

Father's Day - "On a Mission"

2 Corinthians 5:17-21

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Good morning and Happy Father's Day!

Given that my name is not common, in a forum like this, I start with the pronunciation of my name. However, since we are all family, I thought – I would give my whole Woodside family a chance to practice my name so that if we meet at Home Depot or Giant, we can interact.

Repeat after me: Gbenga Oladeji. Very good! You are so much better than the baristas at Starbucks. They've messed up my name so many times I just tell them latte for Ben! Actually, Gbenga is the shortened version of my name. My full name is "Oluwagbenga" which I shortened to "Gbenga".

My family and I have been attending Woodside for 5 years. I am a U.S. Citizen but Nigerian by birth. I came to the US for graduate studies 22 years ago, via Boston. We moved to Bucks County in 2002. We treasure our Woodside Family and we are blessed to be part of the community.

On this Father's Day, I think of my 71-year-old father who lives in Nigeria. What would my father want me to share today? I knew right away that he would want the message to be about Christ – in particular about The Mission – as Christian ambassadors that we have been called to fulfill as disciples of Christ.

I am the first of two kids born into a Baptist family in Nigeria. My Father was a diplomat so we spent a good amount of time living in other countries in diplomatic missions. In fact, by the time, I was 16 years I had spent equal time living outside Nigeria as I did in it.

A diplomatic mission is another name for a Foreign Embassy. The designated head of the embassy is the ambassador who is appointed by the government to promote two-way relationships in the country where the mission or embassy is located. To fully appreciate the functioning of an Embassy – as an American if you misplace your passport in France – you will call the U.S. embassy in France. My father was not the ambassador in any of these countries – but he was part of the Nigerian diplomatic mission.

As the child of a diplomat living outside Nigeria, experiencing different cultures, norms and religious practices, I recall that our parents were very intentional impressing on us that we were Christians and Nigerians.

Beyond the typical parental guidance of work hard, play fair and dream big. Our parents also raised us to appreciate our Nigerian heritage and as Christians, to understand the importance of acting justly and walking humbly in Christ.

“He has showed you, O man, what is good, And what does the Lord require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God” Micah 6:8

The prophet Micah asked the Children of Israel this question at a time when there was worship of foreign Gods, corruption and dishonesty in the land of Israel. As you can imagine, his heart was troubled for the Children of Israel. In parallel, our parents recognized that while living in different countries, different cultures, and different religious practices it was pertinent for them to maintain our identity as Christians and Nigerian heritage. And our parents were very intentional in helping us appreciate both of these dimensions.

On the Christian aspect – We often lived in nations where being a Christian wasn’t important or Christians were a minority or even persecuted. And from my parents’ perspective; if we weren’t taught, how would we know that “the response of a godly heart is manifested outwardly by pursuing justice, cultivated inwardly by loving mercy, and yielding to His commands by walking humbly”?

You can also appreciate that as a father I want my family to abide by the qualities of Micah 6:8. Seeking those qualities attracted us to Woodside Church.

Our parents were very intentional on building our faith in Christ with the backdrop of us living in countries where church attendance maybe low, or sharing the Good News of Christ may be banned or restricted. Our parents took comfort that the law of that country didn’t extend into our house. At home our parents carved out time for fellowship. We would read our daily devotional, read the bible, sing hymns and pray.

As I look back, it is amusing that My father would have felt at home with the length of a Woodside service duration (45 mins to an hour). My mom on the other hand, she is just warming up after an hour of praise and worship. Since this is Father’s Day I will abide by my father’s preference.

As for our Nigerian Identity, our parents were petrified that given the time we spent outside our country we would forget our own native language – YORUBA – and be in their mind “less Nigerian”. Don’t get me wrong, they encouraged our learning of French, German, Lingala, Swahili.

Because they subscribed to that quote which is attributed to Nelson Mandela “If you talk to a man in a language he understands, that goes to his head. If you talk to him in his language, that goes to his heart”

So if we were intentionally learning foreign languages, it was even more important for us learn Yoruba – so that our kinsmen will feel the bond and say “They still esteem our culture by speaking Yoruba”. To help maintain proficiency in Yoruba, our parents spoke our local language with us at home. This was done through basic interactions in Yoruba – greetings and expressions for food preferences. At home we greeted each other in Yoruba –and were encouraged to express menu choices in Yoruba!

I see many parallels between my early life and the lives we are all called to live as Christians today. Truth be told, just as my parents felt a strong need to be intentional about our Christian and Nigerian identities, we as Christians should also be intentional about who we are in Christ and why we are Christians.

Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is – his good, pleasing and perfect will. Romans 12:2

Conform – be similar in form or type, agree

Transform - make a thorough or dramatic change in the form, appearance, or character of

The only way we don't conform to this world is to be deliberate and intentional about immersing ourselves in the Word of God and building our spiritual faith muscle. I am grateful for the resources that I can lean on here at Woodside - my growth group, the Overcoming Prejudice Together group (social upheaval), and other resources here at Woodside to help me and my family along the way. As disciples of Christ, we should be careful that the information, we get from the world does not change our Christian orientation. After spending years living in different countries, my parents imparted to us that our location should not determine our identity or faith.

As disciples of Christ, we are tasked with the ministry of reconciliation of the world to God through Christ Jesus. Paul urged the Christians in Corinthians to be Ambassadors. We are all Ambassadors of Christ. Now, in my mind the choice of the word Ambassador is instructive.

- One, an official ambassador represents the interests of their home country. As spiritual Ambassadors - God is calling each of us to be an envoy to act as a representative of Christ in our communities. God is making His appeal to the world through us, His ambassadors – we are His representatives. And the message is that of reconciliation to GOD through Christ.
- Second, you can't be an ambassador in your own country. Just as the U.S. government can't send an American Ambassador to California or Texas, we too have a higher calling. We are always ambassadors among people who are different than us. Not a cause for fear but an opportunity to build a bridge of love between them and Christ.

While growing up, my father frequently reminded us that our diplomatic responsibilities start immediately when we set foot in a foreign country. I can draw the same parallel, as we are all called to be Christian ambassadors in our daily activities. While driving on I-95 when someone cuts in front of me and I don't feel charitable, I should remember my calling as an ambassador, as well as in other areas such as the tennis court, the grocery store, the gym, and on the train to work. I can also be an ambassador by praying for my neighbor, inviting them to attend worship, a Growth Group, or a mission project and by helping to feed the poor and be attentive to the needs of the community.

As ambassadors for Christ, we must depend on our SAVIOR king especially in difficult times. My father taught me this in a way I can never forget.

Remember how I said my name is Oluwagbenga. My father shared with me why he chose this name. He went to college at an older age and was a senior in college when I was born. My mom worked at that time in a department store, so she was the primary source of family income.

With little money in the bank, lots of responsibilities and a baby on the way – it would be easy to fall into despair. Yet the thought of being a father filled my dad with awe. So when I was born he named me “Oluwagbenga” which means “The Lord has lifted me higher.” Even though the challenges before him appeared as high as mountains, he firmly believed God would lift him higher. After that revelation from my dad, my name was no longer a weight on my shoulder. It became the hope that propels me to this day.

Later in life, when I got the news that our daughter had Sickle Cell – I leaned on the faith of my father. We gave our daughter the name Temitope which means “Mine is worthy of praise”. Even with Sickle Cell – God is indeed worthy of praise. (Children are the heritage of the Lord)

As disciples of Christ, will you join me on this mission and accept the call to be an ambassador. If you do – He will lift you higher. Happy Father’s Day.