

Mission Statement
Caldwell Memorial Presbyterian Church
January 24, 2010
Rev. John M. Cleghorn

Scripture: Luke 4:14-21

“To boldly go where no man has gone before”

“We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal”

“Beat Coke.”

(Musical example – Ode to Joy.)

What you’ve just heard are all examples of mission statements of sorts. The first was from the fictional television show Star Trek. The next from the preamble to the United States Constitution. The third – “Beat Coke” – has been cited as Pepsi’s unofficial mission. And the last, Beethoven’s Ode to Joy, is said have been the great composer’s most important self-expression of purpose.

They may not have all carried the exact label of “Mission Statement.” Nonetheless, each does what mission statements are supposed to do – state a reason for being.

I am sure many of us have been in seemingly endless meetings aimed at writing mission statements. If you have, you know how they can go. Stakeholders parse verbs and adjectives. Phrases get heaped on top of one another. And soon you’ve got something more like “War and Peace.”

Mission statements aren’t limited to companies and institutions. Many individuals and even some families have them. Google the term “mission statement” and you can find on-line mission statement generators to help. Call me old fashioned, but if you need a computer to help you find the words to express your mission, maybe you’re not clear what your mission really is.

One of the best mission-statement exercises I’ve ever been a part of produced the statement that guides the resurrected Caldwell church. Dozens of you turned out three years ago to express what this church should be in the 21st century in response to God’s grace. It was, for so many, an unexpected chance to seek to be the body of Christ in a new place, at a new time. With your input, Jeff Sinn drafted – and Tovi Martin

edited - the final language. If it can be said that in Christ God has handed us a compass for navigating the Christian life, the Caldwell mission statement points to true north for us as a particular people of God.

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God also gave us scripture, which informs and shapes us, as the story of how God has adopted and loved people across the eons, and how people have sought to do God's will in response. Indeed, scripture is where Christ turned for guidance and for self-expression.

Commenting on Luke, chapter 4, verses 14-21, one author goes a step further. He says this passage is a messianic mission statement that Jesus claims as his own, to the stunned surprise of his hometown friends and relatives.

Luke places this story early in Jesus ministry. The spirit of God has descended on Jesus and he has been tempted in the wilderness. Jesus is building a reputation as a teacher and has come home to Nazareth. As is the custom still in synagogues, worshippers read from the Torah and the prophets. Jesus reads from the prophet Isaiah, which centuries before his birth had proclaimed the coming of a messiah, to usher in a new age.

We can only imagine what his friends and family might have thought when Jesus unrolled the scroll precisely to these verses, whose subject would have been unmistakable to any Hebrew of the time.

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because he has appointed me
to bring the 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.

And with that, Jesus sat down.

"That was nice," some might have thought. "He has such a nice voice and he spoke so clearly. He is such a nice young man. I know Mary must be so proud."

But others may have wondered more deeply.

“Well, that was a bold choice,” they might have muttered. “What’s he thinking – that HE is the messiah?”

Jesus didn’t leave them in suspense for more than a moment. From his seat, he said the words that must have caused jaws to drop.

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

With that, Jesus announced his purpose for living. At the age of about 30, this carpenter’s son, a local boy claims and proclaims a mission statement to change the world.

And he would do it one life at a time: Bringing good news to the poor and sight to those who cannot otherwise find their way; freeing those held down and out and, perhaps most outrageous of all; bringing forgiveness on a scale that the world could not imagine then and cannot imagine still, forgiveness that surpassed all earthly logic and even the most generous human heart.

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It’s ok for us to admit it if we hear these words not that differently than the people in the synagogue in Nazareth that day. They proclaim a world that so often seems out of reach, detached from reality.

Even with the exceptions of those who survived being buried for days, the scenes from the Haiti might cause us to ask whether the poor there can find any good news in their tragedy.

With our jails full of a generation of African-American men and immigrants dispatched to detention centers, we are reminded that oppression is still with us.

As we confessed earlier in this service, many still run from the problems of our lives, hiding in too much alcohol, food, drugs or other addictions. As those who are blind, perhaps spiritually rather than physically, so many need to have their sight restored but they will not turn to the great physician.

