



CUBA

COMBINED MISSION AWARENESS SUNDAY WORSHIP SERVICE

Musical Prelude

Robert – Welcome and Announcements

Robert- Introductory Comments:

This year's Mission Awareness Sunday worship focuses on Cuba, a place of great beauty known to many of us in Canada as a winter vacation destination. However, another Cuba exists not far from the beautiful beaches and sunsets, a Cuba buffeted by a 60-year embargo on goods and services imposed by the United States. This blockade has destroyed the agricultural, the oil and gas industries and isolated Cuba from the international community causing food, fuel and monetary shortages, isolation and population loss in addition to other hardships resulting from the destruction of these mainstays of Cuban life. *Written by the Rev. Dr. Dorcas J. Gordon (liturgy) and the Rev. Dora Arce Valentin (sermon).*

Robert- Responsive Call to Worship

Holy God; we come to you, knowing you accept all of us equally,
regardless of what language we speak, the colour of our skin, our gender, age or ability.

For you have created each of us in your image.

You have called us to care for one another.

**In this place we offer our unique gifts to you promising to follow you by becoming one
with our brothers and sisters not only in Cuba but throughout the world.**

In this place we pray for strength and courage to live out that promise.

Hymn #587 Called as Partners in Christ's Service

Prayer of Invocation and Confession

Gracious God; we praise and thank you for your steadfast love and faithfulness. You promise to be with us always. You have searched us and know us; you discern our thoughts; you are acquainted with all our ways. There is nowhere we can go from your presence. Secure in the knowledge of your love and willingness to forgive our weaknesses, we come confessing how often we fail to love our neighbour, how often we criticize and belittle others in order to build ourselves up. Secure in the knowledge that nothing we do remains unknown to you, we confess how often we fail to share, how often we promote division rather than possibilities for friendship. Secure in the knowledge that you will never leave us, we confess how often we want to forget the world beyond our doors. We say it is too complicated to understand, that it disrupts the quiet we need, causing us to stand aside when our sisters and brothers experience racism, homophobia, misogyny, or the violence of war and destruction of their communities. Now hear our prayer of confession.

Forgive us, O God, show us a better way, a way through which we can begin to create new patterns for mission, tearing down walls and fences to become partners in giving and receiving hope and confidence and peace. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

Assurance of God's Grace

Without blame or shame, again and again
you receive us and draw us closer to you
and to each other. Thanks be to you, O God. Amen.

Family Focus

Hymn #585 Christ you call us all to service

Scripture Readings

Responsive Psalm 146

Alleluia! Praise God, O my Soul!

I will praise you, O God, all my life; I will sing praise to you as long as I live.

Do not put your trust in rulers, in humans in whom there is no salvation. When their spirits depart, they return to the earth; on that very day their plans perish.

Happy are those whose help is the God of Jacob and Rachel, whose hope is in God, the Maker of

heaven and earth, the sea and all that is in them, who keeps faith forever, secures justice for the oppressed and gives food to the hungry.

God, you set captives free and give sight to the blind. You raise up those who were bowed down and love the just.

You protect strangers; the orphan and the widow you sustain, but the way of the wicked you thwart. God shall reign forever – your God, O Zion, through all generations. Alleluia.

Matthew 15: 21-28 The Canaanite/Syrophoenician Woman

From there, Jesus went to the regions of Tyre and Sidon. A Canaanite woman from those territories came out and shouted, “Show me mercy, Son of David. My daughter is suffering terribly from demon possession.” But he didn’t respond to her at all. His disciples came and urged him, “Send her away; she keeps shouting out after us.” Jesus replied, “I’ve been sent only to the lost sheep, the people of Israel.” But she knelt before him and said, “Lord, help me.” He replied, “It is not good to take the children’s bread and toss it to dogs.” She said, “Yes, Lord. But even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall off their masters’ table.” Jesus answered, “Woman, you have great faith. It will be just as you wish.” And right then her daughter was healed.

This is the Word of the Lord.

Thanks be to God.

