People I’ve Met on the ‘Jericho’ Road

Address to the 57th General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church of Taiwan,

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Moderator, General Secretary, delegates, staff, honored guests: Words cannot express the honor, or the sense of unworthiness I feel at being invited to address you in this 57th Annual General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in Taiwan. This is the first Presbyterian General Assembly I have ever attended anywhere. Maybe that is as it should be, because to be in the midst of old friends in is this annual meeting on the beautiful island of Taiwan is a moment I will always cherish.

I know you did not invite me here to preach, but inviting a preacher to “speak” is to run the risk of a little preaching. If I were to be preaching a sermon, I would take my text from Luke 10:25-31 that includes Jesus’ story of “the good Samaritan,” a story many of us have known from childhood. Jesus tells how a certain person was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho and fell into the hands of robbers, who stripped him, beat him, and went away leaving him half dead. Two religious leaders see him lying beside the road, but pass by on the other side. A hated Samaritan comes along and helps him, then sees that he is cared for by a local innkeeper, promising to pay any additional expenses the man’s care might entail.

Jesus begins the story with an image that would have made his audience shudder. “A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho…” The road down from Jerusalem to Jericho on the Jordan River, less than a day’s walk, was known to be robber-infested and dangerous. It was a road you didn’t travel if you didn’t have to. Sure enough, this man “fell into robbers and beaten.”

There are many places in the world like the “Jericho Road” of Jesus’ time. They are those places and conditions in life that are dangerous and to be avoided if possible. For me, Taiwan was itself a “Jericho Road.” I accepted an appointment by the Methodist Board of Missions to come to Taiwan in 1965 with great reservations. I wondered if I was betraying my calling by walking away from the Civil Rights Movement in the U.S.

But it was not only about what I was leaving behind; it was where I was going. Taiwan seemed like a “Jericho Road,” fraught with danger. In 1964 when I began to learn about the brutality and corruption of the Chiang Kai-shek government, I told my mission board that Taiwan should be eliminated from the list of possible appointments. But guess where my former wife Judith and I were sent? I was loaned to the Presbyterians to teach Church History at Taiwan Theological College in Taipei and at Tainan Theological College. And I did that for four years.

# People of Conscience and Courage on the Road

I would like to tell you about some people of conscience and courage I met on this “Jericho Road.” Through meeting Dr. Peng Ming-min I learned what a dangerous road it was and decided to do some other things that were not in the usual job description of a missionary. When Don Wilson, the Associate General Secretary of the Church, feared that he would not be allowed back after furlough in the summer of 1966, he introduced Judith and me to Dr. Peng. A close friendship soon developed. Once a week late at night for four years he slipped away from his “keepers” and we spent time together. I began to learn from him, and others to whom he introduced me that the Nationalist Government was as corrupt and brutal as it had been on the Mainland twenty years earlier.

Our first project with Dr. Peng was to provide credible information to foreign visitors who wanted to know more about the situation in Taiwan. The “credible information” consisted of articles from scholarly journals and original articles written by friends in Taiwan, and sometimes through secret meetings with Dr. Peng. Judith and I didn’t believe it appropriate for us to try to influence the Taiwanese people about realities in their country, but we believed it our civic duty to inform other U.S. citizens. With a small network of other trusted foreigners, we provided this information to visitors for four years. Possessing and distributing such articles under martial law was a capital offense.

 **Why Didn’t We Leave?**

I have a friend, Ora Custer, ninety-five years of age and still counting. She’s almost blind; at her request I read *Fireproof Moth: A Missionary in Taiwan's White Terror* to her. Her question, asked several times, was this: “When you knew what kind of a situation you were in there and the danger to you and your family, why didn’t you leave?” In some ways, the book is my answer to that question. My short answer is this: **“For me, when you have made close friends and you learn that their lives are in imminent danger, it is easier to do whatever you can to help them than it is to walk away.”**

### Three Samaritans on the Road

Along with Dr. Peng, there were two other close friends and colleagues: Wei T’ing-chao and Hsieh Tsung-min. We didn’t meet them right away because they were both still in prison when we met Dr. Peng in 1966. These two former graduate students of Dr. Peng at the National University had been arrested with him in 1964 in an attempt to distribute their “Manifesto for Formosan Self-Salvation” calling into question the legitimacy of the Chiang government. Looking back, many say that this was the real beginning point of Taiwan’s struggle for democratization.

Although we couldn’t meet Hsieh and Wei in person for two years, they were a part of our lives and what we had begun to do with Dr. Peng. Thanks to their courage and creativity, they were able to send out from prison lists on very thin fragments of paper names of political prisoners, descriptions of their situations and sometimes information about their families. We were able to provide the lists to Amnesty International, assuming that even a little public visibility was some protection. Their notes from prison also let us know the desperate plight of the families of political prisoners, and got our aid to families project started.

