

[[Imagine that little faith family in Nazareth gathering to worship on the Sabbath, maybe 27 A.D. They knew the routine; as the sun began to set over that tiny village in the hill country of Galilee they took a break from their work in the fields, from their simple household routines, of the other six days of the week. Just as their parents and grandparents had been doing for centuries, those plain Jewish peasants gathered to worship God.

The crude synagogue couldn't have been much bigger than this chancel; probably a few dozen in attendance. They entered the doorway into silence and private prayer; the women sitting on one side and the men on the other. Following this personal prayer they joined together in reciting their recall, the Shema [Dt 6: "Hear, O Israel, the LORD our God; the LORD is One."] Then came the reciting of set prayers by a worship leader, followed by the centerpiece of Jewish worship: the reading of the Scriptures. First one of the men would read, in Hebrew, a lectionary (that is, pre-selected) passage from the Torah (the first five, foundational books of their Bible) and paraphrase this reading into Aramaic, the language of the people. A reading from the prophets came next, and then the centerpiece of the worship experience: the sermon, explaining and applying the sacred texts so the people of God could live their lives accordingly. There was a final prayer recited, and the worship concluded.

Imagine their surprise when that one day one of their own rose to read from the prophet Isaiah, and then to preach the sermon. They thought they were going to worship, one more Sabbath, just as their people had century upon century...and Jesus, the Son of God, the Anointed Messiah, the God-appointed Prophet, stands to tell them everything has changed because He has arrived: "Today, because I am come, everything in your lives, everything in the history of the world is different—may become different...The Holy Spirit of God is filling Me; I am the One God has appointed. As the prophet Isaiah foretold, I will bring good news to the poor, I will proclaim freedom to the prisoners-of-war held captive, I will bring recovery of sight to those locked in their darkness, I will let the bruised and broken be free. I am here to tell you the Jubilee Year has arrived: since olden times, this meant slaves set free, families reunited and returned to their own lands and homes, debts forgiven..." This is going to happen, because I am now here.]] [*Double brackets indicate segments edited out in the preaching; included in the print version.*]

According to Luke, we just heard Jesus' Mission Statement. What He was all about, what His Church is to be all about. "And all the eyes of the people were fixed upon Jesus." I suppose they were. I hope they still are.

When we gather to worship, do we expect that somehow Jesus will show up to address us, to give us our marching orders once again? Do we show up prepared and eager to do His will, follow His guidance whatever the cost, wherever He will lead us? Do we grapple with the social and political dimensions of His Mission? (After all, He is not saying "go home and pray" and stay out of trouble.) Have we traded the treasure of the gospel, the privilege of serving our Lord, for the opinion of some of those around us: "Oh, I know your church. Isn't it the cute white chapel where everybody gets married?" "Oh, that church. Isn't that where they have no mission and they spend all their money on themselves?"

It's enough to make us keep asking, "So what is Jesus' Mission Statement? What is His Mission for His Church, for this congregation?" What is the call of God for our lives? It is true that some 2000 verses in the Bible call upon us to stand up for the poor, to feed the poor, to bring justice for the poor who cannot obtain justice for themselves. It is certainly true that Jesus identified with the poor: "Insofar as you do these things (e.g. feed the hungry, visit the imprisoned, clothe the naked...) without knowing it you do these acts of mercy unto Me." It is true that the Bible keeps calling us to account for how we treat those in need: "If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food, and you say to them, 'Go in peace, keep warm and eat your fill' while doing nothing to help meet their physical needs, what good is that? Faith by itself, without action, is counterfeit. [James 2:15-17] "Who is your neighbor? Who was the neighbor to the Samaritan going down to Jericho, beaten by robbers?" It is true that in Jesus' most enduring prayer, we continue to pray—and, I presume, to mean: "Thy Kingdom come, Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven."

The religion of Jesus, the Mission of Jesus, is not merely to prepare our individual selves for the great hereafter and the devil take the hindmost. God has come into this world in Christ; this world counts. Ours is not a Gnostic religion concerned mostly with the metaphysical world, with only the spiritual dimensions. In this world we obey Jesus; we learn or fail to learn our lessons. It is in this world we are called, as followers of Jesus Christ, to be used to build toward the Kingdom of God. We follow; His Spirit directs the building project. Because it is a tall order never means we have the right to forfeit the effort.

