



“Mission Statements”

Text: Luke 4:14-21

a sermon by the Rev. Kevin Scott Fleming

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FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH - EVANSVILLE, INDIANA

One of the corporate tools that is always in vogue is the mission statement. A mission statement is used by a company to explain, in simple and concise terms, its purpose for being. The statement is generally short, either a single sentence or a short paragraph.¹

Once, when at a McDonald’s drive-thru – back in the days when I did that – I noticed on a wall opposite the window a copy of the McDonald’s drive-thru mission statement. All kinds of companies and organizations have them.

- Life is Good: To spread the power of optimism.
- Patagonia: We’re in business to save our home planet.
- Tesla: To accelerate the world’s transition to sustainable energy.
- Schnuck’s: To nourish peoples’ lives.
- IKEA: to drive people crazy in person and at home.

A mission statement is something of a compass for a company, organization, or individual. It provides direction for what should be done and for what is outside the bounds of one’s mission.

And the key is brevity. One leader of a conference I attended suggested that a mission statement should be so brief that if you were walking down a dark alley and someone put a gun to your head and demanded your mission statement, you could recite it quickly and save your life. I don’t know that it’s all that critical, but you get the point. A mission statement tells who you are and why you are here.

Matthew, Mark, and Luke all tell the story on which we are focused today. Luke alone places the story at the beginning of Jesus’ ministry, following his baptism and temptation. Dr. Fred Craddock offers this explanation:

Luke places the Nazareth visit first because it is first, not chronologically but programmatically. That is to say that this event announces who Jesus is, of what his ministry consists, what his church will be and do, and what will be the response to both Jesus and the church.²

And, of course, Nazareth is Jesus' hometown. Much has been made of "no prophet is accepted in the prophet's hometown." Let's allow that portion of the story to wait until next week.

Luke tells us that "Jesus, filled with the power of the Spirit, returned to Galilee, and a report about him spread through all the surrounding country. He began to teach in their synagogues and was praised by everyone."³ Galilee is a region in northern Israel. Nazareth is a city in the Galilee. Jesus is beginning his ministry in a place he knows among people he knows.

When he is in Nazareth, "he went to the synagogue on the sabbath day, as was his custom."⁴ That's an important detail. Jesus was an observant Jew. He attended synagogue - Schule. He celebrated the holidays as they were in his day. He read Torah and Haftarah, something of an oddity in that most common people in his day were illiterate.

And on the shabbat in Nazareth, Luke tells us that the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. Someone before Jesus had most likely read a portion from the Torah - Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, or Deuteronomy. Jesus is reading from the Haftarah - a complimentary passage taken from the Prophets.

It is in this passage that we read Jesus' mission statement. This is the statement of what Jesus will be all about. It says:

"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor.

He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."⁵

Here is who Jesus is and what he is all about.

Robert Parham, the late founder and executive editor of EthicsDaily.com and executive director of its parent organization, the Baptist Center for Ethics, writes:

Jesus said the gospel was for the poor and oppressed, speaking to those at the margins of society. Jesus was announcing that he came to liberate from real oppressive structures the marginalized - the impoverished, the war captives, the poor in health, the political prisoners. Jesus came to turn the economic structures upside down, instituting the year of Jubilee when crushing debts were forgiven and slaves were freed.⁶

The people of the Galilee - and those who called Nazareth home - were the marginalized people. They suffered the occupation of the Roman Empire. They were the poor, the hungry, the hard-working and poorly paid laborers. They were the discarded and little-noticed people of their day.

It was to them – and to all those like them – that Jesus felt called. Jesus came to change their lot in life. Jesus came to lift up the lowly and the beaten down. Jesus came to heal the broken and make well all those who were crushed by the heavy burdens of life.

