

**Transformed by Relationships:
With Christ & His Mission
Matt 4:17-25**

The Place Where Compassion Grows

In 1998 I enjoyed the film *Patch Adams*, starring Robin Williams. It is the story of Hunter "Patch" Adams, who decides to study medicine because he deeply desires to help people. He refuses to conform to the coldness, the elitism, and the professionalism of his teachers, mentors, and peers in medical school and seeks in unorthodox fashion to humanize the hospital.

He rebels against labeling people as "the pancreatic cancer in 305." He wants to know the patient's name. He winces when told, "bed six needs some blood work." He wants to know the patient's name. Patch refuses to objectify people. He renounces the assumption that doctors should avoid transference, not getting emotionally involved in the lives of their patients. He wants not simply to stave off death, but to improve life. He wants to treat people, not diseases.

Patch describes repeatedly his vision of a new way of doing medicine, and gradually he gathers disciples. Soon others follow him out into the crowds of those who have no access to the institutional hospitals. People bring their diseases and injuries to Patch and his team and they receive outrageous care, and often, healing. The vision of the Gesundheit Institute begins to take shape. The broken people who come there are themselves transformed into caregivers, wounded healers.

The vision costs both Patch and his followers, but it is a vision that so grips them they have no choice but to pursue it. Patch himself is virtually crucified by the establishment. However, his vision is rooted in his understanding of what God is calling him to be and do, and so he presses on.

Amazingly, the story of Patch Adams is true. The Gesundheit Institute is real. In 1994 he was persuaded to put his story into print.

How very like the story of Jesus, who comes to the religious institutions of his day and finds them operated by cold, callused, separated professionals. He sees the common people dying for God and having little access to the system – sheep without a shepherd. Their pain, brokenness, disease, sin, and destructiveness are the very things being shut out by the Pharisees who controlled the synagogues and the Sadducees who operated the Temple.

So, with a vision of God's kingdom, Jesus begins to rally those who are willing to see the kingdom, too. He calls them to experience a complete paradigm shift of what religion and the kingdom are all about. And he beckons them to follow him. Some do. And they go out to the people.

Matthew 4:18-24 As Jesus was walking beside the Sea of Galilee, he saw two brothers, Simon called Peter and his brother Andrew. They were casting a net into the lake, for they were fishermen. "Come, follow me," Jesus said, "and I will make you fishers of men." At once they left their nets and followed him. Going on from there, he saw two other brothers, James son of Zebedee and his brother John. They were in a boat with their father Zebedee, preparing their nets. Jesus called them, and immediately they left the boat and their father and followed him.

Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues, preaching the good news of the kingdom, and healing every disease and sickness among the people. News about him spread all over Syria, and people brought to him all who were ill with various diseases, those suffering severe pain, the demon-possessed, those having seizures, and the paralyzed, and he healed them.

These four fishermen decide to follow Jesus, and look where it takes them. They touch lepers. They come face to face with the demonic. They deal with the hopeless, the despairing, and those in chronic pain. The very people the institution had objectified were the people to whom Jesus went personally. And as he went, he towed along his disciples. He took them to places where compassion grew – in the personal contact with broken people.

In one scene, Patch Adams convinces a fellow medical student to go on one of his outrageous hospital visits. She is a young lady he has a crush on, and who has rejected him repeatedly. Patch takes her to the place where compassion grows – the room of a man who is dying, and his joys and passions and dreams with them. But once she goes on the visit, she is changed.

So Jesus takes his followers to the place where compassion grows – to the crowds with their broken lives. This seems to be a regular practice of his.

Matthew 9:35 - 10:5 Jesus went through all the towns and villages, teaching in their synagogues, preaching the good news of the kingdom and healing every disease and sickness. When he saw the crowds, he had compassion on them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd.

Then he said to his disciples, "The harvest is plentiful but the workers are few. Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field."

He called his twelve disciples to him and gave them authority to drive out evil spirits and to heal every disease and sickness. These are the names of the twelve apostles: first, Simon (who is called Peter) and his brother Andrew; James son of Zebedee, and his brother John; Philip and Bartholomew; Thomas and Matthew the tax collector; James son of Alphaeus, and Thaddaeus; Simon the Zealot and Judas Iscariot, who betrayed him. These twelve Jesus sent out.

