the Honduran Presbyterian denomination who has a U.S. partner-donated fund for pastoral health emergencies such as this. The pilot project committee gave a love donation to complete the cost of the surgery.

Also this day, I met for lunch with another presbytery pastor whose five-year-old grandson had been killed by a drunk driver in Houston, Texas. The pastor had never met his grandson in person and had not seen his son, who is undocumented living in the United States, in over five years. He of course was distraught, and in shock. “As a pastor I comfort other people. Who comforts me?”

I sat and listened in a restaurant for an hour as this pastor wept.

Then we went home.

What was accomplished this Wednesday?

Looking at it from one angle, nothing. I did nothing. I didn’t feed anyone, I didn’t heal anyone. I didn’t pay for the surgery, even though I could have afforded $1,000. I didn’t even pay for lunch with the pastor, in fact.

It’s possible on days like this to wonder, “Why on earth am I here in Honduras? What am I really accomplishing?”

Believe me it’s possible, because I have asked myself and God those questions on many dark nights of the soul.

In my work I am usually the only North American. I have a U.S. passport and can travel without restriction to almost any country in the world. I have a U.S. salary in a country where minimum wage is about $1.50 an hour, and most people make less than that. I live in a three-bedroom apartment with my cat, and when I have stayed in the countryside while visiting churches, I am often given hospitality in a home with five or six residents, two rooms and one bed, and I am given the bed.

What am I doing here? What is that accomplishing?

Sometimes I wonder if Jesus in the synagogue in this Gospel story this morning felt like I might feel.

Forty days in the desert. Accomplishing nothing. Refusing temptation where no one can see him. Then entering the synagogue in Nazareth to read and proclaiming, “This is what God has called me to do. Recovery of sight, freedom to the captive.” I can imagine people hearing this looking around and saying, “and which captives have you freed? Which of these blind can now see? This…THIS…is the year of the Lord’s favor? Really?”

I can imagine this because I have felt this same conflict and guilt and uncertainty as I live this life accompanying the people and the church in Honduras. For the first year,

whenever I visited a new church, trying to get to know people, leaders, pastors for the first time, nearly every time someone, either a church leader or a community leader, would show me some project or idea they had that needed funding. Sometimes they would ask me directly for money, sometimes they would know that I am connected with US churches and would ask me to ask for money.

Dori with her money and power and privilege could swoop in and “solve” many problems.

But that is not what I am called to do. I’m not called to be a savior or a martyr. I am called to be a pastor. I’m called to accompany. I want to say that I am called to empower, to use my privilege to benefit others, but that’s not even really true. I am called to accompany, and that’s it.

That Wednesday two weeks ago was honestly one of the most satisfying days I’ve ever had here in Honduras. How can that be if I didn’t “do” anything? I think it’s because I didn’t “do”… I “was.” I was a pastor. I’m very good at pastoral care. Before I came to Honduras, I was a hospice chaplain. I know how to sit with people who are grieving and dying. Before that I trained as a chaplain in a hospital. I’m comfortable in a clinic, listening to doctors and nurses, and accompanying patients.

I’m also no good at project managing, farming, or negotiating with money. On that Wednesday, as my colleague Alex had simultaneous conversations with the man who caused the motorcycle accident, with the pastor’s family, and with the Honduran presbytery leaders, his sister and I watched somewhat in awe. His conversation with the moto-taxi driver started out defensive and adversarial, and the driver assumed we were going to try to extract everything we could out of them, to punish him for causing the accident. We weren’t. Alex wanted to be fair to all. We asked for the family to cover a third of the cost of the surgery. Initially they refused, insisting that we could wait for free surgery at a public hospital. I don’t know exactly when the tide turned, but the driver’s family ended up covering nearly half the surgery. When I realized that, I turned to Alex’s sister and said, “Your brother has a gift.” She said, “He’s always been that way.”

I could have paid for the surgery. But then I wouldn’t have had the privilege of watching Alex work, seeing a community start as adversarial and end up rallying around an injured pastor.

One more story about my work here. This past year, I stayed in Honduras even though I was ordered back to the United States last April. There were several reasons I stayed, but the main reason was that at the time I felt safer and more secure in my Tegucigalpa house alone than I would have with my senior parents and elderly grandmother. The second reason was that I felt a sense of responsibility to accompany my people here in Honduras. We knew this was going to be a very difficult year, as the pandemic was becoming global. Out of love and a sense of call, I wanted to stay.

Mainly my work is facilitator for theological education and leadership development. I work with two other women to organize and teach classes among church leaders. Of course

because of the pandemic our work has been largely stalled for over a year. We can’t gather, and most of our students have some difficulty with access to Internet and technology. The PC-USA has prohibited me from working in person, with very few exceptions. I can only work online, alone in my house.

Again, we see some big differences in privilege. Staying home and working from home looks very different for me than it does for many of my Honduran colleagues and friends. I have never this year wanted for food or light or water or medicine. I even upgraded my Internet out of “necessity” for all the Zoom calls. The majority of my partners and friends here have not had the means to make those decisions.

Anyway, I digress.

