

“A Mission Statement”
Luke 4:14-21 – January 24, 2016

INTRO: Jesus is in Nazareth, his hometown, and is preaching in the synagogue. It’s a reminder to us that what he says and does comes out of his Jewish traditions. He was a faithful Jew who attended Sabbath worship regularly and participated as all men were permitted to do, by reading Scripture and commenting on it. “He probably read the Scriptures in Hebrew and then interpreted them in Aramaic, as would have been customary. And because he found the place in Isaiah where he quoted from these verses, it probably means that he chose this passage for himself.” (R. Alan Culpepper) He specifically used these verses to describe his own ministry.

We may be a part of a company or organization, whose mission statement we know by heart. Or if we don’t have it memorized, we know where to find it posted. It’s said that a mission statement is a cross between a slogan and an executive summary, which should be able to tell the company story and ideals in less than thirty seconds. (BPlans.com)

I did some investigating this week, to find the mission statements of a few companies or businesses. Some of them are easy to find on the internet, others not so much. As a disclaimer, I’m not advertising for any of these companies—there’s nothing in this for me. Here are some well-known names: Arby’s: To provide an exceptional dining experience that satisfies our guest’s grown-up tastes by being a “Cut-Above” in everything we do. Culver’s: Every guest who chooses Culver’s leaves happy. Starbucks: To inspire and nurture the human spirit—one person, one cup and one neighborhood at a time. Microsoft: Empower every person and every organization on the planet to achieve more. And my favorite, Epic (healthcare software systems company in Verona): Do Good, Have Fun, Make a Fair Profit.

Our lives are a whole lot more than just professional mission statements. Some years back, a popular film, Jerry Maguire portrayed a sports agent who was willing to do just about anything he could to get the best possible contract for his clients and also a nice commission for himself. “The title character is wrestling with a number of issues that make him question who he has become. In the opening scenes Maguire goes so far as to say he hates himself—and then corrects that to say he hates his place in the world.” (Katharine Hansen)

He has second thoughts about what he’s doing with his life why he’s doing it. “So he writes what he calls a mission statement, ‘a suggestion for the future of our company.’ Among the values he talks about in that statement are the ‘simple pleasures,’ ‘protecting clients in health and injury,’ ‘caring,’ and being ‘the me I always wanted to be.’ As the film progresses and the mission statement turns out to not be well received by his company, we realize that what Maguire has written is a personal mission statement for his own life rather than for his company.” (Katharine Hansen)

A mission statement lets people know who we are, what we are about, and what we stand for. Maybe Jesus understood this passage from Isaiah as his own personal mission statement, which gave voice to the reason for his life—it tells us what he came here to do. I believe he came to understand that this mission needed to be agreed upon by the people who became his followers. His mission statement reads: “The Spirit of God is upon me, who has anointed me to bring good news to those who are poor, who has sent me to proclaim release to those who are captive and recovery of sight to those who are blind, to let those who are oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of God’s favor.”

Some suggest that this part of the beginning of this Gospel is “a clue to all that will follow in the Gospel.” (Marion Soards)

What had been promised or longed for by people down through the centuries, now was to be a reality through the mission of Christ. Peace and justice were going to be central to the focus of his work. Those who had been disregarded or downtrodden were given new hope when he announced that he stood for releasing people and healing them from whatever kept them imprisoned. His agenda included physical healing, changing the social structures of the day regarding oppressed people, and redistributing wealth. Those who had long been poor looked forward to this, while those who would lose some of their power and wealth didn’t much like it.

In the novel *Diary of a Country Priest*, the author says that there’s a text of scripture which is the autobiography of each one of us. Our life’s task is to discover that text and live it. For Jesus, that text was Isaiah 61.

One of the first verses I ever memorized, I think has become that text for me. It's Matthew 5:14-15, "You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hid. Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bushel, but on a stand, and it gives light to all in the house." We are each to be a light, not hidden, but giving light to others. What text might you identify as yours—the one that helps define your life's agenda? Whatever strategy found in those words, is that what is revealed in your living? What do you believe because of that text, and how could your story and God's larger story connect better?

