

**CHURCH AND CULTURE:
#2 JESUS' MISSION AND OURS**

Luke 4: 14-21

In honor Christ let us rise in body or spirit for the reading of the gospel.

Fresh from his forty-day sojourn into the wilderness and filled with the power of the Spirit, Luke tells us that Jesus returns to Galilee and that word about him spreads. He begins to teach in the synagogues and was praised by everyone. Then coming to his hometown of Nazareth, Jesus stands and reads from the scroll of Isaiah. From his lips flow some of the most powerful words in all of scripture. Let us hear these words afresh as if we were worshiping at the synagogue that day.

When Jesus came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up,
he went to the synagogue on the Sabbath day, as was his custom.
He stood up to read, and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him.
He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written:

“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 to sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free,
to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.”

And Jesus rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down.

The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him.

Then he began to say to them,

“Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.”

Last Sunday I recounted just how challenging it is to be the church given our cultural reality. Most North Americans don't belong to a church nor are they looking for a church and that's especially true here in Sonoma County. We could bemoan all the varied and complex reasons as to why that's true or try to find someone or something to blame but that could and would easily immobilize us and keep us from living out Jesus' mission. That's what I want to reflect on this morning, Jesus' mission, because Jesus' mission is our mission. It is what the church is to do and to be no matter how challenging our cultural reality, no matter how fast our culture and world are changing.

In a synagogue in rural Nazareth, Jesus is handed the scroll of the prophet Isaiah. He unfurls the scroll, looking for a very specific section of Isaiah, chapter 61, verses 1 & 2 to be exact. He reads this portion of Hebrew Scripture and declares that this is the mission given to him by God. Anointed by God's Spirit Jesus is to be an agent of mercy. His life work is to be about bringing good news to the poor, proclaiming release to the captives, opening blinded eyes, letting the oppressed go free, and proclaiming God's favor, new beginnings for all who have failed. It is a ministry of grace and healing, reconciliation and forgiveness, compassion and acceptance, and more. In summary, it is a ministry of love. It's about blessing the world that God loves so well with good news. This is what Jesus came to do. This was his purpose, his mission, his agenda for ministry. And this is what we as followers of Jesus measure our lives and our church against.

Are you familiar with the term "plumb line"? It's a cord used in construction work from which a metal weight is suspended, pointing directly to the earth's center of gravity and used to determine the vertical line from a given point. In one of my readings on today's text, the commentator (Carol Lakey Hess) invites the church to consider Isaiah's words and thus Jesus' mission as a kind of "plumb line" for us the church. As way to measure our lives and our church, we need to keep coming back to this text, to Jesus' mission statement. "Are we 'plumb', are we in line with Jesus and his mission? Is it the center of gravity for our life and ministry? Is it the central shaping force in our life of faith?"

There's a tendency on the part of the church and it's been influenced by our material and success oriented culture to measure the vitality of a church by numbers: the number of people in worship, the number of families with kids, the amount of dollars in the morning offering, the size of the budget, the number of children in Sunday School, the number of programs offered for the members of the church, and so on. If we are in line with Jesus and his mission, the measure of our vitality is not about numbers, it is about mission, the many and varied ways we manifest God's grace and can bring good news to the

world. Tom Harvey, a Presbyterian missionary in Singapore put it this way in a sermon preached in Charlotte, NC:

“Mission catches you up in the life and vitality of God, for it is God who relentlessly draws men and women to himself in love and compassion. Moreover, when we step away from mission, there is a corresponding depletion of the life and vitality in the church.”

(Preached at Myers Park Presbyterian Church, and quoted by Dr. Ernie Thompson in *First Presbyterian News*, First Presbyterian Church of Wilmington, NC, vol. 12, issue 22, p.1)

From my perspective Knox is an alive and vital church not only because there is a wonderful spirit and wonderful people here. We are alive and vital because we are committed to embracing Christ’s mission as our own. We may fall short individually and as a congregation at times but I believe overall we are committed to blessing one another, our neighbors, and our world with God’s grace. This commitment has been embodied in a variety of ways over the years, currently it is evident in our commitment to feed our hungry neighbors and to build on that commitment through the launch of a community garden and now this year through our Peace Frog support of Meals on Wheels.

