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Transforming Words Into Living Testimony

Blessings, grace and peace be with you. I am the Rev. Raúl Felipe Santiago-Rivera, director of Finance and professor of Church Administration at the Evangelical Seminary of Puerto Rico. Today I share the message titled “Transforming Words Into Living Testimony.” The message is based on Isaiah 55:12. I’ll read it from the English Standard Version: ***“For you shall go out in joy and be led forth in peace.”***

In my hometown of San Germán, Puerto Rico, lies the Convent of Santo Domingo de Porta Coeli, a building of Spanish architecture dating from the year 1530. Queen Isabel II of Spain commissioned the Porta Coeli Convent in favor of the order of Friars Priests, who were part of the colonization of Puerto Rico. This was after the Spanish invasion of 1493. As the city of San Germán is located within the Santa Marta Hills, the Porta Coeli was built on top of one of them. To get to the convent, it is necessary to climb some stairs, some extraordinarily striking and attractive stairs. Their design gives the visitor the impression that they are rising to the gates of heaven. That is where its name comes from, Porta Coeli or Heaven’s Gates.

For centuries, human beings have built pharaonic structures as centers of worship. Solomon’s Temple in ancient Jerusalem and its replica in São Paulo, Brazil, are perfect examples. In the United States, the Crystal Cathedral in California, the Mormon Temple in Salt Lake City in Utah, and Saint Patrick’s Cathedral and the Trinity Church in New York City are some of the most famous. We must not forget about the Egyptians, the Incas, the Mayans and the Aztecs’ pyramids that focus the gaze and the visitor’s attention on the construction toward the center of the building. Its presence and attraction are such that many of us on our travels take time to visit one or two churches, a cathedral or a building to worship God the Creator.

Indeed, churches, convents and cathedrals are places where our religious and faith experience is forged based on biblical knowledge and theological interpretation. Through sermons, homilies, Bible studies and conversations, we nourish our being, we know more about the gospel and we form our idea of ​​what it means to serve Jesus Christ. However, that preparation is incomplete if we stay in the shrines. To complete the experience of faith, we must go from the comfort of the temples to the street, the people and the needy.

The Covid pandemic forced the people of God to leave the temples’ comfort and conformity. Physical distancing forced us to find new ways to worship and new ways to share worship. It also removed us from our sanctuary-centered comfort to recognize that service to God is outside the temple. Yes, the service to God is in the street. The pandemic has forced religious leaders to seek innovative ways to shepherd the cyber and non-cyber flock because the service to God is on the road, in the countryside, in jail, in the hospital, with the hungry and with the marginalized.

Outside the protective walls of our cathedrals, our convents, our temples and our synagogues, we are called and sent to serve. As the prophet Isaiah tells us, we go out with joy and jubilation. Oh, YES! We go out with joy and jubilation to proclaim the redemptive word of Christ. We go out with joy and jubilation to turn the knowledge acquired within the safety and comfort of the faith community into action. Out there, we go out joyfully to share the grace of Christ with the people of God, physically hungry people who need peace and are thirsty for justice.

We don’t go out of obligation. Sharing the gospel of Jesus Christ is not a duty to please God or fall in his grace. On the contrary, our exit from the temple to the street is in gratitude to God. It is our pleasing offering in response to the blessings, mercy and grace poured into our lives through the atoning sacrifice of Christ on the cross. We respond to his love for us, such a sinner that I am, transforming our words, thoughts and knowledge into evident, visible, tangible and concrete actions. We offer our service, gifts and talents, becoming living witnesses, global witnesses of the redeeming power of the Triune God.

We are global witnesses to the healing power of Jesus Christ when intentionally and gratefully, not under compulsion, I repeat; we are global witnesses of the healing power of Christ when we willfully, deliberately and gratefully, not under compulsion or obligation, share the grace received by providing food sustainment to the hungry through the hunger program—not sharing our leftovers or a doggie bag from the restaurant. But intentionally and willingly sharing the grace we have received by purchasing food, seeds and tools so the people of God may eat today and tomorrow. It is not the same to give the hungry the leftovers from dinner than to have them join us at the table for dinner. That is how we become global witnesses.

We are global witnesses of God’s grace and mercy when our words and actions focus on rejecting and correcting injustice, when our words and actions are directed at eradicating poverty, and when our words and actions seek solutions through reconciliation for peace. Looking for reconciliation to the problems and issues and not at who is to blame for the problems is the living testimony of a global witness. We are global witnesses of God’s love when we become peacemakers.

The Book of Confessions, paragraph 9.46 of the 1967 Confession of Faith, reminds us that both injustice and poverty are intolerable violations of God’s Creation. Therefore, coming out of the comfort of our Sunday worship environment to serve the world calls for transforming the world by rejecting poverty and promoting and sustaining the self-development of people, boosting your self-determination and others’ self-determination.

By going out into the world with joy and happiness to share the redeeming and transforming grace of Christ, we become witnesses of the faith that we prophesy; we transform words into actions; and we show the world that the Creator we serve is inside and outside our temples, cathedrals and sanctuaries. We show that God walks with his walking people. We are taking the resources, gifts and talents that God has given us to do justice, spread peace, reject divisions and change the world one act of love at a time. It is there, outside the temple, that we do church.

When we complete our call to serve, we return home in peace. Recognizing that we have accomplished and fulfilled the purpose, we have prepared ourselves to serve the people of God. Joy, happiness and peace invade our lives knowing that we have fed the hungry; we have provided tools to the people for their self-development and determination; and we have been sources of justice and blessing for the oppressed.

We return to our sanctuaries to celebrate in adoration the work we have done. We return full of peace, satisfied to have shared love, grace and mercy with the people who walk, glorious to have shared the redemptive message of the cross. Each one of us, by helping each other in our missions, sharing resources, gifts and talents with those who walk, and with those who do the mission, transform our words into living testimony.

We see this living testimony through the mission carried out through the Peace & Global Witness Offering, an offering that is directly and intentionally dedicated to eradicating poverty, doing justice and reconciling the people’s peace.

Let’s get out of our comfort zone and share the grace we have received with God’s people. Let us turn our faith, prayers, words and resources into a living testimony of God’s love.

That when we go out into the world, our words betray us as they betrayed Peter that night. Recognizing ourselves as children and faithful servants of God, the Creator and Sustainer of life, may our words become actions demonstrating the living testimony of redemption, peace and justice to the world that we go out to serve.

To God are the glory and honor! Amen.