

Compassion
Sermon March 10, 2019

Dear beloved,

As you know, last week six people from our congregation, namely, Reverend Bob Duncanson, Nosoon Park, Dean Bulloch, Ilona Kot, Grant Scott, and I, made a “Friendship Visitation” trip to Cuba to meet the minister and the members of the congregation in Moron, whom we are supporting spiritually and financially.

A few years ago, one of our retired elders, Nosoon Park, contacted this new congregation from Moron and started to support them generously. As he reported back about his private mission, our congregation decided to support that newly created congregation. After we saw pictures of their needs, the Lord created a desire in our hearts to meet them in person and to see how our heavenly Father wants to use our congregation to help them.

I personally had a desire to visit with them for two reasons.

1.

As you know, I grew up as a Hungarian minority in Romania. Until 1989, Romania was a strong Communist country, where the Hungarian minorities and Christians were under huge pressure. The communist ideology wanted to destroy the churches and to kill the faith. If a few people gathered in the churches, the secret government spies were also there to see and listen and to report back. In Romania during communism, people barely had enough food and clothing. It was a real struggle to provide a meal for the family. Today, Cuba is a communist country, where the churches are under huge pressure and are over-controlled by the communist government. Cuba is an extremely poor country where people live in poverty.

2.

Secondly, in Romania, where I grew up, after the revolution in 1988, Christians from West Europe came to help the Christians spiritually and financially. In 1990, my congregation was often visited by a group of Christians from Holland, and we created a very strong partnership. They regularly visited us, driving 2,000 kilometers with huge transport trucks, to provide food and clothing, and to help our church buildings to be renewed. Their personal visits and supports made a huge change in people’s lives. Those who gave experienced what a blessing it is to give,

and those who received experienced God's care through others. People from Holland were God's extended hands for the people from Romania.

Today, people in Cuba live in poverty. Twenty-five years ago, the government decided to create many tourist centers along their coasts, which look like paradise, heaven on earth, but people outside of resorts are extremely poor.

I will show you now pictures, from both sides, providing you more details about our trip.

We had a very pleasant 3 hour flight from Toronto to Cayo Coco Cuba, which is a small island just 27 kilometers from the main island. The Cuban custom service was very smooth. A luxury bus was waiting for the tourists, taking us to our resort, called Memories Flamenco. We all paid for our stay from our own pockets. The prices were very reasonable. I made all the pre-arrangements for our group with a travel agent in Waterloo.

At all-inclusive Memories Flamenco resort, the rooms were large, nice and clean. The food was tasty. The temperature during the day was between 28 and 32 degrees, and the sky was constantly amazingly blue. After our snowy days, the sun lifted our spirits. On the ocean shore, the sand was crystal white and the ocean was so warm that Ilona was swimming in the ocean already at 6 a.m. Everything was so nice that I would go back any time for vacation.

On Thursday, Nosoon organized two cars, and from the resort, they took us to the city Moron, which is on the main island. Cayo Coco, where we stayed, is a small island which is connected to the main island with a 27-kilometer road. As we arrived at the main island, we were shocked to witness the differences between the resort and the real Cuban life. From 1902 until 1959, Cuba had a close relationship with the United States and economically was growing. However, in 1959, after the Cuban Revolution, a Communist dictator and his brother ruled the country. Today, Cuba is a disaster. Everything and everybody is controlled by the government. They allow citizens to buy just a very small lot for a building and, for this reason, the homes are extremely close to each other.

There are huge agriculture lands covered by grass and bushes because they do not have the right nor the machinery to work on those fields. Most streets are covered by dirt. The highways have huge holes and were not fixed for decades. On the streets, there are no lights during the night. In the stores, there is no food. In pharmacies, there are no medications. Once, in front of a store, we saw about 100

people gathering and waiting since they heard that the store got cooking oil. Only a few people have cars, purchased before 1958 from the United States. Lately though, they are allowed to purchase cars from Russia or China. People ride their bikes or, rarely, their motor bikes. Most cabs are tricycles. In their homes, they have space only for a table and a few beds. It was very significant, also, that when they are coming to the church to worship, they dress up in their nicest clothes because they are coming into the presence of God.

As some of you remember, more than a decade ago, our congregation helped the Roman Catholic Church in Moron to restore their church from inside and we provided the paint. We stopped to visit that church, and I took a picture of it.

