

Overarching Pre-Understandings

Part 1 of: *Jesus' Mission & Ministry - and Ours*

Luke 4:14-21 1 Corinthians 12:12-31a
College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa

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On the occasion of our Annual Congregational Meeting today, I want to take this opportunity to talk about something not particularly controversial, at least not on the surface: Mission Statements. Whether for a business, non-profit organization, civic group or church, **a Mission Statement is important. Or at least it can be.** It can help identify and define who an organization is, their purpose and function, their reason for existence, and what it is they hope to accomplish. This is especially true as it pertains to providing guidance and making decisions about future priorities and direction.

You may be familiar with the mission statement used by the company you work for, or at some other organization with which you are involved. Here are a few local examples. **Tulsa Public Schools:** *We will provide quality learning experiences for every student, every day, without exception.* As it turns out, they got that statement from **Kendall-Whittier Elementary School**, located just a couple of blocks from here, who in theirs included "no excuses." **Kendall Whittier Incorporated**, whose primary work now involves running the local food pantry, educational Grow Garden, and Tipton Community Garden: *is a home-grown organization incorporating self-sufficiency for our neighbors through food security, nutritional health, and well-being.* One more. **Kendall Whittier Main Street:** *works to promote and restore Kendall Whittier as a thriving, walkable and welcoming community for living and working.* I like all of these.

Let's look, now, at how mission statements can apply to the church. Concerning the role of the church in the 21st century, the currently developing understanding is that **the primary function of a congregation should be missionally-focused, moving away from the "institutional maintenance" model.** What this means is as a congregation we should focus more on being a mission outpost in our community and neighborhood, than focus on mere survival and just taking care of our own, as important as that is. Institutional maintenance (which is characterized by an inward focus as opposed to an outward focus) is an approach to church life that far too many mainline denomination congregations find themselves in today.

While most churches have a mission statement, chances are it is rarely emphasized or even known by any of their members. Or, it's so broad and vague that it doesn't really do much good in identifying the particulars of that congregation. That's why every year during our Annual Session Retreat, the Ruling Elders and I take a good close look our College Hill Mission Statement to see how accurate, useful, and effective it has been and can be during the coming year. We choose to believe our Mission Statement is of much value. Therefore, we make sure it is printed in our worship bulletin each week, in our monthly eNewsletter, church website and Facebook page, and elsewhere. I put it on cover of this morning's bulletin. Let's take a look at it now.

The MISSION of College Hill Presbyterian Church is to:
Build an INCLUSIVE community of faith
Receive and openly share the LOVE OF GOD
Reach out with a compassionate voice for PEACE & JUSTICE

Action verbs are always an important clue to an organization's function. Ours include: *build, receive, share, reach out*. Each of these has a strong biblical base. Our Mission Statement includes 3 points of specific emphasis, which do indeed help define our identity of who we are and what we hope to be as a congregation. They also help focus and give direction to our ministry efforts – those things to which we believe God is calling us to be and do as a community of faith in this specific place and time.

I bring all this up today for a couple of reasons. First, it's crucial that we remind ourselves of our calling as a congregation. Also, today's assigned lectionary Gospel Reading includes Luke's declaration of what I think can best be understood as **Jesus' mission statement**.

Luke states in chapter 4 that after Jesus is baptized and then spends 40 days being tempted in the wilderness, he returned to the region of Galilee and began to teach in their synagogues. It was during a visit to his hometown synagogue in Nazareth that Luke tells us that Jesus stood up and read from the Hebrew scroll of Isaiah. The passage that he chose to read was from Isaiah 61:

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.

Jesus then sits down and proclaims, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing" (4:21). **With this brief story, Luke establishes his understanding of the basis for Jesus' entire ministry**. Using a term I learned in seminary about how each one of us bring our own personal worldview and theological perspective to bear upon the scriptures, I am now convinced that **the author of each of the four gospels brought his own "overarching pre-understanding" of Jesus' mission and ministry to bear upon what and how he wrote his gospel account**. That's what I tried to convey last month during the season of Advent by exploring the unique and clearly different perspective that each of the four gospel writers revealed in their introduction of Jesus' arrival – his advent.

Luke's overarching pre-understanding of what he believes to be the core of the gospel message is defined in this passage of Jesus quoting the prophet Isaiah. He then uses this to inform every part of his story. To understand Luke's Jesus, therefore, we must interpret his account in light of his perspective. So let's briefly look at that. We learn that Luke's overarching pre-understanding, and therefore the paramount drive of Jesus' mission and ministry, was for the liberation of the impoverished and oppressed. Concerning the implications of this, biblical commentator Carol Lakey Hess makes the following important observation.

Whatever we take to be the heart of the gospel will be the central shaping force in our life of faith; the author of Luke instructs readers to place this text as the central concern of Jesus' teaching. In today's passage we learn what Jesus came to do; insofar as we measure our lives against this, we are following Jesus' ministry. The implication of this text is that if we are going to study, interpret, and follow Luke's gospel [as we will through much of this year], we should keep *coming back* to this text to measure our work.

In a nutshell, **Luke's Jesus underscores salvation and good news in terms of acts of both divine and human compassion, mercy, empowerment and social justice.** Perhaps this is why the Gospel of Luke is the favorite of the four gospels for many progressive social justice types.

Here's the correlation to us. **This congregation, much like Luke, generally tends to have a similar overarching pre-understanding of Jesus' mission and ministry – and therefore, ours. That is why our Mission Statement centers around ministries of inclusion, compassion and social justice.** We believe the liberating work of the Spirit, working in and through this congregation, to be the core guiding principle for our mission and ministry. We, like Luke, believe that the Spirit of God called Jesus – and therefore us to:

- be an agent of mercy to the downtrodden in this world
- to bring good news to the poor,
- release to those that feel life is holding them captive
- sight to those who cannot see through the darkness
- freedom for those who are oppressed by cultural norms or life's circumstances
- the possibility of a new beginning for all who have stumbled or failed.

Lest we forget, this applies to you and I, as well. A legitimate question arises: How do we measure ourselves, and the life and ministry of this congregation, through that overarching pre-understanding of our mission? Perhaps it's valid, then, to **compare and contrast Luke's understanding of Jesus' mission and ministry to our own congregation's Mission Statement, budget priorities, commitments, activities and volunteer opportunities.** Keep this in mind as we review of Annual Report in a few moments after worship.

This is where we will pick up next week. We will continue Luke's story to look at the initial *response* to Jesus' mission statement. Spoiler alert: it isn't good. And we will look at the response to our own mission statement. Until then, I encourage you to reflect upon the following:

- What can you and I do each and every day, and what can we do together, to **build an inclusive community of faith?**
- What can you and I do each and every day, and what can we do together, to **receive and openly share the love of God?**
- What can you and I do each and every day, and what can we do together, to **reach out with a compassionate voice for peace and justice?**

And for those of you who want extra credit, think about what you would include in a mission statement for *your* life.

Amen.