We ought to know, before we get too close to Jesus in our own lives, that His ends have not changed. He wants followers who share his compassion for people and their pain. He will

not tolerate the institutional, objectifying, cold, separated, pristine pious, Pharisaical attitude that deals with people as things. People have names. People have stories. And he wants those names known by his followers. He wants those stories told and heard. He wants his people to demonstrate that all people bear the image of his Father, and are infinitely valuable to him.

But we ought also be advised that his means have not changed either. In order to grow compassionate followers, he still takes them into the places where compassion grows – the lives of people. He knows that for our hearts to be broken, our hands have to get dirty.

Do you know who in our congregation has compassion for inner city African American kids? Who in that church has compassion for the needs of the Navajo Nation? Who in that church has compassion for the Hispanic children in inner city Houston? Who in that church has compassion for the poor Mexican people who live in villages outside Oaxaca City in Mexico? It is the people who have been there. They send their money. They schedule their vacation time. They pray. They perk up when certain things are mentioned in the news. Something within these people has been transformed into compassion.

Where did that compassion come from? It was often not compassion that took them there the first time. It was obedience. It was compassion that took them back. Their hands got dirty and their hearts broke. They learned some names. They heard some stories. Compassion grew. And they were changed.

Jesus still accomplishes his purpose in the same way. He takes his people to the place where compassion grows – the lives of hurting people. We don't get authentic, life-quaking compassion from hearing missionary testimonies, reading missions magazines, attending mission conferences, making mission offerings, or watching mission videos. We only get it by becoming a missionary.

Rich Mullins' song *The Breaks* expresses it this way:

It is the sea that makes the sailor
And the land that shapes the sea
And I do not know yet what I am made of
Or all I may someday be
And it is the wood that makes a carpenter
It's the very tools of his trade
And it is love that makes a lover
And a cross that makes a saint.

Following that lead, I affirm that it is the mission that transforms the missionary, the ministry that transforms the minister, the served that transform the servant. God's plan to transform us, to conform us to the image of his Son, is in part accomplished through the acts of ministry he invites us to share.

Transforming the Minister Through the Ministry

I am learning personally that God still works that way. He has taken me, almost kicking and screaming, into places I would not have chosen on my own. And there he has allowed me to learn some names and hear some stories. And I am changing as compassion has grown for some people I would not have cared for had it not been for God.

That occurred for me in a big way in 1997, as my family became involved with Lifeway, an early recovery ministry for teens and their families struggling with issues of drug abuse. Our younger son provided the impetus for our being there. As I mentioned to you yesterday, we first encountered his issue with drugs in 1994 when as a seventh grader he had been expelled from his intermediate school. My wife quit her job and homeschooled him through eighth grade, and then we sent him on to high school. But his issues persisted.

By 1997 he had gotten in trouble with the law, and all our attempts at parenting through this phase of his life were not succeeding. We joined Lifeway and began attending twelve-step meetings twice a week. Our son attended with the teens and we attended with the parents.

I had been a pastor in our community for ten years by this time. I had no idea of the pervasiveness of the problem with drugs in our schools. I must have foolishly assumed that as a pastor my kids were immune. But week after week I sat face to face with parents like myself, some of whom were followers of Jesus and some of whom were not. Neither group had found help and support within their church, which was why they were in the meeting. The story most often heard that they had faced fear and condemnation from their fellow Christians. I understood.

I learned their names and the names of their children. I spent time outside the meetings at Lifeway "hangouts" with those kids. I heard their stories. Before long they were no longer "those drug addicts," or "those kids with piercings and tattoos," "those Goth kids," "those skateboarders." They were Andrew and Ben and Scott and Julie and Trisha and Anne. They had names and stories. They were not objects.

One Saturday afternoon the hangout was at our house, following the morning twelve-step meeting at Redeemer Lutheran Church and lunch at Wendy's. About twenty of these young people invaded our home. Ten or so gathered around the trampoline in the back yard and bounced and laughed and enjoyed each other's company. Half a dozen sat around on our patio furniture smoking cigarettes and talking. Another half dozen had found my old guitar and circled up in the den playing music I did not recognize. Beside the door to the kitchen lay the pile of leather and chains one of the tough looking, multi-pierced guys had divested himself of before joining his friends at the trampoline.

