

Reaching Those Who've Never Heard

LaGrave Avenue Christian Reformed Church

July 14, 2024 PM Sermon

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Romans 15:17-25

Just a few background notes before we read the passage: Romans wasn't the first letter that Paul wrote. He wrote several letters before this one, including the two letters to the church in Corinth. In fact, he had never yet gone to Rome. He wrote this letter to the church in Rome while he was still in Corinth, and about to travel to Jerusalem to bring the funds he was collecting to help the believers in Judea, who were struggling with a famine.

One reason why Paul wrote this letter was to develop a sort of partnership with the church in Rome as he planned to bring the gospel all the way to Spain. This evening we'll consider this ambition Paul had, and then his plan to carry it out.

So Paul's ambition was to preach the Gospel where Christ was not known; to go to places where no one had heard of Christ. This was directly in line with the mandate Jesus gave his disciples, "Go, disciple all nations," he said (Matt. 28:19), and "You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth" (Acts 1:8). So Jesus' disciples made it their aim to go far and wide to proclaim the good news to people everywhere.

Look for a minute at what Paul wrote just before that, in v. 19 "So from Jerusalem all the way around to Illyricum, I have fully proclaimed the gospel of Christ." Illyricum is northwest of Macedonia, where Paul started churches in cities such as Philippi and Thessalonica. We don't read anywhere in the New Testament about Paul going to Illyricum. So what did he mean?

Well, he's using very broad brushstrokes here. It doesn't mean that the gospel had penetrated every bit of territory in those places. Basically he's saying that the gospel had been planted throughout the northeastern Mediterranean region. From the particular cities that had been reached, Christians could go out and continue the work in that region, until they were saturated with the message. And that did eventually happen.

So now Paul is looking for territory where the gospel hadn't even made landfall. His passion was to go where no one had gone with the gospel.

Now let's see his plan for carrying that out. In verses 23-24 he says that he will visit the church in Rome, and have them help him bring the gospel to Spain. We don't know what kind of help he had in mind. It could be that the church in Rome would be the sending base for his mission work in the western Mediterranean, just as Antioch was for his work in the eastern Mediterranean region. They could provide supplies and funds to help him get started in Spain. My guess is that it was more than that. I think he may have planned to form a team of believers in Rome that would go with him and work alongside of him in Spain.

We don't know whether Paul ever made it to Spain. We don't read in the New Testament that he did, so it's quite unlikely. He did make it to Rome, but was put under house arrest, and tradition holds that he was executed there. But the point is that Paul had this passion to reach people that had no opportunity to hear the gospel.

And so through the history of the church, especially in the last few hundred years, Christian missionaries have been working hard to proclaim the gospel everywhere, on every continent and in every country.

What about now? Are there still people in the world today that have no opportunity to hear the good news? Surely after 2000 years, missionaries have gone to every place on the globe, haven't they? We know that there are Christians in every country.

But actually, today there are still 2 billion people that are in people groups that have virtually no opportunity to hear the gospel. Think about that for a minute, let that sink in! That's one-fourth of the world's population. It's not only that they have heard the gospel and have rejected it. In fact, it's not even that they just haven't heard; they don't even have an opportunity to hear the good news! There aren't churches for them to go

to, there aren't evangelists going and bringing the gospel to them. They have no opportunity. So this is a huge task that the church still has, that still needs our priority in Mission work. There are still thousands of people groups that are unreached.

Now the obvious question is: Why? Why is it that so many people still have not been reached? Well, it's all about waffles; you know, the waffles you eat for breakfast. What happens when you pour the syrup on your waffle? The syrup gets stuck in those little squares, right? You know, there's those ridges like little dikes that keep the syrup from spreading around. So you end up putting too much syrup on your waffle in order to try to get it in every square, and your blood sugar spikes and you're in trouble. (So in other words, don't eat waffles!) Pancakes are different; you can just put a little syrup on them and easily spread it around.

Well, the world is more like a waffle than a pancake. The gospel doesn't easily spread because there are barriers. Take Nigeria for example. If you would look at a map of Nigeria that would show the locations of all the people groups, it would look kind of like a waffle, except that the lines wouldn't be straight. You see, there are hundreds of people groups in Nigeria, and just because the gospel enters the country, that doesn't mean that it's going to be able to reach all the people groups in that country. There are barriers between people groups, kind of like those ridges in a waffle, that prevent the gospel from easily flowing from one group to another.

So there are these people groups, what do we mean by that? Well there are various ethnic groups, they have different languages, different cultural backgrounds, different histories. Some of them may even have hostility toward each other, and those differences present the barriers over which it's difficult for the gospel to flow.

We have about 195 nations in the world, but thousands of people groups. The people groups that have no Christians, no churches, or very few, we call unreached people groups. They need Christian workers to come from outside their group to bring the gospel to them. I'll give you two quick examples.