Then, when if we can somehow believe, truly believe, that Jesus Christ is the messiah who brought good news, who freed the oppressed and who restored sight to the blind, it may still be too much to understand that last part, that we are forgiven. But that is what Jesus meant when he proclaimed the year of the Lord’s favor. With God, in Christ, we

experience the never-ending year of Jubilee, when our debts are forgiven, our sins put behind us.

It took courage for Jesus to roll open that Isaiah scroll, read those words and then to say that he was the fulfillment of the hope of a nation and a people. It takes courage for us to believe those words, to affirm Christ's claim. We shouldn't forget that only a few verses later, Jesus' own neighbors turned on him and ran him out of town.

It's mighty easy for us to want to avoid that chapter for our own lives. All around us, people are saying they find adequate spirituality not in church, not as part of the body of Christ, but in the woods while camping, or by staying home and reading the newspaper or by hitting the gym and working up a good sweat.

To say that that is not enough is to risk our reputation. To say, as God said to Christ, that God has a larger claim on our lives, our time and our resources is to invite ridicule. To give our hard-earned money for God's use, even to give sacrificially, is an irrational act in the eyes of the secular world. To think that lives might actually be changed by what we do here and beyond our campus is an awfully large presumption, some will say. Others would say it's preposterous.

In the Nazareth synagogue that day, people surely said of Jesus: "Just who the heck does he think he is?" And by following Jesus, people are sure to ask of us: "Just who do they think they are?"

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In these tumultuous times, so many of us have lost jobs and even careers, while so many others live in fear of that same loss. In these confusing times, young men and women may struggle even more than past generations to find their purpose, their direction and to write their personal mission statements.

You may not have a crystal clear picture of the world. You may be at a turning point in your life, wondering where God is calling you next. You may be experiencing loss or grief. Or, you may be in the wilderness, facing some major questions about how God works in the world and what, if anything, that means for you. If not now, I'd wager to say that most of us have known what it is to face those questions, questions that, one way or another, shape and inform our life's mission statement.

None of you has said as much to me, at least not yet, but I am sure that at times I've stood here and made it all sound easier or clearer than it is. It's easy for us preachers to

wax eloquent about God's grace and the hope it give us. To dwell on our certainty, instead of our doubts, even when we have doubting days of our own. So I'll try not to do that today.

What we can claim together, I hope, is that being together as the church, taking up this journey, hand in hand, side by side, is, at the very least, worthwhile. And, I hope that you understand that by seeking to respond to God, to do God's work, even if it seems small and inconsequential, or even when we have questions about God's will, we are, nonetheless, pleasing God.

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In my first two annual cycles as a pastor, I've been surprised by how busy Januarys are. You'd think that there would be a break after Advent and Christmas and before Lent and Easter. But that is when other parts of church life get going anew. It's when the church gets busy trying to act on the promise of Christmas and the hope of Easter.

Next week, for example, we ordain and install new officers, who have already gotten a taste of how busy a church Caldwell really is. Sorry, rookies. You can't back out now.

A little later on today, we will consider another important expression of life in the church, the annual budget for 2010. Dozens of hours have gone into it and we are in debt to Elder Janet Blanchard for its careful, thoughtful preparation.

Over the last three years, Elder Jeff Sinn has reminded the session on multiple occasions that a financial budget is not a mundane thing. Quoting pastor and noted author Jim Wallis, Jeff reminds us that a budget is not just numbers on a page. It is a "moral document."

On the income side, it expresses your sacred commitment to the church. On the expense side, where we indicate how we intend to use our gifts, it expresses our priorities: how we serve others in the community and in the world, how we study God's word, how we make God's claims in Charlotte in 2010, how we love and nurture for each other through life's trials and tribulations, how we care for these buildings and grounds we inherited and how we worship God, the source of our very lives.

Our budget is not the only way we as a community bring our mission statement to life, but it's an important one. On the subject of community, the often prophetic preacher William Sloane Coffin offered these thoughts:

“It seems to me that in joining a church you leave home and home town to join a larger world. The whole world is your new neighborhood and all who dwell therein – black, white, yellow, red, stuffed and starving, smart and stupid, mighty and lowly, criminal and self respecting, American or (not) – all become your sisters and brothers in the new family formed by Jesus. By joining a church, you declare your individuality in the most radical way in order to affirm community on the widest possible scale.”

May God bless our claim to be the body of Christ in all of its expressions, numerical and otherwise, as we strive to be a community serving the wider community. Amen.