

SHARING THE GOSPEL, SHARING OURSELVES

1 Thessalonians 2:1-8
Matthew 22:34-46

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Ukama Sunday

TEXT: 1Thessalonians 2:8 “So deeply do we care for you that we were determined to share with you not only the gospel of God but also our own selves, because you have become very dear to us.”
PURPOSE: To celebrate our *Ukama* with the Iveme Congregation of UCCZ as an expression of neighbor love, their love for us and our love for them.

Paul’s first letter to the Christians in the city of Thessalonica is widely regarded as the oldest document in our New Testament. It was written at least two decades before any of the Gospels. Paul and two colleagues had ministered there for an extended period of time, and apparently had developed a deep affection for the people in that fledgling congregation. But something had necessitated the departure of the missionary team, and something had prevented Paul’s return. From a distance, he had heard of the Thessalonian’s continued faithfulness to the gospel, as well as some concerns they had about the faith. So Paul sent this letter to affirm their faith, to answer their questions, and perhaps most of all, to communicate his affection for them.

The passage we heard this morning from the letter lets the Thessalonians know how deeply Paul cares for them, so much so that wrote that “we are determined to share with you not only the gospel of God but also our own selves, because you have become very dear to us.” When I read this passage early in my imagining how we might celebrate our *Ukama* with the Iveme Congregation of the United Church of Christ in Zimbabwe, this verse said it all. It even beat out Jesus urging us to “love our neighbor as ourselves,” which shows up in today’s passage from the Gospel of Matthew. Our *Ukama* is us and our spiritual kinfolk in the Iveme church sharing not only the gospel, but sharing ourselves. We-and by ‘we’ I mean the people of both congregations-are practicing neighbor love at a great distance, as Paul and the Thessalonians practiced neighbor love way back at the beginning of Christ’s Church. And just like the long-distance relationship between Paul and the Thessalonians revealed the grace of God at work in their relationships, so our relationship with the people in Iveme reveals God at work in Christian community in our time.

Ukama started way before South Newbury partnered with Iveme. In the late twentieth century, many church denominations in the United States were transitioning from a mission model of relating to ministry in the developing world to a partnership model. The churches which had been founded by missionaries had matured and become self-supporting. Also, as churches in the United States were beginning to decline, churches in the developing world were overflowing with

evangelical enthusiasm. These developments form the background for the New Hampshire Conference of the United Church of Christ to develop a partnership relationship with the United Church of Christ in Zimbabwe back in 1996.

In 2001, the congregation I served in Concord was partnered with a church in Harare, Zimbabwe's capital. That partnership struggled to get off the ground until 2005, when a delegation including people from our partner congregation came to New Hampshire. Then, in 2007, our congregation sent a delegation including Lindy and me to Zimbabwe. On that visit, we caught the Ukama bug. As Paul wrote, we shared not only the gospel but our whole selves, as did our new family in Zimbabwe shared their whole selves with us. When your hosts give up their bed to their guests, and sleep with their children or in their living room, that's what sharing our whole selves looks like.

So we came here to Newbury with great enthusiasm for Ukama. In the winter of 2013, Rev. Edward Matuvhunye came from Zimbabwe to study for a doctorate in ministry from Andover Newton Theological School. We invited Rev. Matuvhunye here to preach and share the situation in Zimbabwe. You may remember the blizzard which paralyzed New Hampshire during the weekend he was with us. He did get to shovel snow, and this congregation did get to hear him preach and tell about life in Zimbabwe. I have a memory of a group of us having dinner with him at Bubba's. Nancy Nichols was one of the people at that table. She told Rev. Matuvhunye that David Livingstone, a famous English explorer of Africa, was a distant relative, which was sufficient proof for Rev. Matuvhunye to affirm our deep kinship. That visit inspired us to consider becoming an Ukama congregation. Look back on it and consider how it qualifies as an early example of divine providence supporting our partnership.

We did vote to become an Ukama Church, I think at our 2013 Annual Meeting. In October of that year, a delegation from Zimbabwe came to New Hampshire. There was a gathering of folk from all the New Hampshire Ukama churches joining with the folks from Zimbabwe to celebrate our partnership and to witness the pairing of our church with the Ivone congregation. Roberta, Keira, Lindy and I represented our church at that event. What we didn't know before we got to the celebration was that a member of that delegation was Ruramisia Mhlanga, a member of the Ivone Church whom we learned to call just "Rue." So we had the rare opportunity of being paired with an actual person of our partner church with us. Rev. Mugari preached at our church that Sunday, but Rue joined us for a potluck during the week, where she

shared, not only the gospel, but her whole self, as did we. Photos of the 2013 delegation's visit are still on our web site. I look back and regard those visits as another example of divine providence supporting our partnership.

