

We're On a Mission

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

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Let me begin by stating how much I appreciate the invitation to speak today from this pulpit for my State of the Congregation address. [In reference to the President's postponed State of the Union Address] Now you know why I don't start sermons with a joke! Let's move on.

On the occasion of our Annual Congregational Meeting after worship today, I want to take this opportunity to talk about something a bit less controversial than the state of our democracy at the moment. And while this may not sound too exciting, I want to address the importance of an organization's Mission Statement. Whether for a business, non-profit organization, civic group or church, a Mission Statement can be a critical tool in providing necessary vision. Or at least it should be.

A good mission statement helps 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 where you work, or used to work, 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 nearby **Kendall-Whittier Elementary School**, who in theirs include "no excuses." **Kendall Whittier Incorporated (KWI)**, whose primary work involves running the local food pantry, to which we contribute on the first Sunday of each month, along with the educational Grow Garden near the elementary school, and Tipton Community Garden. By the way, their Executive Director is church member, and now City Councilor, Lori Decter Wright. KWI's mission statement 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.* We have indeed seen much improvement over the past few years. I like all of these. They are very effective.

Let's look, now, at how mission statements can apply to the church. Concerning the role of the church in the 21st century, the current 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 community of faith we should focus more on being a mission outpost in our community and beyond, than focusing 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. And yes, even with our strong guiding principle of social justice, College Hill – with its building and staff – is still engrained in this model.

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 our Session regularly takes a good close look at our College Hill Mission Statement to see how accurate, useful, current, and effective it has been and can be during the coming year. We believe our Mission Statement is of great value. Therefore, we make sure it is printed in our worship bulletin each week, in our monthly Newsletter, 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

Using this as our guide, our Annual Session Retreat one year ago developed a three-year strategy of primary goals for our congregation. You will see them printed in the 2018 Annual Report during the meeting after this service. Action verbs in a mission statement 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 three points of specific emphasis, which do indeed help define our identity of who we are, and what we hope to do and 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 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 returns 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 God has anointed me
to bring good news to the poor.
God 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, which according to Luke is Jesus' first sermon, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing" (4:21). Talk about courageous and to the point. With this brief story, **Luke establishes his understanding of the basis for Jesus' entire ministry.** Luke's overarching understanding of what he believes to be the core of the gospel message is defined in this passage of Jesus quoting the prophet Isaiah. Luke then uses this to inform every part of his unfolding 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 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 [and it wasn't, in this gospel, to die on the cross!]; 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 folks.

Here's the correlation to us. **This congregation, much like Luke, generally tends to have a similar overarching understanding of Jesus' mission and ministry. That is why our Mission Statement centers around ministries of inclusion, community, love, compassion, and social justice** – not about getting into heaven.

We believe the liberating work of the Holy 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.

It is 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 all this in mind as we review our Annual Report which outlines our ministry efforts over the past year. I encourage all of us, then, 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 **peace and justice?**

And for those of you who want extra credit, and I know some of you do, think about what you would include in a **mission statement for your life**. And in my opinion, while there is much work to do, including transformational work, the state of the congregation is very good indeed.

Amen.