

Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church

(July 8, 2012)

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Sermon manuscript

Life in the Middle

(Acts 8)

*Message delivered the day after returning from two weeks in Kenya with a team of seven to serve with Crossway, International's in-country partners.

First service: Testimony from Jeremy Means

Second service: Testimonies from Nicole Treadwell and Ryan Johnson

Introduction:

These past two weeks have been very rich for our team. And today you have heard some words of testimony.

Over the next several weeks you may hear from the rest of the team. And I can assure you that any one of the seven members of our team would LOVE to talk with you and would welcome a chance to share something about our trip with you if you simply ask!

This morning it is my privilege to tell a bit of my own experience and to tell you some of what I believe God was teaching me while we were in Africa.

Who would have ever guessed that the Lord would use a rather obtuse element of Greek grammar to open my eyes to a truth about what life in Jesus is all about during our time in Kenya. But that is precisely what He did.

I'm actually very excited to share with you today (despite the 58 hours of travel and probably evident jet lag this morning), and I have prayed that God will use the lesson He taught me to encourage you.

A Word About English Grammar

You should know that I graduated from college with a degree in English. That means that I have a penchant for prepositions and participles, for punctuation and gerunds.

It also means that, from time to time, on Sunday mornings I will regale you with things grammatical. Well, today is one of those days.

When we think of the apt of our language we call verbs, we pay attention to mood, to tense, and to voice.

In English, there are two voices.

There is the active voice, where the subject causes the action in a sentence, as in, "I opened the door" or "I serve" or "You teach the Bible."

There is also the passive voice, where the subject is acted upon. "The door was opened for me" and "You were served" are examples of the use of the passive voice.

Often we Americans are more drawn to active than to passive living. We value taking initiative; we respect "taking charge."

From the beginning, I was very eager for a very active Missions trip to Africa!

A Word About Our Trip

Uganda!

I had contacted Tom and Jean Reed, missionaries our church has long supported, in November of 2011 to explore the possibility of bringing a group from Northwest to serve with them in northern Uganda sometime in early 2012.

They were very positive about the idea and we started thinking about taking a trip in January, 2012.

Ryan Johnson was on board to go and I was looking to advertise for more teammates.

Well, the timing for a January trip turned out to be all wrong for all kinds of reasons. So, we shifted forward to thinking about a trip to Uganda in the June/July time frame.

On this trip we would do some construction, do some Bible teaching, and have a great ministry among the Karamajong tribe, the tribe with whom Jean and Tom live.

Now the Kzaramajong live in northeastern Uganda, near the border of South Sudan, where borders don't mean much.

The Karamajong tribe live in a very scary part of the world. But because they are really, really tough hombres - cattle owners and warriors - IF you are their friend, it is not all that scary to be with them.

An outstanding team came together. I was to be joined by Ryan Johnson, Jeremy Means, Nicole Treadwell, PT Gaines, Tim Gross, and Tiffany Head.

One Sunday in early May, we gathered in the church office after worship and ordered seven tickets to fly to Africa (and back! ☺) @ over \$2,000 a piece.

We were all very excited about the trip!

Then, Jean Reed got really, really sick. She was treated in Uganda. But, to receive the best possible care, she and Tom flew back to the States.

Shortly after their return, I received an email from Tom headed, "Some really bad news..." (You always fear opening THAT email.)

Jean's health was actually getting better. But after evaluating her condition, their sponsoring mission agency would not allow them Reeds to return to Africa until September, obviously long after our team's planned trip.

Tom wondered in this email if we could get our ticket money back because the trip would have to be cancelled.

Well, knowing full well that British Airways would NOT refund our tickets, I exercised one of my stronger gifts - panic (another of them being "whining" as my teammates discovered).

I contacted two of our church's ministry partners who have active works in Africa.

Both were willing to cobble together last-minute trips for us. But Dean Chollar of Crossway International was very eager for the seven of us (he said he was "salivating") to have us serve with his "in-country partners in Kenya.

Kenya

Quickly it was determined that we would go to Kenya and be involved in water-well drilling, ditch digging, some construction, some Bible teaching!

It was going to be a very full, busy, active two weeks in Kenya.

Then, a few days before departure I received an email from Dean. He expressed concern that the well project might not happen. And he wasn't so sure about that whole construction thing, either.