As a result, many congregations and denominations have concluded that the primary Mission of Christ's Church is to feed the hungry, to advocate for those at the bottom of the socio-economic heap. "Social Justice" is the heart of the Gospel message, and the core of Mission for Christ's Church. Not only to feed the hungry, but to advocate and get involved politically to lobby to overcome injustice—to change the systems which continue to cause the poor never to gain their fair share. In so doing, many churches know they are investing themselves in Christ's Mission, in helping to bring into reality the Kingdom of God about which Jesus preached so often. I am confident Jesus is very pleased with many of them. God bless them. (Never mind for now two slight problems to this approach: the obvious one is that although the Spirit can work thru all sorts of people and circumstances, no secular, Government program can bring people to Jesus—and Jesus is the One who sets us free, who releases us from our dependencies and our ignorance and our bondage. Jesus heals us and transforms us. If it weren't for that detail we'd be a little less picky about which causes our church gets behind.)

The second is a question of focus. Here's where it starts to get interesting. Let's say we were convinced to get involved in "social justice."

Sadly, there are all too many places to start. Some 35,000 children die every day of starvation. Over 1 billion of the world's people live without access to clean drinking water, which then leads to a host of other illnesses. Over 100 million refugees are displaced from their homes due to political or economic necessity. Women are universally oppressed: physically abused, culturally deprived, systematically deprived of a shot at life *in utero* by the millions, in China, before they are ever born. They are said to bump up against the glass ceiling preventing their professional advancement in this country.

A few other items to claim our attention and our action, also on the international scale. Surely we should support the UN, the world's best hope for a harmonious one-world government. (They are getting along harmoniously with Iran and Hezbollah today.) The predicament of global warming is fast approaching "the tipping point." The deforestation of the Amazon and Indonesian and other rainforests proceeds wildly; jungle areas the size of Rhode Island are stripped and disappear each year, adversely affecting our greenhouse gases and our oxygen supply. Genocide in Darfur, in the Sudan, at the hands of Muslim extremists; the simmering war between Israel and Palestinian and Arab/Islamic states; never mind how to be involved or not involved, to stay or to withdraw, in the liberation or the occupation of Afghanistan and Iraq. The ongoing civil war in the Philippines; the plague of fanatic and violent religious extremism waiting to flare up into flame in India, Indonesia, and dozens of other nations. The universally widespread corruption and demagoguery in the leadership of countless emerging nations and the crushing economic debt (close to \$200 billion) these leaders have incurred for their people while they themselves so often live in luxury. The illicit sex trade of millions of young women, primarily in Asia, sold into a lifetime of prostitution and beaten into submission. The religious persecution, incarceration, torture and execution of close to 300,000 Christians worldwide, and of course also persons of other faiths. Even the vast ocean expanses are polluted; countless quantities and species of fish have been depleted through overly aggressive commercial fishing; the natural habitats of many animal species have disappeared and extinction threatens far too many.

Closer to home? A few items of civic concern in our own nation: we all know about the injustices of poverty, the crisis of affordable housing, the scandal of so many living without adequate health care, the grotesque problem of violence and gangs in the inner cities, the heart-breaking statistics of homeless children and children raised in single-family homes and with abusive parents. The tragedy of so many battered women. The high recidivism rate of criminals doing time, the inhumane practice of capital punishment. Inadequate resources for teaching English to non-English speakers. The dangerous and overly commercialized television for children, and the gigantic (\$12 billion) pornography industry which leads directly to the disrespect and physical abuse of women. Racism hasn't gone away; doesn't justice require a more robust government legislation of affirmative action if not direct quotas? (Or was justice color blind?) The full benefits of this society are not available to undocumented immigrants who have arrived in this country illegally, who are then too often exploited with no protection under the law. Addictions to gambling, to drugs, to alcohol ruin too many homes, but disproportionately in low-income communities. Unelected, unaccountable judges who render politically-minded decisions contrary to the clear will of the people and the legislatures threaten the constitutional balance of power within government. (Or are they valiant judges who uphold the finest elements of our national character against the bigotry and ignorance of the electorate?)

Churches are called upon to join in the struggle for justice in a host of other arenas. Gays and lesbians and transgendered persons face discrimination and are not able to marry; AIDS and HIV viruses strike certain communities far more heavily than others; female clergy do not serve as senior pastors in representative numbers. "Inclusive language" which prohibits the reference to God as "Father" remains the law in many seminaries, and unofficially in several denominations. The patriarchal systems of

oppression are to be identified and overturned. We churches are called upon to provide sanctuary and services to all of God's children, to support anti-war demonstrations regarding involvement in Iraq, to support only public schools (and to oppose magnet schools, home-schooling, and vouchers which would enable parents to exercise some freedom in the education of their children. We are encouraged to adopt or help resettle immigrant families, and to show specific solidarity with the oppressed pueblos of Chiapas, Mexico. We would be a lot more active in Ecumenical and Inter-faith coalitions and communities.