Earlier in Luke’s gospel, before Jesus is even born, Mary his mother sings a song known as “The Magnificat.” I wonder if she ever sang that song to Jesus? It seems as if he learned the message of the song, if not the words themselves:

He has shown strength with his arm;
he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.
He has brought down the powerful from their thrones,
and lifted up the lowly;
he has filled the hungry with good things,
and sent the rich away empty.⁷

Mary sang of what God would do in this miraculous infant. With the benefit of hindsight, we can see just how much Jesus fulfilled these words.

The discomfort, of course, in hearing these words is that we are not among the poor, the marginalized, the oppressed or the imprisoned of our day. Jesus’ and Mary’s words threaten us – because we benefit from the economic system just as it is. We are the powerful – perhaps not on thrones – but powerful in our privilege. We stand ready to be cast down and sent away empty.

Perhaps we need to have a reawakening to those all around us for whom life is more burden than blessing. We need to hear the stories of those who struggle to make ends meet. We need to hear the stories of those who suffer in sub-standard housing. We need to hear the stories of those who cannot afford electric or natural gas to light and heat their homes. We need to hear the stories of those who struggle to care for children and hold down a job.

Jesus’ message was about bringing healing and justice. It is more than interesting that in Jesus’ sermon, all mention of Isaiah 61:2b is missing. Here is the passage in its entirety:

The spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me,
because the LORD has anointed me;
he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed,
to bind up the brokenhearted,
to proclaim liberty to the captives,
and release to the prisoners;
to proclaim the year of the LORD’s favor,
and the day of vengeance of our God...⁸

Jesus does not speak of vengeance or retribution. Jesus’ focus was on healing and justice, restoration and righteousness.

This is Jesus’ mission statement. This is who Jesus is and why he is here. This is Jesus’ purpose – his reason for being.

So, the question should be asked: what is the purpose of the Church that Jesus established? Why are we here? It's a good question to ask any time, but an essential question for a congregation celebrating its bicentennial. Why are we here? What are we called to do? What does God want from us? What is our purpose?

We will be answering those kinds of questions with greater specificity as we move further into our self-study and planning process, but what should our answer be? The Book of Order, part of our Constitution in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) tells us:

The great ends of the Church are:

- the proclamation of the gospel for the salvation of humankind;
- the shelter, nurture, and spiritual fellowship of the children of God;
- the maintenance of divine worship;
- the preservation of the truth;
- the promotion of social righteousness;
- and the exhibition of the Kingdom of Heaven to the world.⁹

We'll explore what that means in some depth, but is that what we are about?

And, as we finish, let me drop it down there next to you. What is your mission statement? Why are you here and what is God calling you to do? What gifts and graces has God placed in you to accomplish that which is pleasing to God's eyes and blesses the world around you with God's presence? How is God calling you to reveal God to the world?

Just as God called Jesus of Nazareth in his baptism, so God calls us in our baptism to do that which God needs done. What is that for you?

The late Steven Covey, educator, author, businessman, and keynote speaker, put it this way:

"A mission statement is not something you write overnight, but fundamentally, your mission statement becomes your constitution, the solid expression of your vision and values. It becomes the criterion by which you measure everything else in your life."¹⁰

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and release to the prisoners;
to proclaim the year of the LORD's favor...

That's sounds like a good place for us to end – and to begin.

For now and evermore. Amen.

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- 1) <https://www.investopedia.com/terms/m/missionstatement.asp>
 - 2) Fred Craddock, *Luke*, Louisville, KY; John Knox Press, 1990, p. 61
 - 3) Luke 4:14-15
 - 4) Luke 4:16b
 - 5) Luke 4:18-19
 - 6) Robert Parham, *The Agenda: 8 Lessons from Luke 4 Student Guide* Nashville: Baptist Center for Ethics, 2007 - www.ethicsdaily.com 3,4
 - 7) Luke 1:51-53
 - 8) Isaiah 61:1-2
 - 9) Book of Order, F-1.0304
 - 10) <https://www.awakenthegreatnesswithin.com/23-quotes-to-inspire-you-to-pursue-a-mission/>



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