Wei was released from prison first on September 20, 1968. He hadn’t been out a week when Dr. Peng brought him to our house at Taiwan Seminary. The stories about his refusal to be intimidated by the court or his guards were well-known. During his trial, he stood up and dared the judge to sentence him to death.  I wasn’t sure what to expect when he came in the door. Was he hardened and cynical from his experience?

Wei greeted Judith and me. Then, he saw our two and a half year old Elizabeth hiding behind a chair. Before we knew it, Wei was sitting on the floor talking with a delighted Elizabeth in both Mandarin and Taiwanese (and as far as I knew maybe a bit of his native Hakka too). Within weeks, Wei was tutoring me in preparing my history lectures at the seminary. Although not a Christian, I think Wei would have been proud of the respect shown to his culture with the new Hakka translation of the Bible celebrated today. Dr. Peng, Mr. Wei, and we continued plans for aiding families of political prisoners.

Hsieh Tsung-min was released from prison exactly a year later in 1969. Like Wei, he came to the house within a week of his release. Wei had already talked with him about the plan to aid families. He said he was ready to begin distribution of the funds immediately. I couldn’t believe it! Here he was, just out of prison and yet ready to assume the dangerous (and under martial law a capital offense) task of delivering money we smuggled into the country (money raised secretly by the American Friends Service Committee in Philadelphia) to families all over the island. He and Wei both laughed at the danger; and rightly pointed out that they were the only ones with the credibility and knowledge to get money to these families.

The distribution began within the next week. In order to avoid using their real names in talking together at home or anywhere else, we gave them English names as we had to Dr. Peng, who was and continues to be known to me as “Peter.” Wei was called “Matthew” and Hsieh was called “Tony.”

Working with them was consistent with what we had decided two years earlier when we determined to do what we could with Dr. Peng. Because Judith and I were foreigners we assumed that we could do things for which the worst that could happen was to get kicked out of the country, while Taiwanese doing the same things risked prison, torture, and even death. Because Hsieh and Wei took a great risk with working with novices like us, we decided we would only work with Taiwanese who knew what the real costs were and had been in prison. There would be times in the coming days when we would have reason to wonder if our assumption about being “fireproof moths” and subject only to deportation was a false assumption, but we were right. We were also tragically right about what would happen to Taiwanese associated with us.

When we learned there was good reason to believe that Dr. Peng was going to be assassinated, we found a way to get him out of the country. On January 3, 1970, he left Sung-shan Airport on a JAL flight to Hong Kong dressed as a hippie musician with a burned arm.

In February of 1972 President Nixon and National Security Advisor Henry Kissinger met with Chinese Premier Chou En-lai. Although transcripts of their meeting show that they wanted to know, none of them knew that Judith and I, with Dr. Peng, two other missionary couples, a missionary in Hong Kong, an American Quaker friend in Japan, and two Japanese, arranged for his escape to Sweden. None of us had experience with escapes. But determination and luck trumped naiveté and even Chiang Kai-shek’s Stalinist style security system. Chou, Nixon, and Chiang all went to their graves without knowing of our roles in Peng’s escape. Our involvement was not revealed until the mid-90s; and how we did it wasn’t revealed until 2003.

Neither Wei nor Hsieh knew about the escape. We decided that though they would be prime suspects, we could not add to their vulnerability by their actual involvement. It was not a matter that we didn’t trust them; it was an acknowledgement that we were such rank amateurs at such things we didn’t want to put them more at risk than they already were.

A year later on February 23, 1971, a week before Judith and I were arrested, Wei and Hsieh were taken into custody. We had been right about what would happen to Taiwanese associated with us. It was over thirteen months after their arrest that they were tried secretly and sentenced to fifteen years in prison, terms later commuted by half. Both were tortured horribly. We know details of the interrogation and torture because Hsieh was able to smuggle out a letter that got to me in the U.S. On April 24, 1972 I was able to get the letter published as an op-ed piece in the *New York Times*.

After their release from prison the second time, Hsieh went into exile and lived in southern California for a while. Wei was rearrested for his involvement with the *Formosa Magazine*in the Kaohsiung Incident on December 10th, 1979 and was sentenced to another eight years.

With the end of martial law in 1987, Hsieh and Wei continued to provide great service to the people of Taiwan. Although forever scarred by his torture, as a Congressman and advisor to the President, Hsieh has worked tirelessly both to document the casualties of “White Terror” and work for reparations to political prisoners. Wei did likewise. In 1997 he published the *Taiwan Human Rights Report 1949-1996*. After spending most of his adult life as a political prisoner, on December 28, 1999 on his morning jog, Wei’s great heart stopped beating.