It is evident in our prayerful support of Charlotte and the English Improvement Program as well as the Multicultural Preschool that serves low-income families. It is evident in our concern for justice and equal rights for those who are excluded and discriminated against by church and society. It is evident in the relationships we are just beginning to build in support of youth through VOICES. It’s evident in the many Knox folks who serve in the Cursillo community as way to help people catch on fire with the good news of God’s grace. It is evident in Knox’s nature to rise to the occasion when a Knox sister or brother is need of good news or when our neighbors are in need of attention and compassion – like the efforts we undertook to help the gulf coast in the wake of Hurricane Katrina and now undertake to help our neighbors in Haiti. It is also evident by our involvement with the North Bay Sponsoring Committee, joining with other faith communities to build a better community and to increase the impact of our various ministry efforts. Take for example, the new relationship that we are building with Resurrection Parish.

As you know Resurrection has formed a team that now staffs our weekly food pantry on the first Thursday of the month. And they are beginning to consider taking on another Thursday. This isn't primarily about providing us some relief from this work. By partnering together it's about increasing our impact. Instead of providing enough food for 2-3 meals for the week depending on the size of the family, together we can provide enough food for twice as many meals. This is good news for our neighbors. It means that they will not be forced as often to make the desperate choice between buying gas in order to go to work or feeding their children, the choice of buying needed medicine for a sick child or feeding their whole family, the choice of paying their home's electric bill or sitting down to table for a nutritious meal.

Yes, from my perspective Knox is an alive and vital church not only because of it's wonderful spirit and people, but because we seek to embrace Christ's mission as our own. So why are we gathering as a community in conversation this coming Tuesday evening?

Well, as the first step in a strategic planning process, it will provide an opportunity to acknowledge our church reality along side our cultural reality in what's called a situational audit. It will also provide opportunity for conversation about what we consider our strengths and weaknesses as a church, and the opportunities and threats that face our life and ministry given our culture. Then over the course of the next few months, we will build on this conversation with additional conversations and experiences with the hope of adopting 2-3 short terms goals and perhaps a couple of long-term goals. These will not be quick-fix kind of goals. My assumption is that these goals may involve risk and change and will be directed toward strengthening, enhancing, perhaps even altering or tweaking our worship and community life not simply for our own sake nor for our own survival, but in faithfulness to Christ's mission.

It's amazing what can happen to a church that is grounded in Christ's mission. Amazing things have happened in Knox and amazing things will continue to happen. Inspired by God's Spirit present and at work in the worship and community life we share, I trust that the overarching goal of whatever strategic plan we develop is to keep moving forward and looking outward, to keep celebrating God's love as well as taking God's love outside these walls to a world in need of good news. As many of us have discovered - embracing Christ's mission, serving and blessing others, is what really renews our life and our church.

Of course, none of this will happen unless we ourselves have had a true encounter with God in Jesus; unless we ourselves have been awakened to God's presence and grace in our lives. When Jesus borrowing from Isaiah says, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor", he is speaking to us. Whatever our poverty - economic, emotional, mental, physical, social, spiritual - Jesus wants to bring good news to you, to me, to each of our lives. Being a part of a worshiping and serving community is way to affirm and embrace that good news as often as each and every Lord's Day. This good news is not meant for us alone, that's why anointed with God's Spirit we are called to bear good news to the world, and that's what we must not forget.

"There is a story about lighthouse that was built on a cliff above a treacherous stretch of coastline. Many ships, crashing upon the rocks, had met a tragic end and many lives had been lost at sea. So it was decided form a lighthouse society whose purpose was to tend the light in order to warn sailors of the pending danger and thus save lives. After a while, however, those who were members of the society became distracted, with other tasks. Some formed a social club so that others could enjoy one another's company. Others were involved in fund-raising to help finance these social gatherings. And so it went, until one day someone forgot to check the fire in the lighthouse and the light went out. Because of the darkness on the coastline that night, several ships were lost at sea. The original purpose of the lighthouse had been displaced."

(Recounted in *A Field Guide for the Missional Congregation*, Rick Rouse and Craig Van Gelder, p.46)

Friends, Jesus is our good news and he speaks anew to us today reminding of to continue to embrace his mission as our own. May we do so with grateful hearts – all in praise of our gracious and glorious God. Amen.