I sat at the kitchen table with my wife, drinking coffee. I observed how different this was from having the church youth group over at my home. They didn't smoke. They didn't cuss. They played music I knew. They weren't pierced and chain laden. This was not the church youth group.

I thought about how reluctantly and with what pain I had come to this place in my life. This had by no means been my plan. And had it not been for what the pain made necessary, I would never have known these kids or kids like them. But then I realized two things clearly:

- Jesus would have been right in the middle of this party with these “sinners,” laughing, bouncing (probably not smoking and cussing – my theology and piety would not go there), and
- He had brought me to genuinely love these kids. I actually had come to like most of them, even Nick the one with the chains. Several years later I officiated at his wedding.

Jesus had taken me to the place where compassion grows -- the intersection of human hurts and hopes and the mission of God. And there he was working a transformation in my heart. Consequently he transformed our church and its ministry. Two Lifeway groups (a Tuesday night group for older kids and a Wednesday night group for younger ones) and their alternative school have met at our church facilities for years now. Other compassionate ministries to the real needs of people have developed out of God’s using this experience in a pastor’s life to transform a congregation.

I have seen God do this in the lives of others. He sends them on mission and then he changes them as they serve. They go in obedience and return in compassion.

Dr. Larry Pepper was a member of our congregation, a flight surgeon at NASA who provided medical care for astronauts and their families. He has become one of my personal heroes. In 1994 he made a trip to Rwanda, following the horrific bloodshed there. He worked for three weeks in a refugee camp caring for children. Jesus took him to the place where compassion grows. When Larry returned the mission had transformed him. He could no longer live in the comfort of the Clear Lake area. He had seen too much, learned too many names, and heard too many stories. Within a year, he and his family had packed their bags and were off to Africa serving with the International Mission Board.

Larry began to teach medicine in the government-operated university and hospital in Mbarara, and planted a church next to the University campus. He established an HIV/AIDS clinic that grew quickly over the next ten years. He began a ministry called Words of Hope that involved visiting in the homes of clinic patients on a regular basis to check on more than just their physical health.

Because of the mission, Mbarara has competent, trained indigenous physicians serving on the faculty of the medical school, training their own. A vital church sits on the edge of the campus of the university, providing ministry to university students. The Words of Hope ministry offers care to victims of HIV/AIDS. An AIDS clinic dispenses advice and healing to thousands of Ugandans. The mission of God – the intersection of human hurts and hopes

and the ministry offered by God's people, has transformed the city of Mbarara and many thousands of lives.

But that is not all that has changed. Larry and Sally Pepper are different people than they were in 1994. As of this year, Larry and Sally are now serving in Lesotho, being flown by a Missionary Aviation Fellowship pilot every day into villages to offer care, compassion, gospel, and hope to the thousands there who would otherwise be without medical care. They were already full of compassion when they arrived in Lesotho. I am certain, however, that will only be taken deeper.

Transforming the Church By the Mission of God

Engaging the mission of Jesus transforms the church. It is not just that the world is transformed when we follow him into the mission – we are transformed. And that is intentional on his part. He calls people to follow him and then he takes them to the place where their hearts begin to change – into the lives of others. The “head part” of discipleship (if there really is such a thing) follows that. The teaching of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5 comes after the call and the mission of Matthew 4.

The story of Peter's encounter with the Roman soldier Cornelius in Acts 10 and 11 is a case in point. Peter had been transformed to a point, but much remained to be renovated in his life, just as it does in ours. What most needs to be changed are often not matters of the head. Matters of the heart, the character, the will, the control centers of our lives – these are the areas that call for transformation.

Peter held a deep prejudice in their hearts against Gentiles. He had come by this perspective honestly. It was the paradigm of his culture. Gentiles, at their best, simply were not on the same level with God as were Jews. You did not eat with them. You did not associate with them. They were unclean. And Peter, though now following Jesus the Messiah, was still a Jew.

