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Where Will It Get You?

Luke 12:35-40 & Hebrews 11:1-3, 8-16

I have never parachuted out of a plane, nor have I ever gone bungee jumping. I have gone rappelling a couple of times. I think that the same holds true of the other two as has been written about bungee jumping:

Bungee jumping is not a difficult sport. All one has to do is take the first step, and the rest comes easy. But that one step is a doozy.

I will have to admit that I hesitated for several minutes before taking that first step when I rappelled that initial time, even with all of the safety equipment, and with the belayer and the instructor right there. The additional times were easier.

As we look at the passage from Hebrews we can't help but notice that those mentioned seemed to take their first steps without hesitation as they acted out their faith. Their faith was their lived-out belief, faith put into practice. We can read about what they did with their faith. We can assume that many most likely stepped out of their comfort zones to follow where God was leading. I can remember a friend challenging me when I was seeking a new call - she asked if I was willing to leave my comfort zone and consider a position at her church.

When we look at Hebrews 11:8 we are mindful that Abraham and Sarah left their home, their comfort zone, with no idea of where they were going. They were completely ignorant about their destination. A conversation with others in his hometown before he left might have gone like this present-day humorist wrote:

Some one asked Abraham, "Where you goin'?" "I dunno." "What you goin' to do there?" "I dunno." "Why you goin', then?" "I dunno."

In the community of faith we look upon Abraham & Sarah's willingness to set out for an unknown land as an act of risk and courage, of faith and obedience to God's call. This was why they were going. Again, in the books of Hebrews and Genesis in the Bible there is no indication of any hesitation on the part of Abraham and Sarah. They trusted in God and God's leading. And so they moved forward, trusting in God for their provision & security.

And if a skeptic asked,

What did it get them? the answer would be, "A life of wandering in search of a better homeland which they never reached.

Moving from place to place, living in tents, they never knew where they were going. They never lived in a town or city in the Promised Land. Theirs was an unsettled but a faithful life.

As I thought of the people of God living unsettled lives and traveling to unknown destinations coming to mind were missionaries – for me, people definitely living outside their comfort zone, my comfort zone.

For stories of the amazing faith of missionaries I turn to the books by Marj Carpenter, Moderator of the 207th General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) in 1995, and mission interpreter for the church. Some of you may remember her sharing her stories of the mission work of the church when she spoke here in 1995 for the Bay Weekend lectures. In her 2 books we read of her traveling to Presbyterian mission sites all over the world as she tells of the missionaries who worked and who still work in these places to share the Good News of Jesus Christ.

What she had to go through on many of her journeys is way beyond my comfort zone. She endured so much because she was so eager to learn and tell the stories of Presbyterian mission personnel. Marj writes:

As I was standing there in that stinking, rotten place, I made up my mind that I was going to get out into the mission fields and see what we had done.

Whatever hesitation there may have been about going for the first time to a mission field, there certainly was no hesitation after that. She continues:

Presbyterians have opened more mission fields than any other church in history. We have taken very seriously the commission to go into all nations and take the gospel to all people, and we don't even know we've done it.

This is what she wrote about Presbyterian outreach in China:

Once we were there, what wonderful work we did! We were sent back home on several occasions, and finally, in desperation, all of our mission work was brought home. We stayed just as long as we could, even when Dr. Frank Price was taken prisoner and when many of our missionaries were put under arrest. That was the second time that happened. In the 30s, one of our missionaries, Jack Vincent, was beheaded in China and his body was dragged through that land by bandits. His church, was destroyed, but has since been rebuilt and now has 2000 members. He was not a martyr in vain.

The church there was never gone. On the very first Sunday it finally went public again, there were 16,000 baptisms. ... It's been 12 years since that Sunday, and in 1995 there were 15,000,000 Christians in China.

The Sunday we were in a crowded church in Beijing, an elderly woman came down the center aisle carrying a box of hymnbooks that she had risked her life to keep hidden for 32 years. Would you risk you life to keep hymnbooks hidden?

The next Sunday we were in Shanghai in a former Methodist Church. There were 4000 people there that day. The people in that church were singing too. They didn't have hymnbooks, but they were singing hymns we had taught them. And guess what! They remembered the words to the hymns and we didn't.

Marj writes of our mission work in Cuba:

One of the reasons for the new enthusiasm for the church in Cuba is that Lois Kroehler, one of our missionaries in Cuba when the revolution began, refused to leave.

She stayed there through the entire revolution and remained there until 1994 when she retired and came back to the States.

Marj writes of mission work in Thailand, Korea, Brazil, Cameroon, Zaire, Colombia, Haiti, Jamaica, Mexico, Malawi, Bangladesh, Ghana, Sudan, Chile, Argentina, Northern Ireland, Russia, and many other countries. Marj's intent, I believe, is to inspire us as Presbyterian Christians to be involved in and support mission work, to encourage us to keep on, to take that difficult first step, hoping that the rest that make up our faith walk will be easier.

There are those scholars who believe that the 11th chapter of Hebrews was written to help rekindle the dwindling faith of the Christians who received this writing.

As we may need some inspiration now and again, we are called on to remember the faithful who have gone before us, people who didn't know where all those steps after the first one they took in response to God's call would lead them. Most of us can point to a family member, a pastor, teacher, leader, sponsor, coach, friend, a caring church member, or someone else who had a tremendous influence on our faith journey, who was an example to us of being a Christian and living out the Christian faith, and who inspired us to take those first steps on our faith journeys.

