

2009 Global Mission Lenten Series

Week One Reflection

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Luke 5:1-11

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and from our Lord Jesus Christ! Amen.

Calling itself “Asia’s World City,” the former British Colony of Hong Kong is now a Special Administrative Region of the People’s Republic of China, and a dynamic, pulsating city that is home to the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Hong Kong and the Lutheran Theological Seminary. It is my privilege as a missionary of the ELCA to be a pastor of the ELHK and a professor of New Testament Studies at LTS. This is truly an exciting place to live and work in because it gives my wife Janey and me a chance to experience God’s grace and power in the life of a faithful, energetic church and a seminary that takes its mission very seriously. This cross-cultural experience strengthens our faith as it gives us first-hand experience of the boundary-spanning reality of the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

Christians here are a minority of about 9 percent of the total population of 7 million (in a land area of about 410 square miles – it is a crowded place!), and Lutherans are a small minority of that number. The Evangelical Lutheran Church in Hong Kong has a membership of about 15,000 people in over 50 congregations and preaching points spread throughout the territory and is almost entirely Cantonese speaking. The Lutheran Theological Seminary has over 300 students from many different denominations and almost two dozen countries and is tri-lingual, using Cantonese, English, and Mandarin for our teaching and community life. We are an international seminary in an international city that is, paradoxically, in a predominantly Cantonese speaking setting. Life here is always interesting.

This minority status shapes the lives of Christians in Hong Kong, stamping a real urgency on them to evangelize their families, friends, acquaintances and colleagues. Christians in Hong Kong are free to share their faith in any way they wish, since Hong Kong has kept the freedoms it had under the British, and many first generation Christians are concerned about their parents and friends, most of whom are either Buddhists or believers in an eclectic Folk Religion. Many parents object to their children becoming Christian because they believe this means their children will not sacrifice to them or provide for them in the spirit world after they die. In a culture that highly values obedience to parental wishes, this can put a double pressure on young Christians to offer the assurance of eternal life through the Christian faith to their parents while at the same time not offending them by being baptized.

What it means to “follow Jesus” in this place is different from what it may mean in some other places. Surrounded by the secular materialism of a bustling modern city, mixed in with traditional Chinese ancestor worship, Buddhism, and worship of various gods and goddesses, a Christian really has to swim against the tide here. In Asia, Christianity is counter-cultural in ways that it is not in the West, and that gives it an intentionality, a purposefulness that is hard to find in places where the culture has been informed by Christianity for millennia. There are very few casual Christians here in Hong Kong, or across the northern border in China, either. Instead,

there is intensity and a commitment that often puts me to shame. People take their faith very seriously and it plays a central role in their lives.

So, the text of Luke 5:1-11 has the ring of truth among Christians here. When they read about Jesus' first disciples "leaving everything" and following Jesus, their own experience can inform their image of what that must have been like for the disciples. Many of them, too, have had to "leave everything" about their past, their culture, their traditions, and their families behind them to venture forth into a life of faith in Christ. Even though almost nothing about the rural lakeside fishing life described in Luke 5 is like the crowded, chronically busy urban life of Hong Kong, the call to become "fishers of people" and the call to "leave everything" and follow Jesus comes through very clearly.

One person, who, like the disciples, answered this call, is the evangelist at one of the congregations of the ELCHK where I serve as sacramental pastor. Mr. Cheung left a successful career as the head of his own accounting firm in Hong Kong's Central business district to go to seminary full-time for three years, graduating over a year ago. His wife and two children are very supportive of his career change even though that has significant life-style implications for them. He must wait at least another two years before he can be ordained as a pastor, because that is the rule in the church here, but he is already serving as the principal evangelist at his vibrant congregation. This congregation, Peace Lutheran Church, worships in a space comprised of three small apartments with the walls between them knocked out to make a long, narrow sanctuary that can seat about 150 people, with an activity room on the end opposite the altar that can be divided for Sunday school classes and meetings. This worship space is on the third floor of a non-descript apartment building reached by a small elevator or a grungy staircase. The church office space is down on the second floor of this building and both sanctuary and office are only identified by small signs on their doors, and by a tiny neon sign sticking out the side of the building that you almost need binoculars to see or read from the street. It takes a certain level of dedication just to make it to a worship service, yet the whole space pulses with faith on Sunday mornings, and two services are needed to accommodate the whole congregation.

Hong Kong has been through its share of economic adversity in the past and many people here have struggled through great hardship to be where they are today. Mr. Cheung himself has spoken of his early childhood years living as a refugee from China on a small boat in the Macau harbor, and later in Hong Kong his mother making her children recite Chinese poetry from memory as they all sat around doing piece-work at home for clothing factories to try make ends meet for the family. As the first Christian in his family, Mr. Cheung was very happy that his mother became a Christian and was baptized before she died earlier this year. He shared with his mother the message of Jesus Christ both because of his love for God and the Gospel, but also because of his love for his mother and his gratitude for all she had done for him. This kind of evangelism that comes from deep personal involvement with people characterizes the church and many Christians here in Hong Kong, and I want to share with you one more example below.

Just last week I was privileged to go with a group of seminarians on a boat trip out to some of Hong Kong's stunningly beautiful outlying islands. One place we stopped at was a small secluded harbor where Margie, one of our students had spent her childhood living on a fishing boat. Her brothers and male cousins went to school several years before she and her sisters did,

because girls were not considered worth educating. She told her fascinated fellow seminarians about what her life had been like as a “water person” in those years, about how she herself was born in a hospital, but her younger sister was born in the boat on the way to the hospital, a not uncommon experience among her acquaintances. Margie proudly pointed out to us the spot in the water where her family boat had been moored, and the group of boats still belonging to members of her congregation. The Christians are a minority of people from this village, most of whom worship at the temple to the goddess of the sea, which was the largest and most ornate building in the entire fishing village. Margie has been one of my students for the last year and a half and I had previously had no idea about her background, so it was wonderful to be given just a little glimpse of her life. She plans to continue working with her congregation of fishing people and former fishing people when she graduates from LTS. Her story is not very far removed from the story of Jesus calling his first disciples from among the fishermen on the Sea of Galilee so long ago.

The students at LTS come from many countries in Asia, as well as Europe and North America, and we take very seriously our mission to provide quality theological education for future church leaders in these countries. For LTS, becoming “fishers of people” means engaging in this multicultural theological education, training committed, spiritually mature, capable women and men to be evangelists, leaders and pastors for their various churches. It is exciting to know that we have graduates in various parts of China, in a remote village in Nepal, in Bangladesh and Sri Lanka, in India and Indonesia, Malaysia and Australia, Laos, Cambodia and Vietnam, as well as Taiwan, Korea, and Hong Kong, to name just a few places on the map. In this Lenten season, it is worthwhile keeping this far-flung network of faithful “fisherpeople” in our prayers as we also pray that God will continue to invigorate our faith, teaching us, too, to work always to bring the Gospel to those near and far who are in need.

May God continue to be with you all, filling your lives with the blessing and the gift of faithful service to this world.

Amen! Thanks be to God.

Now may the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all. Amen.