In that context he received his well-known vision atop the house owned by Simon the tanner in Joppa. Joppa was a seaport town, the very place from which Jonah had once set sail running from his vocation, on his way to have his own prejudices against Gentiles exposed by God. Peter climbed the stairs to the flat roof at noon to be alone and pray.

Several stories about Peter in the New Testament present him as a pretty heavy sleeper. He fell asleep in the Garden of Gethsemane, when he was supposed to be praying. In the jail cell in Acts 12 the night before his scheduled execution he sleeps so soundly that an angel has trouble awakening him to set him free. He is out in the street before he realizes he is not dreaming. And here on the rooftop, planning to pray like a pious Jew, he falls into a deep sleep. Perhaps that's why Jesus nicknamed him “the rock.”

The setting is significant. He is on a roof overlooking the port of Joppa. Sailing vessels are anchored in his view. Below, outside the house of Simon the tanner, animal skins are

hanging, with carcasses perhaps stacked nearby. Unclean things. And it is lunchtime. Peter is hungry. In that state, he falls into a prayerful sleep. God mixes those elements in Peter's setting together in a recipe destined to transform Peter's heart.

God sends a dream. Peter sees "a sheet" (same word in Greek for a sail) let down from heaven containing all kinds of unclean animals. He hears a voice tell him, "Get up, Peter! Slaughter and eat!"

But Peter, who had rebuked Jesus on at least one occasion, here rebukes God: "Certainly not, Lord, for I have never eaten anything defiled and ritually unclean!"

Then the voice spoke to him again, "What God has made clean, you must not consider ritually unclean!" This exchange happened three times in Peter's dream.

When Peter awoke, he discovered that there were representatives of Cornelius, a Roman officer in Caesarea up the coast, at the gate inquiring for him. They wanted him to accompany them to their master's house. Given the dream he had just experienced, and the story they told him, Peter obliged, however reluctantly.

Arriving at Cornelius' home, he practically apologizes for being there: "You know that it is unlawful for a Jew to associate with or visit a Gentile, yet God has shown me that I should call no person defiled or ritually unclean. Therefore when you sent for me, I came without any objection. Now may I ask why you sent for me?"

Peter hears of Cornelius' experience with God and proclaims the gospel to him and all the others in the house. While he is still preaching the Holy Spirit falls on all those there, just as he had done on the Jews in Jerusalem on the Day of Pentecost. This convinces Peter that he had no business withholding baptism from them, since God had obviously accepted them just as he had the Jews.

Later Peter's testimony about this event helped convince Jewish Christians in Jerusalem that this is God's way of working in the kingdom – there will be no distinction between Jew and Gentile. He eventually wrote a beautiful epistle in which many Old Testament metaphors for Israel are applied to the mostly Gentile church that he addresses. Both his heart and mind have been transformed.

That was a difficult lesson for Peter to learn, and he did not learn it from a book, a lecture, or a classroom. God took Peter to the place where compassion for Gentiles grew – the home of a Gentile named Cornelius. Peter learned his name and heard his story. The changes in Peter's heart came as a direct consequence of engaging the mission of God, and then taking that experience back to Scripture for an interpretation. The church as a whole was seriously transformed as one of its leaders engaged the mission of God.

Lesslie Newbigen writes:

What the story makes clear and what is spelled out in more theological terms (as we shall see) in the Fourth Gospel is that mission changes not only the world but also the church. Quite plainly in this case there is a conversion of the church as well as the conversion of Cornelius. It is not as though the church opened its gates to admit a new person into its company, and then closed them again, remaining unchanged except for the addition of a name to its roll of members. Mission is not just church extension. It is something more costly and more revolutionary. It is the action of the Holy Spirit, who in his sovereign freedom both convicts the world (John 16:8-11) and leads the church toward the fullness of truth that it has not yet grasped (John 16:12-15). Mission is not essentially an action by which the church puts forth its own power and wisdom to conquer the world around it; it is rather, an action of God, putting forth the power of his Spirit to bring the universal work of Christ for the salvation of the world nearer to its completion. At the end of the story, which runs from Acts 10:1-11:18, the church itself became a kind of society different from what it is before Peter and Cornelius met. It had been a society enclosed within the cultural world of Israel: it became something radically different, a society that spanned the enormous gulf between Jew and pagan and was open to embrace all the nations that had been outside the covenant by which Israel lived.¹

Engaging the mission of Jesus transforms the church. It is not just that the world is transformed when we follow him into the mission – we are transformed.

