4/10 John 21:15-19 *Doing Extraordinary Things with Ordinary Lives* Deb Winters

Last Sunday we started a new series which you will see on the insert is also the theme of the American, Becoming more like Christ. Specifically we are going to look at how when ordinary people open themselves up to the movement of the Holy Spirit in their lives, God uses them to do extraordinary things, things they may not have even dreamed they would do.

The scripture lesson today takes place after the resurrection. The disciples decided to go back to what they knew best, fishing, but they had fished all night and had not caught a thing. Come morning as they were heading to the shore they notice a figure on the beach who called out to them and knew they had not caught any fish yet. He told them to throw their nets over the side of the boat and they pulled them up full of fish! Peter immediately knew it was Jesus and couldn’t wait for the boat to get him there so he jumped in and swam to shore.

After breakfast Jesus in a way commissions Peter and some say reinstate him after he had denied Jesus three times before Jesus crucifixion for here Jesus commissions Peter three times telling him each time that if he loves him he is to go and feed my sheep.

The words, “feed my sheep” take on a symbolic meaning as there are many ways to feed sheep both physically and spiritually. Missionaries have come to realize that you need to feed people as well as teach them how to find food. Using the fishing metaphor, the popular phrase is we have to “teach a person how to fish,” meaning you need to educate people to learn how to provide food, shelter, clothing, and sustenance for themselves and their families. With an education people can also begin to learn more about God and the love of Jesus.

God does not always pick people we would think as we have examples over and over again in the Bible as Jesus chose fishermen and tax collectors and in today’s example, a car mechanic and metal fabricator. My husband Gary had reached the point in his life that his children were grown and out of the house and it was time for him to give back so he signed up for a short term mission trip.

His first missionary experience was in 1997 with American Ministries to the Deaf. He spent two weeks in January in Jamaica at the Jamaica Christian School for the Deaf. I kid him sometimes as I wouldn’t mind spending two weeks in January in Jamaica, and for Gary it was an awesome growth experience where he began to feel the call of God on his life to do more mission trips.

My husband has a dry sense of humor and one of the stories he likes to share was one of his first experiences in Jamaica:

Gary is a mechanic by trade so my job at Jamaica Christian School was to work on their vehicles.

I brought, from the States, a suit case full of car parts to install on the school’s vehicles.

I was anxious to get started on my work that first day ; I was all pumped up,

I opened my suit case on the ground and went scurrying off to look for some tools to work with, and along came a dog , - a male dog, - a male dog looking to mark his territory, and there was my suit case.

You know, this gives a whole new meaning to **receiving a warm welcome to Jamaica**.

In 1998 the Lutheran Church sent Gary to Liberia, West Africa that has had long standing ties with the US going back into the 1800’s. When Gary went in 1998 they were still in the midst of a bloody civil war where the rebels used the Scorched Earth Policy destroying the country as they went. Charles Taylor, one of the war lords was ruling when Gary went and he saw firsthand people without food, without clean water, without housing, without medical care—things were not good!

Yet even among this chaos Gary saw the great desire, craving is you will of the children to go to school, to sit behind the desk and learn something. Little did he realize God was planting seeds.

Gary hated that time in Liberia and swore never to go back so the next year he went to Puerto Rico (once again, another place I wouldn’t mind spending a few week in January at) and while there, as God would have it, he met a nurse whose husband “happened” to be Liberian who just happened to be the “Minister of Health” in Liberia who once he met Gary talked him into going back to Liberia.

So in the year 200 Gary found himself as one of the coordinators for the renovation of the Phebe School of Nursing. He spent two weeks working under Jerry and Doris Freeze who then left for the States leaving Gary in charge of 30-40 Liberians to finish the project and unbeknownst to Gary, just at the time tuitions were coming due for the second semester.

