

# Mission Statement: Response

*Luke 4:16-30 Isaiah 61:1-3, 11 Rev. Todd B. Freeman  
College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa January 31, 2010*

Today's sermon into Part 2 of the sermon I preached last Sunday, entitled, *Living Out Your/Our Mission Statement*. For those of you who were not in the service of worship last Sunday, let me briefly recap the main points of last week's sermon so that you won't feel left out today. And it never hurts for the rest of us to have a bit of review, given the importance of the subject matter – our congregation's Mission Statement.

We talked about the importance of **mission statements** and how they can **help define an organization's identity, focus its work and priorities, and provide guidance as it makes decisions about its future.**

After looking at our Mission Statement here at College Hill (which is again printed on the cover of today's bulletin) we looked at the story in Luke 4 where a mission statement, of sorts, is provided by Luke for Jesus' ministry. The gospel writer presents Jesus' very first public ministry appearance as occurring during a worship service in Jesus' hometown synagogue in Nazareth. He is asked to read from the Hebrew Scripture (which is our Old Testament). Jesus reads a passage from Isaiah 61, which declares, in part, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because God has anointed me to bring good news to the poor...the captives...the blind...and the oppressed."

Jesus then sits down and declares to the congregation, which by the way is his very first sermon according to the gospel of Luke: "Today, this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." According to Luke, Jesus announces that it is he himself who is the one to bring such liberation and compassion – the personal fulfillment of the ancient Hebrew prophecy. Last Sunday's sermon acknowledged that **this ministry of liberation and compassion is ours to carry out as well, as the church, the body of Christ.** Also emphasized was the importance of Luke's word "today." There is urgency in doing the work of Christ *today*, and everyday – both here at church and in our daily lives out in the world.

That brings us up to this morning's scripture text, a continuation of this story that presents the dramatic and violent reaction to Jesus' sermon and his remarks that follow.

The initial response is awe. The people were "amazed" at his words of compassion. This is followed by the comment, "**Isn't this Joseph's son?**" This question is not intended to denigrate Jesus, as most folks interpret this passage, but simply to point out that **he is a hometown boy, one of their own, a member of their clan – he's family.**

This point is crucial to having a fuller understanding of this story. Cultural and societal norms dictated that being a member of a particular clan or tribe involved certain obligations. Most prominently, **it was customary for any person to give preference to one's own family and village.**

The local folks have heard about the great things Jesus has done in the nearby fishing village of Capernaum, located on the northern shore of the Sea of Galilee. Therefore, they expect even greater things from Jesus, therefore, now that he is back

home in Nazareth. When Jesus reveals that this isn't his mission and that it's not going to happen, things get ugly.

Luke has Jesus quoting to them what was a familiar proverb that prophets are not accepted in their own hometown. **Jesus declares that his role as a prophet will not be governed by giving preference to just his own hometown people.** In a culture dominated by honor and shame, they believed that Jesus had shamed them.

In essence, Jesus is stating that his mission is broader than in-group loyalties. Instead, Jesus is governed by the broader purposes of God. His ministry, therefore, will focus not on the in-group but on the excluded, there *and* elsewhere.

**This story exposes quite a dilemma for us today, and begs the questions: Does the church exist to serve primarily its own members, or outsiders? Is a congregation's mission and ministry to be governed by "in-group" loyalties, or by the needs of outsiders and the broader "purposes of God"?**

As I have continued to learn throughout my ministry and journey of faith, the answer is more of a both/and than a simple either/or.

Within the past decade, presbyteries throughout the country have started to try to get their member congregations to recognize that perhaps too much of our time and ministry efforts are focused on what is termed, as I mentioned last week, **"institutional maintenance."** That implies that perhaps a majority of congregations operate primarily with a **survival mentality** and a focus of taking care of just their own, **as opposed to seeing themselves a mission-outpost in their own neighborhood and community.**

So what we have here, in other words, is the difference between being inward-focused and outward-focused. Or, to use the language of family systems therapy, a closed system or an open system. Let me ask you, where would you put College Hill along that continuum?

Let's go back to our biblical text now for a moment. After Jesus cites two Old Testament examples of how prophets helped *not their own people* during hard times, but Gentiles (outsiders), the folks in that synagogue in Nazareth listening to Jesus run him out to the edge of town with the plan to throw him off a cliff and stone him to death. (A bit of an overdramatic response to an unpopular sermon, in my opinion.) This near-tragic story ends with the announcement that Jesus somehow slipped away and escaped harm. And according to the gospel of Luke, **Jesus never returns to his hometown of Nazareth.** Luke makes a very strong point here:

- **Jesus does not go elsewhere to minister because he is rejected by the in-group; he is rejected by the in-group because he goes elsewhere to minister.**

Since they feel abandoned by Jesus, they decide to abandon him. Jesus will not place himself and his ministry under the control of his hometown people and religious community, or even his own family.

When it comes to church work there is often a similar dilemma. **There is always a struggle to balance what we might term as "pastoral" work and "prophetic" work; ministering within and among ourselves, and ministering outside of our own community of faith.** It's a delicate balancing act, and not without risk – especially for clergy.

But Luke warns us that since God's work necessarily involves reaching out to outsiders, that **some insiders will get perturbed from time to time.** Reflecting this tendency, biblical commentator Brian Stoffregen writes:

The people in Nazareth recognize and marvel at Jesus' 'gracious words' (v.22); but when illustrations of God's grace to *outsiders* are given, their feelings turn to rage. They are also hearing that God does not act the way they want God to act.

Do we really *want* a gracious God? Certainly we do – for ourselves; but can we have a gracious God if we don't believe that the same grace is given to those sinners outside our church doors, outside our faith, outside our boundaries of acceptability?

Or as biblical commentator William Loader concludes:

If you join Jesus in living a life of compassion that is inclusive and without prejudice against the despised and feared, you will be living the life of the Spirit and you will be courting danger.

If you start hating the sources of danger and thus dehumanizing the enemy, you have become part of the problem. The mission and message of Jesus according to Luke is about undermining the dehumanizing categories wherever they have been applied (usually to people seen as threats.)

This is not about a naïve denial of danger where it exists, but it is about living out the freedom that love brings so that people never lose their value, are never written off.

So here's another tough question: **Who are the people you and I are tempted to devalue and write off?**

That brings us full circle to where this sermon began last Sunday – with the importance of our Mission Statement. And being what it is, it does indeed seem that faithful discipleship may lead to risks along the way. **We are challenged to find ways of balancing how we minister to one another, and to those outside this congregation – and be open enough to draw others into this community of faith.**

Perhaps another way to look at all this is that if our church work and ministry isn't risky at times, just as it was for Jesus and his disciples, then perhaps were not fully doing all that God would have us do. That includes all areas highlighted in our Mission Statement. Therefore all this should help influence how we, as a congregation go about trying to fulfill our **Mission Statement**:

- **Build an inclusive community of faith;**
- **Receive and openly share the love of God; and**
- **Reach out with a compassionate voice for peace and justice.**

**In a nutshell, our mission is all about extending God's grace to others – both inside and outside this congregation – so that no person is ever written off, but rather seen as a valued and beloved child of God.** And yes, sometimes this is risky business. But we also believe this is our calling.

Amen.

Resources: Brian Stoffregen. Faith Lutheran Church, Marysville, CA.