On Thursday, our group had a nice visit with Reverend Eberto, his lovely wife, their son and daughter, another minister Sergej, who translated for us, and a few people from that congregation. The congregation was started four years ago in 2015, and every year blossoms like a flower, growing in numbers. As we know from Nosoon Park's previous reports, they started from scratch. The people's income in Cuba is \$20 CAN per month. A pair of running shoes costs \$40 CAN. People are so very poor that I cannot even describe, but they sacrificed very much to buy an old house and to start to build a house for God, where they can grow in faith. We saw how they were using the money we sent to them in the past.

The congregation has 200 members, and they have one toilet, which was installed based on our financial support. They also bought a sound system, painted the walls and purchased 20 pews. Above the church building, they built a place where parents can look after their children and still listen to the service. They built a prayer room behind the church where they gather for their group work.

We also witnessed how much help they might need shortly with their plans. Next to their church building, the members from their donations purchased another small lot, where they are planning to build a facility for children and youth work. Their congregation is growing quickly in numbers, and they need facilities for their mission. We learned that they are providing and supporting missionaries for Venezuela, Spain and some African countries as well.

Knowing that we would visit them on Sunday, they decorated the whole church. There were over 100 worshippers. The service started at 9:30 a.m. and finished shortly after 12:30 p.m. On that Sunday, the minister's wife led the service since Reverend Eberto was at the hospital with his grandfather who had urgent issues.

Although the minister's wife, Tanya, is dealing with breast cancer and is under a very severe chemo-therapy, her messages and prayers were very powerful.

I was asked to share with them God's message from Calvin Kitchener. We passed to them the financial support you sent to them. As you know two weeks ago from our treasurer Frank Thompson, we received \$1,350 CAN. After we saw their huge poverty, some of us donated some more money, and we passed to their congregation \$1,600 CAN on behalf of our congregation. Then we passed to them the goods you brought to the church as a donation. Most of the participants were in tears, moved by the love and support our congregation provided for them. After the service, the whole congregation jumped on us, showering us with hugs and kisses. I did not receive as many hugs and kisses even at my wedding.

Many thanks for all of you who supported the congregation in Moron financially or with your donations or in your prayers. Our Lord is telling us that we are responsible for supporting our brothers and sisters who have much less than we have. We have to discover again and again how blessed we are here in Canada and how much needs are around the world. God gives to us so we should help others in Jesus Christ's name.

In the Bible, God often speaks of the poor and needy. He commands us to give generously to them and to speak up on their behalf.

To help you connect with God's heart for the poor, I prepared a list of Bible verses that speak to how God asks us to relate to and serve people around us.

Do not withhold good from those to whom it is due when it is in your power to act. Do not say to your neighbour, "Come back tomorrow, and I will give it to you"—when you already have it with you. Proverbs 3:27-28

A generous person will prosper; whoever refreshes others will be refreshed. Proverbs 11:25

It is a sin to despise one's neighbour, but blessed is the one who is kind to the needy. Proverbs 14:21

Whoever is kind to the poor lends to the Lord, and he will reward them for what they have done. Proverbs 19:17

The generous will themselves be blessed, for they share their food with the poor. Proverbs 22:9

Those who give to the poor will lack nothing, but those who close their eyes to them receive many curses. Proverbs 28:27

If you do away with the yoke of oppression, with the pointing finger and malicious talk, and if you spend yourselves in behalf of the hungry and satisfy the needs of the oppressed, then your light will rise in the darkness, and your night will become like the noonday. The Lord will guide you always; he will satisfy your needs in a sun-scorched land and will strengthen your frame. You will be like a well-watered garden, like a spring whose waters never fail. Isaiah 58:6-11

Share with the Lord's people who are in need. Practice hospitality. Romans 12:11-13

If anyone has material possessions and sees a brother or sister in need but has no pity on them, how can the love of God be in that person? Dear children, let us not love with words or speech but with actions and in truth. 1 John 3:17

Give generously to the poor and do so without a grudging heart, then because of this the Lord your God will bless you in all your work and in everything you put your hand to. There will always be poor people in the land. Therefore I command you to be openhanded toward your fellow Israelites who are poor and needy in your land. Deuteronomy 15:10-11

May the Lord help us to see how much He gives us day by day and may He help us to see how to help others in His name. After we die, everything that we have today will stay here and will not help us in heaven, but everything we give away with a joyful heart, will be counted amongst our treasures in heaven. May we learn that only those things will be mine that I give away in Jesus' name to help others.

Amen