### Two Other Samaritans on the Road: Kao Chun-ming and Ruth

While I know that there were many other Samaritans on Taiwan’s “Jericho Road” I have mentioned only three, but these were the ones I knew best. There are two others I first knew only by reputation. He was elected General Secretary of this Church in 1970. In December of 1979, General Secretary Kao Chun-ming was asked to help some Taiwanese pastors hide a human rights advocate being hunted by the police. Kao did not hesitate. Being under watch 24 hours a day by the secret police himself, General Secretary Kao couldn’t bring Shih Ming-teh into his own home, but he arranged a place for him to hide. Kao and the pastors were later arrested. Kao’s arrest and imprisonment was such an embarrassment to the Nationalist government that he was released in August of 1984. So highly regarded was he by Presbyterians in Taiwan that despite his being in prison you continued to elect him General Secretary.

While he was in prison, Secretary Kao’s wife Ruth visited the U.S. raising awareness about human rights in Taiwan. Presbyterian friends in the old PCUS Mission office in Atlanta arranged for me to have a meeting with her. I was amazed at her courage and confidence. She told me that Kao was an embarrassment to the government because he kept converting his guards to Christianity. Is it really true that was the main reason he was released from prison early? She gave me a copy of a poem he wrote in prison on June 27, 1982. I’m sure most everyone here knows the poem:

**“I asked the Lord for fresh flowers;**

**but instead God gave me an ugly cactus with thorns;**

**I asked the Lord for a beautiful butterfly;**

**but instead God gave me many ugly and dreadful worms;**

**I was threatened, I was disappointed, I mourned.**

**But after many days, suddenly**

**I saw the cactus bloom with many beautiful flowers;**

**Those worms became beautiful butterflies;**

**flying in the Spring wind.**

**God’s way is the best way.”**

Secretary Kao and Ruth both knew what it meant to be “good Samaritans” on the “Jericho Road.”

### Not Those Who “Say” But Those Who “Do”

Peng Ming-min, Hsieh Tsung-min, Wei T’ing-chao, although not ostensibly religious, and Secretary Kao, Ruth, and many others I have not named, demonstrated with their lives the justice and mercy I associate with the highest Christian ideals. They were living examples of the core Christian teaching in Jesus’ story of the Good Samaritan.

 Judith and I were told, “You are guests in another country,” as the reason for not getting involved in the political affairs of a country not our own. The principle has some merit in international relations, but it is a principle that serves the status quo. As desirable as that may be in the world of international relations, the principle may also be an immoral rationalization.  In Taiwan, a brutal and corrupt government was enabled to stay in power due in no small measure to the support it received from the United States. I love my country and I loved the work the church sent me to Taiwan to do, but my conscience didn’t allow the luxury of being politically uninvolved. By doing nothing, I believed I was putting my stamp of approval on what the U.S. government was doing here. As an act of faith, I chose otherwise.

I don’t know if Dr. Peng, Wei, or Hsieh ever thought much about the story of the Good Samaritan, but certainly the Kaos would have known it well. But they all would have understood the tragedy of the priest and the Levite passing the wounded man beside the road. They had all doubtless lamented those Christians and non-Christians alike who had been content to ignore the plight of their neighbors suffering under the brutality of the Chiang government. But they would also have understood the story from several months ago when a [group of bystanders in Logan, Utah](http://www.mainlinemedianews.com/articles/2011/09/14/main_line_suburban_life/news/doc4e6f5feeac6c5894474598.txt), at great personal risk, lifted a burning car off of a man trapped underneath, thereby saving his life. The people present didn’t just watch a tragedy unfold, they did something about it. The people I met on the road here in Taiwan, and many others like them whose names I do not know, have spent their lives trying to help others at great personal risk.

The Book of Hebrews (12:1) reminds us that in the company of these heroes we are literally surrounded by a “great a cloud of witnesses.” If you read the list of those in Hebrews (chapter 11) and look at those who have sacrificed so much in the struggle for human rights and democratization in Taiwan, you will see that relatively few wear the label “Christian.” According to Jesus, it is not those who say “Lord! Lord!” that matters most; it is “those who actually do the will of God.” (Matthew 7:21)

The road ahead in Taiwan is not easy. People had high hope for the elections, and many worked so hard to bring about a change, but the established interests, money, and of course the China threat factor played a role in a vote for the continuation of the current government.  Society is still being plagued by the robbers who want to deprive the people of Taiwan of their freedom and democracy. More good Samaritans are needed to stand up for what is right, and help bring about a caring, free and open society that can steer Taiwan in the right direction.

I believe it is not the role of the United States and other nations to decide the future of Taiwan, but I believe it is their role to insist that the future be decided by the people here, not in Beijing, Washington, or Ottawa. I pledge to you my determination to work with others who care about Taiwan and with them resist any efforts by our governments to further compromise your freedom to determine your future.

To you and me, as to those who heard the story of the Samaritan on the road to Jericho, Jesus says, “Go and do likewise!” We are surrounded by a cloud of witnesses who have done just that; so let us lay aside every weight that distracts us and run the race that is set before us! So that one day all the people of Taiwan will, in the words of that old Negro spiritual, be able to shout, “Free at last! Free at last! Thank God Almighty, we are free at last.”

Thank you!

-  Milo Thornberry