

Mission Statements: They Matter

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

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A couple of weeks ago, on Baptism of the Lord Sunday, we looked at how our own baptism provides us with an *identity*, as a beloved child of God, and a *mission*, to further the ways of God by putting the teachings of Jesus into action. Last week, when we Ordained & Installed the incoming Ruling Elders Class of 2024 onto the session, the sermon focused on the spiritual gifts given to each and every one of us by God to use together for the common good of the community of faith and beyond.

Recognizing and using God-given gifts is the responsibility of any congregation. And as we heard in the Epistle reading from 1 Corinthians 12, Paul's analogy of the one Body of Christ, yet with many different members, we learn that using our gifts is the responsibility of each and every member of the congregation working together. Yet, how those gifts for ministry are more specifically directed has a lot to do with a congregation'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 adopted that statement from our nearby **Kendall-Whittier Elementary School**, who in their statement add, "no excuses." **Kendall Whittier Incorporated (KWI)**, which this congregation helped form with others in the neighborhood over 50 years ago, has the primary mission which involves running the local food pantry, to which we contribute, along with the educational Grow Garden across the street from the elementary school, and Tipton Community Garden. By the way, their Executive Director is church member, and City Councilor extraordinaire, 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 from our church neighborhood. **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 in this neighborhood over the past many years. I like all of these mission statements and find them to be 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 *only* 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 somewhat entrenched 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 revealing the particular identity 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, relevant, 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 insert 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. Let's read it together

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 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 in this time and place.

I bring all this up today for a couple of reasons. First, it's crucial that we remind ourselves of our calling as a community of faith at the very beginning of this new year. 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 begins to teach in their synagogues, and is well-received. 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.*

But guess what. **Jesus chooses to not finish the rest of that sentence in Isaiah 61**. Steve Garnaas-Holms has a provocative take on this that I'd like to share with you for your consideration. It's entitled, "**Choose**".

Watch how Jesus does scripture:
 the passage in Isaiah actually says,
 "to proclaim the year of God's favor,
 and the day of vengeance of our God."
 But Jesus stops with favor,
 leaves out vengeance, and sits down.
 Call it cherry-picking.
 Scripture is replete with images
 of God as vengeful and God as forgiving.
 But vengeance is not forgiveness.
 God isn't sort of this and sometimes that.
 You have to choose. You don't get both.
 Jesus chooses.
 (He quotes Hosea: "I desire mercy, not sacrifices.")
 No matter what your sacred books say
 you have to choose:
 the way of vengeance, power and domination,
 or the way of courage, love and nonviolence.
 Though he has reason not to,
 Jesus chooses the side of love.
 And when he asks you, and you falter, don't worry.
 He'll still choose the way of love.

And I would add, as does God! This reminds us to always **ask of ourselves what it is we believe about the nature and character of God. Who is the God you choose to worship and serve?** I'll leave you to wrestle with that for yourself.

So, 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. Were all my sermons that 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 understanding, and therefore the paramount drive of Jesus' mission and ministry, was for the liberation of the impoverished and oppressed, the downtrodden and those in need. 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 understanding of 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 a 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, hospitality, love, compassion, and social justice.** From an identity standpoint, therefore, note how different that is than those churches whose primary mission is to get people into heaven and avoid eternal damnation. Instead, **we believe the Holy Spirit's work of liberation, working in and through this congregation, to be the core guiding principle for our mission and ministry.** 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.

I encourage all of us, then, to reflect upon the following:

- What can you and I do, as individuals and together, to **build an inclusive community of faith?**
- What can you and I do, as individuals and together, to **receive and openly share the love of God?**
- What can you and I do, as individuals and together, to **reach out with a compassion voice for 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.** Then, use it to guide your heart, mind, spirit, and actions. And together as a community of faith, let us live out our own mission.

Amen.