The conference Ukama frequently has partnered with other groups in New Hampshire to fill a shipping container and send it to Zimbabwe. We sent boxes in 2015, 2016, and 2017. I don't recall packing those boxes and getting them to the container as particularly pleasant events in our Ukama, but they did connect us more concretely with our church family in Iveme.

In 2015, Lindy and I made another trip to Zimbabwe, this time as the older members of a delegation featuring five youths, one of which was Judy and Wayne's granddaughter Brianna. On our first visit in 2007, Lindy bonded deeply with a woman from the Mbare church whose name is Annamercy Madhuku. Annamercy started calling Lindy, "Mum," and Lindy started saying that she had two daughters, one of whom lived in Zimbabwe. Annamercy came to greet us the first night of that 2015 trip. I've rarely witnessed such a depth of affection as these two people had for each other. There's Paul's words once again coming to life: "you have become very dear to us."

In 2018, the conference was making plans to host a delegation from Zimbabwe. Many of the people in the first group of delegates selected were denied visas on the grounds that their lives were sufficiently economically unstable as to risk them not returning to Zimbabwe. This was totally ridiculous, especially for the pastors on that list, who yes, probably hadn't been paid any salary for many months, but whose devotion to their congregation was huge. One of the delegates, Sitshengisiwe Tsododo, who we quickly learned to call "Sitze," was from the Iveme Church, and had been granted a visa because she was employed full time. But no pastors, nor anyone who had been here before, had been granted visas, and we all knew both of those things were crucial to a successful visit. So the Conference Ukama Mission Group reached out to the pastor of the Iveme Church, Rev. Menson Mpfungu, who not only had been here a few times, but because he also was employed as the Chaplain of Midlands State University, was considered to be less likely to want to stay past the time allotted in his visa. Rev. Mpfungu was granted a visa, which meant that in a delegation five people, two were members of our partner church. Once again, I felt divine providence seeking to enrich our church's partnership with the Iveme Church.

The Ivone Church is a new church start, an offshoot of the Gweru Church. When Lindy and I visited in 2015, the congregation was worshipping in a small room which someday will be the youth room. The future worship space had walls and window frames but no roof. Every once in a while, the congregation would get more bricks and add to the walls, but they could not afford to get the structure roofed. Last year, as a part of the celebration of the 40th anniversary of my ordination, I asked that gifts be directed to helping our sister church put a roof on its building. We raised over \$2000, enough to allow them to add the roof. Is it only a coincidence that both of our congregations have been engaged in building projects at the same time? I think not. I think it's another example of sharing not only the gospel but our whole selves. We have prayed for each other and supported each other as we have found our way through our very challenging building projects.

Throughout this relatively brief but remarkably blessed relationship, people in both congregations have deepened our care for each other. Over Facebook and WhatsApp, we have shared news of our churches, our families, and the challenges we're facing in our countries. We have, indeed, shared not only the gospel but our selves. We have encouraged each other, inspired each other, learned from each other, and become more and more dear to each other.

What I want us most to consider is how God has been guiding and prospering our Ukama. God apparently has a reason for this particular partnership to thrive and to bless and enrich the faith, the hope, and the love of all of us. What we know here at South Newbury is that it is our relationships with each other which gives energy and persistence to our life as a community of faith. Ukama adds to that: our relationships with our family in Zimbabwe yield valuable perspective on the challenges we face and invite us to seek the same enthusiasm that they have for being the church in these strange and urgent days.

Some of us here, as I'm sure is also true in the Ivone Church, have not directly experienced that deep affection and sharing I've been talking about. But our life together as a community of faith has been richly blessed by this partnership. In a world suffering from so many fractures, our Ukama demonstrates unity. In a world enticing us to focus on ourselves, our Ukama demonstrates the blessing of loving our neighbor. In a world where differences lead to distrust, our Ukama demonstrates how differences enrich. God knows the world needs what we have received through our Ukama. May it be that we realize the gift we have been given, that we care for it and nourish it, and that we use it to share the good news of God's love with all our neighbors.