I suppose if we were a normal progressive Christian church, we'd be busy. (Believe it or not, I'm not trying to be facetious at this point. How is Jesus honored if Christians are known as persons only who withdraw, do not get involved in their communities, who do not care about the common good, who live lives no different from other uninvolved people?) We could be expected to be the most fair-minded employers, the most conscientious recyclers, the most healthy segment of the population in body and spirit, since we understand our allegiance is to the One who asks these things of us.

You have noticed, by now, that the sword of justice cuts in both directions. To some people the outrage is that all women, regardless of income level or status, still do not enjoy freedom of "choice"—fully available, government-funded abortion on demand for any cause. To others the outrage is that almost 40 million babies—the most vulnerable among us, the least able to speak up for themselves—have been "terminated" (?) since the Roe vs. Wade decision. (I learned earlier this week talking to a friend from Sweden that a significant reason for the decreasing birthrate among Swedish families of childbearing age is because they believe the law is unjust which provides for maternal or paternal leave, paid at State expense, for only eighteen months after the birth of the baby—Norwegians and Finns get three years of paid leave. "Justice" is not always so clear-cut.)

The solution is not to throw up our hands and go back to our comfortable homes. Since the story in which Cain threw up his hands ("Am I my brother's keeper?") that has not been a valid option for the people of God. Nor is the solution is to flip a coin to see which side we should advocate. For Christians, we "fix our eyes upon Jesus." In worship, we offer ourselves and our lives back into service to God, cheerfully submitting to Christ all over again—this Sunday and every Sunday. What did Jesus say? What did Jesus do? What is His Mission for His Church?

Jesus was "full of the power of the Holy Spirit" when He burst upon that unsuspecting synagogue of worshipers to proclaim His platform. He was not long removed from His intense 40-day retreat of intense prayer and no doubt wrestling with God the Father, along with the enemy, in order to gain clarity about His Mission. We become full of the Spirit when we put aside our former self conformed to the contours of this world—our expectations, our limitations, our political and personal agendas. Jesus Himself didn't dare define or embark upon the divine Mission apart from prayer and preparation and submission to the Holy Spirit of God available to Him and to you and me.

Full of the Spirit, and now ready to carry out His God-assignment, Jesus stepped up in power and authority. He did not meekly accept either the way of the quislings, who

sold out their own people as appeasers of Rome, nor the Zealots, the insurrectionists against Rome. He heard and proclaimed the bold Vision of God—the Kingdom of God proclaimed for centuries. Except that it was now fulfilled in Him.

Jesus could have gone the political route. He could have gone to Rome or Jerusalem to enlist political support and cooperation for His divine Vision for the world. He would have been one shrewd negotiator, don't you think? He could have focused on the social and political structures oppressing the Jewish people, oppressing the masses. The oppressive system of taxes, the oppression of women, the Roman occupation which denied all sorts of basic human rights.

Many in our time believe the key to bringing about the Kingdom, or the closest thing to it, is to reform the earthly systems and Governments and policies and institutions which appear to be the problem. Thank God—as a result of Jesus' strategy proclaimed back then in Nazareth and countless times since, and enacted in much of Western Civilization—we do enjoy the power and responsibility to make meaningful changes in our Government for good.

But Jesus had no magic wand to transform institutions or systems or governments. He offered, thru His Holy Spirit, a less dramatic but more surefire way to change the world, to build toward His Kingdom: “the Kingdom of God is among you;” “Today, this Scripture is fulfilled in Your hearing.” (People want to change society and government first; Jesus wants to change people first.)

We just heard “this Scripture” He had read from the prophet Isaiah; that He, Jesus, was the One appointed by God to bring good news, especially to the poor since they are the ones most likely to hear and accept it; God sent the Christ, Jesus, to proclaim release to the prisoners of war (obviously Jesus had no physical key with which to unlock holding cells—He offered freedom in spirit where it can do the most good even in the midst of the walls of the jail—remember Paul and Silas, severely flogged and imprisoned, locked up in shackles in a fetid dank underground cell, singing their hearts out to the glory of God who made them free—so that the jailer who held the keys asked him, Paul, how to be free! [Acts 16] Remember Jesus Himself, who chose, in spite of the soldiers of Pilate and the spectre of the cross, freely to pursue His own mission into Jerusalem, right into the heart of the enemy.)