The Transforming Servant of God

Jesus and Patch Adams have something to say to us:

1. You can only objectify people you don't know.
2. You can only heal those whom you are willing to touch.
3. You can only be whole yourself by reaching out to someone else with hope and grace.
4. You cannot follow Jesus and stay where you are.
5. The mission transforms the missionaries.

In the encounter with the hungry, the thirsty, the stranger, the naked, the sick, and the prisoner we encounter the face of Jesus (Matt 25:31-46), and he transforms us as we serve him. In the encounter with injustice, with cruelty, and with human arrogance we learn to do justice, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with our God (Mic 6:8). In our encounters with the enemy and the persecutor we learn that it is we, not they, who have the privilege of defining them as our enemy to be hated or as our neighbor to be loved (Matt 5:43-48). In the encounter with those who have trespassed against us we learn what it is to be merciful people (Matt 6:12). The encounter afforded by the doing of the mission transforms the people of God. Our relationship with those we serve changes us.

The Practice of a Theologically Reflective Ministry

I would like to say that this transformation is automatic, that all we must do is engage the mission and the transformation of our hearts will follow. That is not the case, I think. Another aspect remains.

Transformation follows a *reflective engagement* of the mission of God. It is one thing to do the mission. It is another to reflect theologically on what we heard and saw and felt and thought. After sending the Twelve out on mission in Mark 6:6-13, Jesus receives them and debriefs the mission in 6:30-31. Having commissioned the seventy-two in Luke 10:1-16, he receives them and debriefs the mission in 10:17-24.

Paul engages the ministry of proclaiming and defending the gospel in Athens in Acts 17:16-34. He meets with moderate success as he uses human wisdom and rhetoric to present his message. He never gets around to preaching about the cross. Reflecting on that experience, Paul became a further transformed missionary. In 1 Corinthians 2:1-5 we hear the outcome of his reflection as he made the trip from Athens to Corinth:

1 Corinthians 2:1-5 When I came to you, brothers, I did not come with eloquence or superior wisdom as I proclaimed to you the testimony about God. For I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified. I came to you in weakness and fear, and with much trembling. My message and my preaching were not with wise and persuasive words, but with a demonstration of the Spirit's power, so that your faith might not rest on men's wisdom, but on God's power.

The experience of doing the mission in Athens changed the way Paul thought about the message of the cross and his methodologies for ministry. Paul was transformed by the mission *plus* theological reflection.

Reflecting on our acts of ministry – visits aboard ship, pastoral conversations, evangelistic encounters, worship leadership, preaching, teaching, and acts of service – is a necessary discipline for transformation. Even more effective is the practice of reflecting on these experiences with others. Clinical Pastoral Education has made much use of the discussion of verbatims as a means of forming a minister. Many of us worked through required theological reflection on our ministry as a part of a field education experience in seminary. This important practice has a way of quickly evaporating once it is no longer required of us. Some of us are more naturally prone to introspection and reflection. Others of us move quickly from one action item to the next. But the practice that transforms us necessitates something a bit more intentional on our part.

Transformation of our hearts as a result of engaging the mission will require some form of that practice to take root in our lives, however. Don Payne, associate dean and assistant professor of theology and ministry at Denver Seminary in Denver, Colorado, suggests that

that practice will have three prominent features: sustainability, humility, and an action orientation.²

- To say that our practice should be *sustainable* is to realize that we need to learn methods of theological reflection that are naturally part of our ministerial habit long after formal education as been completed. It must become a part of who we are – both simple and organic.
- To say that our practice must be marked by *humility* is to recognize that the world in which we serve is so broken that perfect decisions and ideal responses to all that we face are unlikely. We will always have a less than perfect score in our ministry. But we are justified by God's grace alone, not by our perfection.
- To say that our practice should be *action oriented* is to affirm that our reflection should ultimately affect the concrete ways in which we lead, listen, and love.