The world's leaders, whether they are leaders of corporations or leaders of countries, may each have "a different sense of power and how it is to be used. Most generally, the person in power doesn't reveal openly their strategies for employing power, they just act." (*The Kennedy Imprisonment: A Meditation on Power*)

In contrast, Jesus openly revealed himself, took upon him the role that God has assigned to him, told people what he believed that to be, and went about living his life. These were not just empty promises, or hidden agendas.

As his followers, I believe that at some level, his agenda is our agenda, his mission statement, our mission statement. Being about people's liberation and release and caring for the poor—that's the working agenda he's left us. And it may not necessarily be the popular, safe thing to be known for, but it's consistent with Jesus's priorities.

Lawrence Wood, a UM pastor in Michigan says: "The church I serve, like the synagogue in Nazareth, is proud of Jesus. (But) it is more comfortable proclaiming him than (proclaiming) his dangerous message. And that message in Nazareth could just as well be preached today. It's not hard in this day and age to think what 'release to the captives' might mean. (Think immigrants and refugees.) It's not too hard to think what 'sight to the blind' might mean. (Think an education system that is equal for all.) Or 'to let the oppressed go free.' (Think of increasingly large prison populations.) This radical message, first proclaimed by Isaiah in the Assyrian empire, then by Jesus in the Roman empire, has a particular resonance for the American empire. Not just in the capital cities, but also in a small town in Galilee and a (suburb on the west side of Milwaukee.)" (*The Christian Century*, 1/9/07)

His message honestly calls us to move beyond what's comfortable. There's a church that moved to the wilderness of Queens NY, in 1922—First Presbyterian Church of Astoria. When it moved there, it was on the cutting edge of community development. By the 1950's, the church had 1200 members and was thriving. And ten years ago it had dwindled to less than 50 members. They were operating in the red and their buildings were decaying. Instead of giving up on their ministry in that place, they decided on something pretty radical. They agreed to tear down the elegant old buildings and replace them with more than 90 units of affordable housing for senior citizens. They ended up with a sanctuary room in the new building, for Sunday services, spaces for a variety of arts groups, and an endowment that can be used to expand their spiritual mission. The community is now vibrant, diverse, and steadily growing. They are reinventing themselves, to better serve the community and to serve the least well-off in the community. (*Christian Science Monitor*, 12/12/06) Their building doesn't look like the church structure they've always known. They've downsized, but their mission in that neighborhood has become more strongly defined.

Churches have to challenge ourselves to pay attention to our mission, and be open to making changes when they can enhance our ministry. Occasionally that happens in churches, and occasionally it happens in businesses whose mission statement is their focus. When I was in seminary, the Palmer House Hotel in Chicago became my downtown stop for a clean restroom. I knew that the restrooms were located right behind the check-in counter, and I would just quietly walk there, thinking they might not be able to tell whether I was a guest or not. I did this for the three years I was in grad school. And one Fourth of July I will never forget, once again using their restroom. A friend and I had gone to Grant Park for the music & fireworks. Mitch Miller was there, along with literally a half million other people. We'd purchased food and drinks, and watched the fireworks and it was time to go home. The crowd simply took over Michigan Ave. and all the streets surrounding the park—cars couldn't move because people were walking. And once we got to the subway stop, people were singing the songs we'd just sung with Mitch Miller—it was an amazing experience—singing underground. But before we headed for the train, my friend asked about a restroom, and I told her I knew of just a place that nobody else knew about. We headed for the Palmer House. As we walked towards the hotel check-in counter, what did I see, but a whole line of

women with their lawn chairs and coolers, waiting to use the restroom only I knew about! And I thought, this isn't going to work, there's no way the management will let us use these facilities. Clearly we weren't paying guests. But they didn't tell us to leave.

The Palmer House is a Hilton Hotel. Their current mission statement is: "To be the preeminent global hospitality company." On that Fourth of July, I'd say they did that very well. Their mission statement was consistent with our experience.

If we ever forget our own church mission statement, which is on the front of our worship bulletin each week: Gathering as Friends, Growing in Faith, Sharing God's Love, we could look up these verses Jesus read in his hometown synagogue. That would be plenty good enough, as a definition for his life's work, and ours.

--Sue Burwell