People started streaming to Gary, the only missionary around for miles, asking him to help them with their tuitions fees. Their pleas were so bad, Gary was having trouble getting his work done and would lie in bed at night and pray:

**“God, *why are you doing this to me? I have come here to do this renovation project and I can’t, I can’t concentrate on my work with all these people coming to me for help.***

***God, I pray for the wisdom and strength to deal with this.”***

And this I will read in Gary’s own words:

**I started thinking** about what was really happening ---

The simple fact is that, the majority of the parents can not afford to put their children in school. For most fathers, it’s all they can do just to feed the family.

The next thing that happens, they look to someone who maybe can help.

It is not a whole lot of money for 1 or 2 students, but when you have 40, 50 or more asking for help, it gets costly.

I thought, boy if only people back home could see this great need.

I am sure there would be lots of people who would be excited to help.

I discussed my thoughts with Martin Digler, one of my close Liberian friends,

and together we laid the groundwork for the Tuition Sponsorship Program or TSP.

The first year we gathered info and took pictures of 135 young people.

I brought that home with me and with help from my missionary friends, we found sponsors for every child.

I thought boy this is great. How can it get any better than this?

But God had different ideas.

The next year it grew, and the next year it grew, and it grew again, and again, and again.

This is where I enter the story, for in my life I have found God definitely has a sense of humor. I was a settled pastor and for a good portion of that time I had many church members try to “set me up” so to speak. To make a long story short, one of them worked when I met Gary and fell in love at age 50.

As I dated Gary I found out I had to learn two things about him. First, I had to learn a new language. One day as we were dating and I was fidgeting, Gary leaned over and kiddingly said, “stop ruachin.” I said stop what? And he said, “ruachin.” My first introduction to the language of Pennsylvania Dutch and all the new words and foods I now know.

This man also went over to Africa every year and before I married him I wanted to understand what he was feeling called to do there. We took the 18 hour trip to Liberia, West Africa and after we had landed, got a good night’s sleep and loaded our jeep for the three weeks ahead of us, we headed up country to Curran hospital, the site we were helping to rebuild that January.

On the way we stopped at Phebe hospital to drop supplies off and the word soon spread that Gary Winters was on the property. People started running from all over to greet him, including many school children who came running up to him calling, “PaPa, PaPa”, at which point I turned to Gary and said, “exactly what do you do over here?”

I have since learned it is a word of endearment and I am now called “MaDeb.” My favorite Liberian name for Gary is also a term of endearment, “Old Man” and one I’ll use from time to time, as in “Hey Old Man, how are you doing?” ☺

We going to show you a short video Gary took and put together to give you a taste of the work we do in Liberia, (Show *Tuition Sponsorship Program GPC* video).

What Gary first found out in the year 2000 was a whole year’s tuition based on the grade and school children are in cost as low as $35 up to $160 for the whole year. What started with 135 students had now grown to over 1400 students and in 2011 we became a 501c3 so all of the monies given are tax deductible by US standards.

We now have 25 helpers across the US, sponsors in 34 states, Australia, Canada and Puerto Rico and a team of about 15 Liberian who help us in country. To date we have raised over a million dollars for education in Liberia and have watched our graduates finish High school, receive scholarships to College and have gone on to help the country of Liberia rebuild itself as they have become teachers, nurses, civil engineers, architects, and business people, just to name a few.

Every time we do these presentations we ask for your help for God truly does work through ordinary people to do extraordinary things. First we ask you to pray for us, through wars and ebola this work continues and it is only by the power of prayer and God’s guidance it has touched as many lives as it has through our tuition sponsorship program, the three schools we have been able to build with the help of Grasslands Trust and our teacher training programs.

The second is we give you an opportunity to sponsor a child. At the end of the service today Gary will be at a table in echo hall with student profiles. They have information about the students such as their name, grade, school, hobbies, as well as the tuition cost for the entire year. We ask you to fill out the tear off sheet and send it back with the tuition for your child.

And this year we brought back some African dolls the cost of the dolls goes 100% to God’s Precious Children. Thank you for the opportunity to share our story (see if there is time for questions).

I look forward to hearing the stories still to be told as we continue this series, *Becoming more like Christ*, and your stories as you open your lives up to the movement and power of the Holy Spirit. God is in the daily business of using ordinary people like you and me to do extraordinary things! Amen