Hymn #500 Open my eyes, that I may see

Sermon: The Syrophoenician Woman

Good morning, everyone! I am joining you after a long journey through time and you know a little about the transportation problems we have in Cuba. I ask you with great humility to allow me to break into your worship service. I really wanted to meet you. I've been told many special things about you and your rich story, so I'm sure we'll spend a blessed time together.

Well, I think it's a good place and a very relevant time to tell my story. I heard my story in the reading of the sacred text in the version Matthew wrote. I think Mark told my story a little differently, and the truth is, they both told my story in ways that they thought best for their community. Do you always have things that you omit or add to stories? But you know, right? When you tell a story and then repeat it for different people, it always becomes the story of the last person who recounts it.

I have no doubt Matthew had good intentions. In fact, it is said that he tried to prevent people listening to this story from worrying too much about what should be defined as a mission to the Gentiles. He did what he could to prove that my story was unique among the many miracles of the Nazarene, even among those in which Jesus relates to non-Jewish people. And to be totally honest, because you look like trustworthy people, I never thought any of those witnesses would tell my story, because, between you and me, the truth is that Jesus was hard on me, even a little insensitive to my mother's pain.

I felt it, right at the beginning of our conversation. Still, I understood his discomfort. I totally understand your discomfort. He and his group had an urgent need to rest. When my husband

decides to take naps, no one dares to interrupt this holy time. So, I know. I'm totally clear. They really needed to have a time away from such a demanding and anxious crowd of people. There seemed to be so much anxiety about the lack of justice in those times! By the way, it seems to me that things aren't any better now, right?

Anyway, returning to history, Jesus was looking for a private space to relax. Understandable, I think. How many times a day do we wish for a little quiet, a moment to stop thinking about how much work needs to be done. It happens to you, too, right? So, in his writing of the story, Matthew was very honest to outline Jesus' and the disciples' situation.

I began by telling Jesus that my daughter was possessed by demons. I know that today it is not easy to understand what this means but a little while ago I heard someone here shouting some rude things, which in my time we would describe as being possessed. But in my time, anything we can't understand, especially a physical condition or being anxious, we put labels on them.

What do you do in these times with so many problems and situations that go beyond your understanding, things you feel you cannot control? Do you label them too? Do you call them demon-possessed too? I hear some people talking about the financial market and the stock market, the market economy, tax policies... I've also heard many people talking about "isms" ... racism, sexism, individualism, homophobia, selfishness, sectarianism... Excuse my ignorance, but are these things the demons now?

Don't feel you need to answer because I need to tell you first hand my story. Here is what happened. I was desperate for my daughter. I had no choice but to invade that male privacy of Jesus and his friends, and the truth is, I had to shake him a little bit because I knew that somewhere in his tiredness, his humanity was also becoming numb. I was desperate to find that special human being everyone was talking about. They spoke of his courage to challenge the Pharisees, his concern to cure marginalized people, lepers, prostitutes, persons with disabilities, women fighting for survival. So, where else would I go? I had no choice but him. All the stories I had heard about him gave me the courage even to challenge him and to engage in a conversation about his response.

I think living in exclusion, experiencing it vividly, gives you a wisdom that you don't articulate very well unless you're in a survival situation. I was checking the news about my people today, the Palestinian people, running from violence and war with the same feeling that they have no other choice. Trying to find food even if you have to risk your lives and those of your loved ones.

So where's Jesus today? Who took charge after his resurrection? Are you in charge of your life? I wish my people could have the chance to meet him the same way I did ! Our encounter certainly had an impact on Jesus, but honestly, it changed my world. I was never the same person. I was transformed in a very deep way. I'm sure people like me would defy Jesus himself today if they had the chance. In fact, I'm sure people like me, who feel that society and churches leave them out, exclude them, those people would challenge you today if they had the chance... I'm sure of that.

Like Jesus that day, you may need some time to rest, to catch up with your own needs, to transform the way you work to be faithful to your legacy. My advice to you: when I pressed Jesus to recognize himself in his vulnerability and to re-engage himself it resulted in a kind of

conversion of his own commitment to justice. So, in every encounter you have with the words of Jesus, the testimony of your actions and your daily seeking of spiritual guidance, remember that there is always an opportunity to be converted, to change your mind as Jesus did. If you can identify yourself with the pain and screams of the excluded, as Jesus did with me, I am sure you too will identify as Jesus did with his liberating project of justice for all creation. And that experience will impact people like me in so many unimaginable ways.