In ending one of her tales, Marj writes of an influential person on her faith journey:

Another time I was in the Amazon, we stopped at the home of a Presbyterian elder. He had killed a deer and was going to serve us a very fancy lunch. We were all standing around in his home and the rains came. When the rains hit the tin roof of the house the conversation was over. There were no screens on the windows and suddenly that room was filled with butterflies. The most beautiful butterflies in the world are in that jungle in the Amazon, and here was a room full of them.

I remember standing there thinking that my grandmother was the one who interested me in mission, and somehow I hoped she could see me there in the Amazon in that elder's home, with the rain pouring down on the tin roof, and venison on the table, and the room filled with butterflies. To me, it was a real sign of God's love for the whole world.

A part of my Christian/Presbyterian upbringing in the home of a Presbyterian minister involved being exposed to the church beyond the doors of the congregation my father served.

While he was pastor at a church in San Francisco our family became aware of the Donaldina Cameron House, a Presbyterian mission and community center in Chinatown. Relationships were established. After we moved to the Ohio and Illinois for 9 years, our family kept in touch with the director and others, all of whom had become family friends. Then when we lived in Oakland in the mid-60s we became reacquainted with these people. I have fond memories of going over to Cameron House in the late spring to enjoy their carnival, which was and is a wonderful fundraiser. My family moved from California again, yet we still managed to keep in touch those friends. My mother still hears from a few of them at Christmas. A treasured memory from my ministry in Indianapolis is being part of a 3-church high school age mission trip that went to San Francisco to work at Cameron House. It was a joy to be back there but more to help it continue in vital ministry to the people of Chinatown and San Francisco.

I want to share now some of the history of Cameron House, material gained from books by Carol Green Wilson and Lorna E. Logan.

It was September 1, 1874 and a group of Chinese and Americans, mostly women, gathered in a second floor apartment in Chinatown. The place was consecrated as a home for Chinese girls, 'to receive and train girls and women out of slavery, and also to prepare women as lay workers for the church.' These girls had been kidnapped or bought to become household slaves or prostitutes. So many girls sought refuge that in 1876 the mission moved to larger quarters. The work was overseen by a Board that was the California Branch of the Women's Foreign Missionary Society.

Board members were personally involved in the day-to-day operations and were an inspiration to many others throughout the state and country to get involved in support of mission work in this country. In 1878 a Margaret Culbertson from Groveland, New York was hired to be the superintendent for the Home. The work at times was dangerous and unpopular due to the persecution of the Chinese in this country in the 1880's. But the work continued and was so successful that funds were sought to be able to build a new building. As they were moving in to the new building a call came to rescue a girl, and so the staff left, with an interpreter, and then got a police officer to join them so that they could bring the girl to the home safely.

In 1895 Ms. Culbertson's health was not good and a staff member who had been doing her work had left the mission. The head of the Mission Board knew of a 25 year old woman, a friend of her daughter's.

This woman was inexperienced and young and came from a totally different background from the community in which she would serve. She was Donaldina Cameron. Her family lived in Southern California where her brother was manager of a ranch. It was from this life of the open country, and the shelter of a close and loving family, that Donaldina Cameron came to the locked doors and barred windows of the Mission House. Little did she know when she took that first step in response to God's call where she would be led.

A few weeks after she started sticks of dynamite were found on the front porch and in the grating of the windows of the girl's kitchen. In light of all this Miss Culbertson asked Donaldina if she wanted to leave a place of so much danger, but the girl of Scottish forbears would not hear of it.

In later years, Miss Cameron said that people spoke of her as being brave, but she insisted that bravery consisted of doing something of which one was afraid. She simply didn't feel fear, so deserved no credit.

Miss Culbertson died and then late in 1899 Miss Cameron was made the superintendent. The work load and the dangers involved did not let up. On top of everything the earthquake of 1906 added extra burdens to the work. Within a few days after the earthquake the Board met at the House but then went to a church to conduct their meeting. The decision was made to rebuild. Many of these women had lost their homes, and their own family businesses had been destroyed. But they sensed that it was God's will that they should continue the work with a new building, and they set about to do it.

In 1911 a physically and emotionally exhausted Ms. Cameron took a year's leave.

She would have had to reflected on what her work involved and whether she wanted to continue. The rescue of the girls and women was dangerous work. Whether she went alone or with other staff and police officers, the rescue work was usually carried out at night. They might go from roof to roof to roof of buildings in Chinatown, up and down fire escapes, often breaking into the places the females were supposed to

be. The chases would take them down dark hallways and narrow alleyways and maybe through several buildings. Donaldina became an expert at discovering hiding places behind walls, equipment, or furniture, or under the floors or in the ceilings. All the rescue work was going on in the presence of hostile people who did not want the women to be found.

From her leave she came back to carry on with vigor and a clear sense that, even in spite of all of the danger, this was the place where God wanted her to serve, which she did for a total of 40 years before retiring.

Donaldina Cameron did not start working with Ms. Culbertson with a desire to put her life on the line, but if her service to God and those in need put her in danger, so be it. And she did not do her work in order to have the building and institution, where her work is carried on, named after her, which happened.

The words of chapter 11 in the book of Hebrews culminate in the words of Hebrews 12:1-2. In these verses we read of being “surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses”. These are the faithful of all times and places, known and mostly unknown to us, who have lived and shared the good news. They surround us now, including Donaldina Cameron, Ms. Culbertson, Dr. Frank Price, Jack Vincent, Lois Kroehler, the faithful of this congregation who have gone before us, and countless others. They are those who, like us today, feast at the table of our Lord. What an amazing thing it is to be part of the family of God.