Jesus changed people—any and all who would also be indwelt and empowered by His Spirit. He miraculously cured physical blindness here and there—but He offers clarity, insight, wisdom, the God's-eye view in place of the blindness of our ignorance, our psyche, our denial, our delusions and spiritual myopia. The Light of the world will illumine our darkness for the repentance and the asking. He offers release from the prisons of our insecurity, our fear, our bigotry, our shame, our ego. His promise was not to change immediate circumstances or government or public policy, though thanks be to God circumstances and governments have been changed immeasurably for the better by His people, full of His Spirit—and we along with hundreds of millions of others enjoy great blessings brought about by His Church, His people transformed and obedient to one degree or other.

Jesus' Mission to change the world was to change His followers thru His Church, as we worship together and pray and keep submitting to the power of the Spirit. (Random acts of kindness, lighting a candle in the darkness are nice—but hardly sufficient for the Church of Jesus Christ, against whom the gates of hell itself shall not

prevail!) Jesus appointed Peter not to be ambassador to Rome to lobby for democratic reforms for the Jews, not to be head of His Political Action Group or this political party or that one: He appointed Peter to be Head of His Church. He appointed His followers yes, to feed the hungry and to clothe the naked, but that as the result of their primary mission to go forth and to proclaim the gospel, to make disciples, to invite them into His family which is to change the world by transforming us its people (and which has, in fits and starts, made some fairly good progress.)

[At least three times more in Luke's gospel we read what Jesus did: "Soon afterward, He went on thru cities and villages, proclaiming and bringing the good news of the Kingdom of God. The twelve were with Him." [8:1] "Then Jesus called the twelve together and gave them power and authority over all demons and to cure diseases, and He sent them out to proclaim the Kingdom of God and to heal...They went, bringing the good news and curing diseases everywhere." [9:1] Likewise when He sent the seventy-two. [10:1-9] What He did, and what He sent His disciples out to do, was to preach the gospel and to heal and cure people.]

In this church, we trust that each of you is responsible for being filled with the Spirit and going out as you are sent. Being a fantastic mother or father to your children; to be a terrific teacher or an ethical CEO. (Or to go to Sacramento or Washington or Hollywood to challenge and change the systems of Government, if the Spirit of God calls you to do so. (Heaven knows plenty of other special interest groups and lobbying efforts have funding and focus for working the levers of government—why should Jesus' side be shut out? Christians are not called to disappear and give up!)

By the way, you are to be commended. Many of you are being Christ's missionaries, His ambassadors, every day. Not to mention the fact that over the last five years alone we have allowed this church to support Christ's Mission beyond our own walls to the tune of \$165,000. (Only God can say whether that's good or bad for this church, out of all that we have—but it's not nothing!) We are not called to do everything; we are not called to do nothing.

We are called to focus. Two specific calls to involvement this church is offering you are coming up in the next few months. Please pray about supporting the Marshallese congregation with which we partner: we have all been invited to the celebration of thanksgiving and dinner and entertainment they are offering you, this church, to say "thank you" October 14. This may also lead to other areas of involvement. You will be hearing more about the weekend in Mexico (December 8-10) for much-needed and greatly-appreciated hands-on help with the Open Arms day care center in La Mision—probably praying, painting, installing cabinets and a heavy-duty refrigeration unit, laying tile, and other chores. (You can always help financially if you're not able to make it.)

Please pray about jumping into these and other opportunities the church may specifically extend. Our Bd of Christian mission prays and works faithfully; we trust that their invitation to our deeper involvement represents the voice of the Spirit, the invitation of our Lord Jesus. Is another day at work, another soccer game, another concert really more important for our kids than these God-possibilities for our lives and our life-perspectives to be radically changed?

Jesus finishes up His Mission Statement, "Today (that is, in this era, now that I, the Messiah of God, have come to earth to direct God's divine Mission)—Today, this promise *has been fulfilled in your hearing.*" This doesn't mean automatically, by remote,

everything is unfolding as it should. This means the fulfillment of the Scripture, of the Vision, comes about not because we good church people have been hearing the gospel—but it becomes real, His message fulfilled, as you and I hear it and incorporate it and witness it and spread it and proclaim it and live it out, filled with the power of the Holy Spirit.

We are not called to do everything; we are not called to do nothing.
Keep being doers of His word, not hearers only.