When Jesus goes to the trouble of taking us to the place where compassion grows – the intersection of human hurts and hopes with the mission of God in the person of one of his servants – we have the responsibility of paying attention to what is happening and of letting it have its intended impact upon our lives, our minds, our hearts, our character, and even our ministry methodology in the future. This requires a reflective posture.

The failure to reflect can be deadly. We can find ourselves repeating the same mistakes, carrying about the same prejudices, living with the same character issues, year after year. Rather than being transformed by ministry we discover that we are being calcified by it. The discipline of theological reflection can make the difference.

A prayerful time of meditation about the ministry event, a journal entry, or a conversation with another one of God's servants may do the job for us. The important thing is to allow God to use the mission to shape us as much as possible. We never outgrow the need for such transformation or for the practices that make it possible.

Theological reflection on the mission proved transformative to me in another way in 2005. I regret to say that issues of social justice had played little part in my own spiritual formation as a Baptist. I was on a sabbatical for three months, traveling to places in the world where missionaries from our congregation were serving. One leg of the journey took my family and a few friends from University Baptist Church to Mbarara, Uganda to work alongside Larry and Sally Pepper. It was my second trip there. In 2003 I had taught a week-long pastors' conference, but had not been much exposed to village life. This time, however, I found myself in the *unfamiliar* Ugandan village of Nakinombe visiting once more that *familiar* place where compassion grows – the place where human hurts and hopes intersect the people engaging in the mission of God.

We set up a two-day medical clinic in a small village outside of Lyantonde Town. Like the 4077th, five vehicles laden with supplies and twenty-seven people moved into Nakinombe and set up our operations at about 9:30 on Friday morning. The mud and stick church

building was divided by ropes and bedsheets into a clinic with a triage area and four examining rooms. A blue plastic tarp spread its shade just outside the door for the registration and reception area. A screen shelter set up behind the church became the "evangelism room," where the gospel would be shared. A big, black ten gallon barrel with a spigot was set up outside for hand washing. The back of the Toyota van became a mobile pharmacy. A mud pit latrine served as our restroom facilities. At the house next to the church a half-dozen women worked all day to prepare a single meal of *matoke*, *posho*, cabbage, rice, and beans for the group.

By 10:30 we were receiving the first of what would be 575 patients over two days. Business was slower on Friday (only 175) because of a funeral in the village, but it picked up the next day. We stopped registering patients at 1:30 PM on Saturday and began to turn people away. We continued to process those we had registered until 6:00 PM, and then we struck camp.

On Friday evening, after supper, when the sun went down, we set up a video projector and showed "The Jesus Film" to a crowd of two hundred or more, who sat on the ground and watched the movie until 10:30 PM, and then walked in the pitch black dark back to their huts.

We spent the night in tents, sleeping on the ground. The women's tents were set up inside the church on the dirt floor that was covered with straw. They had no pews, so people sit on the floor. The men's tents, and my family's, were set up outside. The rocks under our tent floor were the size of my fist.

That was the setting and schedule, but I want to describe the experience. When the people began to arrive, they came in droves. They came with their disease and injury. Women came bearing their sick children in their arms and on their backs. One infant who had malaria was sent into Lyantonde Town to the hospital there, but the woman returned with the child's corpse during the movie that evening. They came in the brightest colors you can imagine. Many came with deeply expressed gratitude for our being there. Women came out of their strong patriarchal culture and bowed to their knees before me, a man, a white man, to hand me their prescriptions. It was terribly uncomfortable. More so than the rocks in the bed.

I helped out in the pharmacy, mostly, where Melinda (my wife), Sally (Larry's wife), and Jenna (my daughter) were the pharmacists, dispensing what the physicians had prescribed. People pressed into us with their needs and we gave what we had. Before the two days were completed, we were running low on supplies.

Pamm, one of our friends who accompanied us from Houston, worked at the registration area, where patients were given a number and a piece of paper to carry through the process. Next they went to the triage area for nurses to take their vital signs and record their complaint. Then, a physician examined them, diagnosed their condition, and prescribed treatment. They next went to the evangelism tent, heard a presentation of the gospel and received prayer. Thirty-five adults made commitments of life to Jesus Christ.