There's the Laki people of Iran, an Islamic Kurdish people group, about 1.3 million people, 0% Christian. Because evangelism is illegal in Iran and Islam is deeply ingrained in the Laki people, it's very hard to reach them. Then there's the Adi Dravida people of India, one of the lower caste groups, over 10 million people. They are 99.8% Hindu, and 0.1% Christian; a few Christians, but not enough to really bring the gospel to that group.

And there are several thousands of these unreached people groups, according to mission research. Besides the barriers I mentioned earlier, there are more. Often missionaries are not allowed to enter their territory. Evangelism may be prohibited. There may be a history of bad experience with Christians, as there has been between Muslims and Christians for centuries going way back to the Crusades and even earlier.

And then we would have to admit, there are barriers in ourselves that prevent us from going and reaching these people. For one thing, we are hardly aware of these unreached people groups. I doubt if any of you had heard of those two groups I mentioned. In fact, I wasn't aware of them until a couple days ago. You could go through lists of these unreached people groups and, one after the other, say, "Oh, I've never heard of these people." We're not aware, let alone being concerned enough about them to do something.

And then our attitudes. Sometimes we have attitudes of superiority or racism, or are simply fearful of these people that are so different from us. And so that's a barrier. Besides that, we are very busy becoming successful and affluent, and then helping our children and grandchildren become successful and affluent. And so we don't really have enough time to consider this great need.

These are just a few of the barriers preventing the gospel from reaching these people. There are even more, and they are formidable. In other words, these unreached people groups are very hard to reach.

But on the positive side, good things are happening. More mission organizations and missionaries are targeting unreached people groups, and finding new strategies to reach them. And many of these organizations are working together more than they were before. Churches in the "global south", or non-Western countries like Nigeria, Kenya, Brazil, Mexico, China, and the Philippines are now sending out many missionaries, often going to unreached people groups. Often they are more effective than white-faced missionaries like myself.

And another thing that is helping, or can help, is migration; people are moving around a lot. And that is putting many unreached people who've never heard the gospel in contact with Christians. In other words, God is often bringing unreached people closer to us, and closer to Christians in other places. There are many immigrants from the Middle East right here in Michigan. God is providing us with opportunities to reach them, even by helping them get resettled in their new country.

So how should we respond? I have 6 points on ways we can respond to the great need.

First, credible witness. I mean the witness of our lives and actions. Because many Christians (or so called Christians) are not following Jesus in the way they live, it's become a bad witness to the world. We need to follow Jesus in a way that will make others want to follow him too.

Second, awareness. We need to learn about the mission needs in the world, especially the unreached people groups. There are many ways to do this, and I will be glad to share with you more about these unreached people groups, so you can be enhanced in your understanding of them. One way is to be sure to attend when missionaries come and visit our church. Learn from the people that are out there working. Reminder: We have a visit from a missionary couple next Sunday evening, Jeff & Julie Bouman, who have been working in Hungary. Don't miss that opportunity!

Third, prayer. As we start learning, focus on a people group or a missionary, and pray in a focused, regular, and intentional way for God's work in them.

Fourth, sending and supporting mission workers. We do well at this here at LaGrave, supporting 40 plus missionaries and ministries. Supporting means encouraging them and praying for them, as well as giving financially.

Fifth, local outreach. We need to reach people right around us with the good news, even if they've already heard it in some fashion. How can we bring the gospel far away if we're not reaching people close by?

Sixth, going. Those of you that are on the younger side, I want to challenge you to consider going in missions; going to an unreached people group, going to people that don't know the Lord, to give at least part of your life to go to reaching out to others. You won't regret it. As for me, I'm over 65, and I would guess a few of you are too. It's not likely that we're going to go and learn a new language, immerse ourselves in a strange culture, or go in some remote place. But there's a lot that older Christians can do both locally and abroad. Prayer is a big one. We all can pray, and we need to do it intentionally, faithfully, and consistently. We can also motivate younger Christians to serve in missions. As we learn about missions and the needs, let's talk about it with the younger generation, and challenge them to really consider missions.

About 25 years ago, fellow missionaries of ours in the Philippines were bringing the gospel to a tribal group in the mountains who were still unreached. Their chieftain, who regularly communicated with demonic spirits, performed a blood sacrifice every year to atone for bad things people had done to each other. They believed that one day a savior would come and they would no longer need to make such sacrifices. The missionaries told an elderly lady that the Savior already came. She asked them what his name was and when he came. They told her Jesus, 2000 years ago. She replied, "2000 years ago?! Why didn't anyone come up the mountain and tell us?" There was anger in her voice. Her people were waiting. But she and many others in that tribe did put their faith in Jesus.

In a few minutes, we will celebrate the Lord's supper. Think of it this way, all Christians all over the world, are gathering around one big table with Jesus to thank Him for giving his life for us. But many people are missing from the table. And not just individuals, but whole people groups are missing. And for many of them, it's not because they've rejected the gospel, it's that they've never been invited. ©Rev. Stan Kruis