I mean, I don't want to be-labour the point, I only dare to tell you... I was persistent; I claimed my place in God's plan of salvation. I claimed my rights and gifts as the daughter of God, to me and my family as those who were part of Jesus' inner circle. Don't you think people like me, people who feel marginalized and alone, abandoned by God, deserve those rights today? You know what? When I remember what happened, it comes to mind that Jesus not only recognized my right to claim my place in God's plans but gave me the right to be the subject of my own miracle. He said, "What a great faith you have. May your wishes be fulfilled!"

Being here with you today, makes me think about the power of perseverance and the opportunities you have as a community to reconnect with the mission that all churches are called to realize in the name of a Jesus who is brother to all, regardless of gender, race, culture, traditions or anything else you can imagine as a way to classify people. Remember my words to Jesus, the one I call also my Lord: "... also the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from the table of their owners." Look at the beautiful way He himself empowered me to claim my right to his miracle! It could today be a paradigm to consider for you these days when the world seems so lost, so disoriented and entrenched at the extremes, so lacking dialogue and empathy among humans and for nature. Perseverance and confidence are two tools to make those miracles possible in the name of God's Son.

Speaking of paradigms. I went to Jesus to intercede for my daughter, to intercede for her health, which by the way meant to intercede for her place and a role in the community, for recognition of my daughter as a human being. It wasn't about me; it was about her. For solidarity is one of the main elements in Jesus' healing and salvation project. And intercession is an instrument of God's power in the world. It doesn't always appear in the form of prayers, but always as a manifestation of love. I heard that a Colombian priest, named Camilo Torres, who died with the guerrillas in the 1960s, defined it as effective love, effective love. The claim to be recognized in our dignity as God's creation, through solidarity, was an indispensable part of Jesus' ministry. I can assure you that. So, perhaps you should think of a strategy to create networks of solidarity-intercession-healing and, through them, to make the church capable of transforming, healing and interceding. Doesn't that sound like a good idea?

Well, I'm almost finished but I can't go back to my own time without telling you something that has captured my heart when I look at your 21st century world.

The miracle of my daughter's healing is not just a story in which "a brave and gentle woman dares to break into a male and strange space to challenge Jesus, to make him recognize that he needed to reconfigure his theological thought." If you read the story that Mark tells, there is a detail that makes me proud. My story would be the only miracle in that Gospel that recognizes it is not faith, but the word, that is the instrument of salvation. "To say that" says Mark's version, or "For your word," in other versions, "you can go; the demon has left your daughter."

So, yes, my friends, words matter. What you say is important. I think you live in a time when, if you really want the world to recognize you as heirs to the Jesus movement and the early church, you should dare to claim the crumbs that belong to their daughters and sons. It is time for the church to express itself, to condemn the injustices of this world, and to openly recognize the value of every human being, the value of every living being, the value of Mother Earth. I challenge you to persevere for justice, to bravely break into comfortable spaces where people passively destroy themselves and as they exterminate the world God created, the world God loves! Violence, greed, predatory paradigms of development and success! I challenge you to yell out loudly, to demand the healing of all the victims of evil demons who wander everywhere, seeking whom to devour, as if the world belonged to them and not to God.

My dear community, I have to go. I hope my visit has been useful and challenging. You also have the gift that Jesus gave me: you can be the doers of your own miracles. Why not start working on them now.

If you want to spend some time reflecting on my story and how much of that story can be an expression of God's living Word for you today, I will leave you with some suggestions... just to think about: How might you organize networks of solidarity-intercession and healing or strengthen them if they already exist? If as a community you had to make a list of issues that would be good to discuss together and together to find ways to include them in your church's mission, what would they be? And what about the demons today? Could you talk about that in your community, looking for ways to confront them? I have to go now, but I will be at hand as long as you remember my story, you know... just in case I can serve you.

Just one more thing. Remember God blesses you today and always. Shalom and amen.