Finally, they brought their prescription to the pharmacy to be filled. Once their prescription was ready, one of the medical students explained how to take the medication. Five hundred seventy-five people went through this process with us in two days.

During all this, unexpected encounters with people rose like flood waters about our feet until we were inundated with them. I walked across the road to a small mud hut. A medical student went with me to translate. We spoke with an old woman there, a Muslim, who was selling fried grasshoppers. Two Roman Catholic women were with her. A couple of "born again" men were also there. We talked about God and his grace. She asked lots of questions about America ("Do you have tribes there?" "Do you have grasshoppers?") She expressed her gratitude to us for coming to bring healing to the people.

No one spoke much English in the village. Some of the children, who had studied in school could speak a bit, and enjoyed practicing it with us. A group of boys found Jenna enchanting. "Your daughter is beautiful." "How old does an African man have to be to come to America and look for a wife?" I could have gotten several cows for her had I wanted to. They enjoyed having their photos taken on a digital camera and then seeing their own faces.

A group of children gathered around the Toyota van on Friday evening to sing songs with Melinda, ask questions about America, and generally to be up close to a *muzungu* (white person, literally, "one who runs in circles"). This same group sat at Melinda's feet during the film and wanted a running commentary: "Who is that man?" "Is that one Jesus?"

We finally left about 6:30 PM on Saturday. Men, women, and children lined the road and waved to us as we left. We left them with a few pills to rid them of worms, relieve their pain, and cure their infections. We left them with the good news that Jesus does know them, love them, and offer them life and hope. We left the village with a different view of the Baptist church that stood in their midst. Pastor Vianny and his wife Juliette had their ministry strengthened. The church was given a chance to be more effective.

When we left we were spent. Our medical supplies were low. Our legs were tired from standing. We were dirty and dusty and hungry and sleepy. We had been to that place, that place Jesus takes his people, the place where compassion grows.

I tried to live as a person of prayer in the middle of that operation. Lacking both language skills and medical knowledge, I was in the role of "Radar" or "Klinger" to Larry's "Colonel Potter." I could not do many of the things I would like to have done. So I decided I would pray for people as I walked among them or took their prescriptions and read their names. But that was a challenge. Things were so busy and hectic. I found compassion a difficult "feeling" to sustain. But I'm not certain compassion is a feeling. It is a response of obedience to the compassionate God who loves these people, who goes among them, and who says to us, "Follow me." I believe that the compassionate Christ was there, with those people, in the form of twenty-seven of his people who were willing to obey. Compassion sometimes takes the form of obedience.³

By the time I left Africa, I had been changed. I had prayer-walked on mud streets among people poorer than I had ever imagined. I sat in home of HIV/AIDS victims and listened to their stories, prayed for them and received the gift of their prayers for me. The phrase "extreme poverty" meant something different to me than it had before. The word "AIDS" meant something different to me now than it had before. The word "hunger" took on a different meaning. The image of "clean water" was transformed for me. Even now, I can hear African English when it is spoken in a crowd and I feel compelled to find the speaker. My praying, writing, preaching, and giving have changed. I returned to Uganda in 2007 for more work on my soul as much as to serve the mission of God.

The Call to a Transformative/Transforming Ministry

The world we live in, the world of seafarers and space scientists, of sailors and astronauts, of ordinary men and women with their ordinary lives, is in need of a word and a touch from God. People make their way through a spiritual fog, trying their best to discern what is right, what is true, and what is good. They are "harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd." Whether they know it or not, they long for the good news of the kingdom of God, for grace and forgiveness, for acceptance, for reconciliation with their creator and redeemer, for communion with God and community with others. And out of compassion Jesus has called us to follow him on the mission of taking that word and that touch, good news and good works, into their lives. They may not know it yet, but those people need people like us who are willing to enter their lives, if even for a moment, just for one conversation. Such a word and a touch could be a moment of transformation for them. And it could be a moment of transformation for us.