I began to ponder the possibility of my worst nightmare come true. I was taking an incredibly gifted team to Africa - and we would have nothing to. Thumb-twiddling, 101.

Who could even imagine a "passive" Missions trip?

THIS was the thought that boarded the plane with me as we left San Antonio for Dallas to London to Entebbe to Nairobi.

It was not until the second day in Africa that the Lord redeemed the trip for me via Greek grammar.

A word about Greek grammar

So, to review...

The active voice is where the subject performs the action. We serve. We build. We plant. We preach. We dig.

The passive voice is where the action is performed ON the subject. We are saved.

Greek, the language in which the New Testament was written, throws us a curve at this point.

Greek also has what we call a “middle voice.” In the middle voice the subject participates in the action that is initiated by another.

For me, the trip to Kenya was all about learning to view the Christian life as life in the middle.

Not at all passive. We don’t just sit there like bumps on a pickle.

But it is not all about our activity and our initiative, either.

RATHER, life in Jesus is about entering in to what God is already doing. It is all about joining in Him.

I got my first lesson in life in the middle on our second day in Kenya.

Living Out the Middle Voice in Africa

After taking our first afternoon (Monday) to recuperate from our travels and from jet lag, we were rarin’ to go and do something “missiony” on Tuesday.

So, our first activities? We peeled potatoes. We moved a pile of rocks. We weeded the garden at our host’s home.

Hmmm... THOSE activities are not likely to go down as great moments in 21st century missions.

But God was teaching me something on that Tuesday.

We were being called to enter the rhythm of life in Africa. We were given things to do that needed doing, and I (along with the rest of the team) was learning to enjoy not being passive, but not actively initiating, either, but to enter in to what was already going on.

And so it went through the two weeks at our host’s home, with some needy widows, at a mountain school, at a shelter for homeless children, at a government school with twelve hundred kids and 46 blind kids, at church last Sunday, and at an orphanage in the bush.

All of the significant activities in which we engaged were all about participating in what was already happening. It was neither active nor passive. It was life in the middle.

The Middle Way - a Biblical Way to Live

Philip and the Ethiopian (Acts 8)

God was clearly at work in the heart of the Ethiopian. He was reading Isaiah 53, for heaven’s sake! God had already softened his heart.

Then, Philip was commissioned to show up. He joined the Ethiopians’ chariot and alertly shared the Gospel, participating in what God was already doing.

Jesus lived this way

In John 5, Jesus healed a man who had been crippled for thirty eight years.

Afterward He said, “My Father is working...”, meaning that what he done was to enter a situation where God was already at work.

We see the same thing in Acts 13 and the commissioning of Barnabas and Saul for the first missionary journey.

And when Paul tells us that we are saved by grace through faith (Ephesians 2:8-9), he follows that up by letting us know that ***“we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them.”***

The Middle Voice and YOU

Active is good

It is a good thing to take initiative. It is a good thing to do what we can do.

Passive is good

Passivity can be very much called for. We in the USA could learn a lot by being inactive from time to time!

Middle is key

But, as an overall orientation to life in Jesus, the Middle Voice may be the most helpful image we are given.

If we live in the middle, we will prayerfully enter

- Conversations, asking, “Lord, what are You up to here?”
- Rooms, wondering, “Father, what are the dynamics of need here?”
- Conflict, seeking to know, “How can I minister Your peace here, now?”
- Situations of need, praying, “Lord, in what way would You like me to be a source of blessing here?”

Conclusion:

In Kenya we were honored to spend an afternoon at a home for street children.

We hung with the kids for a while. While there, we jumped rope.

Now, when I jump rope, I grab my jump rope, twirl the rope, and start jumping.

At this school, two kids twirl the only rope they have (a very long rope) while a third child waited, waited, waited, until just the right moment to jump in.

Well, yes, after a while I tried it.

I even managed to “get in” once, but I did it awkwardly.

I think, given time, I could have improved. But I did find that there was an art to it.

It is challenging to enter in to what another is doing, be it two friends swinging a rope, or God inviting our involvement in what He is doing.

We, as God’s people, are to stay alert, spiritually, to what He is up to.

In the end, life in the middle brings God-honoring impact!