Offertory

Matthew records these words of Jesus spoken as part of the Sermon on the Mount. These words reminded those who were present that day, and we who hear them centuries later, about priorities, about the ways in which our priorities follow our heart in giving of our time and money. Our offerings will now be received.

Offertory Praise #759 (verse 1)

In loving partnership we come,
seeking, O God, your will to do.
Our prayers and actions now receive;
we freely offer them to you.

Offertory Prayer

Generous God; receive these gifts as a sign of our commitment to work for a world that is more just, more thoughtful and more loving. May the creation of new patterns for mission lead to a widening circle in which hope and peace abound. Amen.

What Does Mission Look like To The Women's Missionary Society?

Prayers of Thanksgiving and Petition:

From Cuba and Canada: Thanksgiving

We thank you, Creator God, for our lives, for uniting us in the paths of peace, for putting into our hearts the desire to serve you by helping others. Thank you for friendships made in the act of serving.

We thank you for the partnership of the Presbyterian Reformed Church in Cuba and the Presbyterian Church in Canada. We thank you that even though our relationship has been weakened over the years, neither a revolution nor a blockade has been able to pull us apart. You have given each of us a mission that reaches beyond differences to find common ground.

We thank you that the model of partnership we are developing might be a pattern for how we reach out in partnership with all who are our neighbours whether a street away or on the other side of the world.

We thank you for the "Building Hope Together in Cuba" initiative in which together the PCC and local Cuban partners, including the Evangelical Theological Seminary and the Presbyterian Reformed Church, are implementing community development projects that respect local dignity and create lasting positive change.

Petitions From Cuba

God, our loving parent, bless Cuba, illuminate its afternoons and mornings, illumine the path we must take, illumine its streets, our houses, our dreams; illumine the future of our young people. May they flourish here. Shine brightly, gracious God, your lights of hope, lights of peace and tranquility that light up the lives of all humanity.ⁱ

O God, hear our cry for hope, for dignity, for justice, for the health and prosperity of the Cuban people. In the midst of these times we feel like the Syrophoenician woman whose cries for the healing of her daughter were pushed to one side by the disciples. Yet we know that because of the persistence of the woman, Jesus listened and healed when he first refused. Like her, give us that same courage so that the island we love will know your healing and peace.

Deliver us from whatever might hinder us. May we see beyond what is to what might be. Give us courage and persistence to believe that what we now only dream can become our reality.

Petitions From Canada

God, our loving parent, hear us as we pray alongside our sisters and brothers in Cuba; like them we search for a world where all find hope and live in dignity. So often we too know the cries of children, woman and men whose voices are drowned out by poverty and violence. We feel overpowered by the unjust structures that seem to control the world and all in it.

Hear our cry for hope, dignity and justice for all. Show us how to cry out for justice like the Syrophenician woman who even dared to challenge Jesus in her refusal to be silenced by prejudice against her as a foreigner and a woman.

Loving God, bless Canada, enlighten us to see even more clearly what you call us to be and to do in your name. Open us to the path we must take to work for justice, the health and well-being of all in our country. Embolden us also to see beyond our own needs to care deeply for the world you created and continue to love passionately.

Deliver us from whatever might hinder us. May we see beyond what is to what might be. Give us courage and persistence to believe that what we now only dream can become our reality.

Prayers for Cuba and Canada:

Remind us that in Jesus you came to show us how to live here on the earth you created with such care. Show us daily the ways in which you direct us outwardly toward living fully your purpose in the world you love. As Jesus gave himself to others may we too know what it means to reach out to others with mercy, in humility and to love all as you have love us.

Affirmation of All:

We know that our common calling is to be co-creators with you of a kinder, more merciful world. In response, on this Mission Awareness Sunday, we commit to doing what you require of us; we will show mercy, love, kindness and walk humbly with you who created us. Amen.

Hymn #635 Brother, sister, let me serve you

Sending Forth and Benediction

Let us go from this place rejoicing in the partnership we have across language and nationality, a partnership in mission that strengthens all of us.

And now may the peace of Christ, the love of God and the Holy Spirit within which we all have our being be with us every step of the way. Amen.

Benediction Song #726 May the God of Hope go with us every day

Musical Postlude