Henri Nouwen tells the story of his own feeble attempts to serve that mission. In *The Wounded Healer* he writes:

A few years ago, when I was chaplain of the Holland-America line, I was standing on the bridge of a huge Dutch ocean liner that was trying to find its way through a thick fog into the port of Rotterdam. The fog was so thick, in fact, that the steersman could not even see the bow of the ship. The captain, carefully listening to a radar station operator who was explaining his position between other ships, walked nervously up and down the bridge and shouted his orders to the steersman. When he suddenly stumbled over me, he blurted out, 'God damn it, Father, get out of my way.' But when I was ready to run away, filled with feelings of incompetence and guilt, he came back and said, 'Why don't you just stay around. This might be the only time I really need you.'⁴

The world God loves really does need those who will follow Christ into the places where it hurts. But we who are followers of Christ need the healing and transforming power that serving that hurting world offers us as well.

We need something to take away from this hour. I believe it should be both an attitude and a practice. The attitude we need as ministers of Christ, whether on board a ship, with seafarers in a chapel, in a seminary classroom, or in the pulpit is the same. We are

responding to the invitation of Jesus to “follow me.” We follow him into the world. We do not precede him, we do not take Jesus to them, rather he takes us to them. We follow him to the places he is going. We do not remain where we were before he summoned us. We leave things behind and we follow. We go where he goes and we do what he does.

Every day, whether we are on the job or not, God is at work in our world. Before you step on the gangplank, Christ is at work on board the ship. Eugene Peterson notes that the biblical order of the day begins with evening and ends with morning: “And there was evening, and there was morning-- the first day” (Gen 1:5). The Hebrew day begins at sundown. When we awaken in the morning, the day is half-over. When we begin our day we are not beginning anything. We are stepping into what God has already begun while we were totally unconscious for hours.

Each day of ministry then remains a day of discerning his presence, listening for his voice, and following him as best we can. That attitude will lead us inevitably to the place of transformation. He will take us to the people he loves and ask us to serve them. While we slept, Christ was already aboard the ship among those seafarers. He knows of their struggles with the economic fears of layoffs and joblessness, their issues with morale, their fatigue from long hours of hard labor, their cultural isolation, their loneliness, their longing for intimacy and community, their lack of privacy, their lack of holy space aboard the ship.⁵ He knows their stories and their names. And as we enter the day, we follow him into ministry.

I enjoyed reading Hendrik la Grange’s address to you last year in Buffalo. He said:

What do you know: I discover that God is already there, up there on the ship, even before I arrive, because that’s where this gangway goes: to a place where God lives! It is not I who am to take God up there and to enthral seafarers to sit up and take note. It is I who needs to take notice of God already sailing with and working at these men who may, just as I, not know it yet that he is there, but he is nonetheless. God awaits me there.⁶

You will board the ship where He is at work. You will listen to their stories. You will learn their names. You will speak of good news and of hope. You will offer assistance. You will lend them your presence. You will serve their needs as best you can. You will engage the mission.

Then, if you are wise, you will adopt a faithful practice of theological reflection. You will pray or write or converse about what you have seen and felt and heard and done. You will consider what you might have done differently or better. You will think about where God was working in the midst of it all. You will wonder about what you might do next. And in the mixture of this serving and reflecting God will do something. God will transform us, from glory to glory, allowing us better to represent his kingdom and his mission in our next encounter with human hurts and hopes. And you will return to the place where compassion grows.

¹ Lesslie Newbigin, *The Open Secret: An Introduction to the Theology of Mission* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1995), 59-60.

² Don Payne, "Field Education and Theological Reflection in an Evangelical Tradition," in *Preparing for Ministry: A Practical Guide to Theological Field Education*, ed. George M. Hillman, Jr. (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2008), 61-62.

³ Henri J. M. Nouwen, Donald P. McNeill, and Douglas A. Morrison, *Compassion: A Reflection on the Christian Life* (New York: Image Books, 1982), 34-45.

⁴ Henri M. Nouwen, *The Wounded Healer* (New York: Image Books, 1979), 86.

⁵ Maggie Whittingham-Lamont, "President's Message," *Waterlines* (Spring 2009), 1.

⁶ Hedrick la Grange, "Address to NAMMAC, Buffalo USA" (http://www.namma.org/resources/NAMMA_ConventionAddress2007.pdf), 2.