Six weeks ago, my co-facilitators and I started offering classes in a hybrid format, part in person and part online. The first class we offered is called Ethics and Spirituality, and as I was planning the class, I was trying to think of a good present-day ethical case study, and suddenly in my home state of Utah, all residents became eligible to be vaccinated against COVID. I had a decision to make, again a privileged decision, because most people around me in Honduras don’t have access to a vaccine when rich countries have the clout to over-buy and hoard vaccine doses, leaving small, poor countries out. Most mission co-workers who stayed in their country of service have said that they expect to wait until they are eligible to be vaccinated in their country of service, but most say that they do not expect to have that option before the end of the year, either because vaccine programs won’t be widespread, or because vaccine shortages will leave their countries waiting until possibly 2023 until they are able to vaccinate a majority of their populations.

I had a choice to make. Should I make a personal trip to the U.S., for the sole purpose of being vaccinated? Or should I wait in solidarity with my Honduran partners, continuing to maintain social distance, mask, work online, for possibly another year or more?

I believe the best way to care for my own health and for the health of others is to be vaccinated. Everyone who has the chance, I believe, should be vaccinated. The vaccine is a Godsend.

But as I presented this ethical dilemma to my class, a “hypothetical missionary” who is deciding whether or not to leave Honduras to be vaccinated, the decision became not so simple. We started to analyze the many parties in this scenario, the missionary herself, the missionary’s family, the U.S. church, the Honduran church, the U.S. government, the Honduran government, the multinational corporation that is producing and selling the vaccine, the trade organizations that protect those corporations at the expense of increased production, the missionary’s students…we also started to analyze the values that take precedence…and as my students listed values they saw as important in making the decision, I had anticipated many of them: the missionary’s human rights, the health of the missionary and her contacts, the money involved in traveling, a sense of justice and injustice we all feel under the system we live in,

equality, solidarity, accompaniment—one stopped me short: the conscience of the community…the conscience of the community was a value that I had not anticipated coming

up. I’m used to my rugged individualism as a North American, the ability to think and make decisions for myself. But this value of the community conscience…I won’t be able to reason or think my way into that. I will have to humble myself before the community. The missionary may or may not have a duty to be vaccinated despite the injustice involved, but one duty the missionary certainly has, my students agreed, is to make the decision in concert with the other vulnerable people in the scenario, those who also run a risk: the Honduran church partners and students of the missionary’s classes.

The conscience of the community is a value that, through our Christian analysis of Biblical texts and ethical systems, should always be part of a Christian ethical decision.

This passage in Luke has been one I struggle with. Jesus goes alone to the desert, is tempted by the devil and makes ethical choices and intellectual arguments while he’s alone in the desert. There is nothing wrong with making the choices he made, to live on the Word and not bread, to not test God, to refuse riches and wealth in order to serve only the one true God.

But the more realistic ethic and ministry happens outside the vacuum of intellectual and solitary thought and reason. Jesus left the desert, went into the synagogue and looked around at an oppressed and marginalized people and said “I’m here to tell you that I am here to serve the poor among you, to free the prisoners among you, to recover the sight of the blind among you. I am the chosen one.” I can imagine how it might have felt for the hearers of this reading in the synagogue to look around and think, “Excuse me? What prisoners have been freed? My father is still blind. My mother is still poor and widowed. You haven’t fixed anything!!”

What, then, could Jesus have meant? What could he be calling us to? The radical thing about Christian ethics is that decisions aren’t made alone, they’re not in a vacuum. Christian ethics must always happen in community, and if the community structures are unjust, we all are affected. To make a Christian decision, we must take the community conscience into account. We must point to the most vulnerable among us and say, “this person’s dignity and autonomy matters just as much as or more than my own.”

Yes, I could make the decision on my own to get myself to the U.S. to be vaccinated, and I think I could do so with very reasoned ethical arguments. But I must then return to my community in Honduras, knowing that we all still swim in the same river of injustice and inequality. Nothing has really changed.

What DOES have the power to make change?

Jesus quoted the prophet Isaiah in the synagogue. I want to also quote a different passage of Isaiah, from chapter 58: “Is this not, rather, the fast that I choose: releasing those bound unjustly, untying the thongs of the yoke; Setting free the oppressed, breaking off every yoke? Is it not sharing your bread with the hungry, bringing the afflicted and the homeless into your house; Clothing the naked when you see them, and not turning your back on your own flesh? Then your light shall break forth like the dawn…” (Is 58:6-8)

Exercising my right to be vaccinated or not is a privilege that I maintain. But I am not acting ethically if I make that decision on my own. I must share my bread, bring the afflicted into my own house, not turn my back on my own flesh, which is my siblings in Christ. I must work with them in community to make the decision about how to confront injustice as a community, how to protect our health, as a community, how to prioritize the values and powers and risks at play, as a community.

I believe that Jesus’ ethics in preaching freedom for the prisoner, recovery of sight to the blind, was not entirely about the individual prisoners, the individual people with blindness, the individual poor or brokenhearted person. Jesus’ ethics in preaching freedom and healing was an ethic of structural upheaval. Saving not only individual souls or bodies, but all of creation. Which means overturning structures of injustice, banding together as a community against machinations of evil that would keep us apart.

I have made the decision to travel to the U.S. to be vaccinated, and I did so after listening deeply to my ethics students, to my family and friends, to my supervisor, and to my Honduran church partner. I am glad I didn’t make the decision alone.

Because I am not a savior. I’m only a pastor, a Christian, called to be in community.