

First Presbyterian Church
Charlotte, NC
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Rev. Pen Peery

Jesus' Mission Statement

Luke 4:14-30

Then Jesus, filled with the power of the Spirit, returned to Galilee, and a report about him spread through all the surrounding country. He began to teach in their synagogues and was praised by everyone.

When he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, he went to the synagogue on the Sabbath day, as was his custom. He stood up to read, and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written:

“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,

Because he has anointed me to bring 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 he rolled up the scroll, gave it to the attendant, and sat down. The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. Then he began to say to them,

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

All spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his mouth. They said, “Is this not Joseph's son?” He said to them, “Doubtless you will quote to me this proverb, ‘Doctor, cure yourself.’ And you will say, ‘Do here also in your own hometown the things that we have heard you did at Capernaum.’ And he said, “Truly I tell you, no prophet is accepted in the prophet's hometown. But the truth is, there were many widows in Israel in the time of Elijah, when the heavens were shut up three years and six months, and there was a severe famine over all the land; yet Elijah was sent to none of them except a widow at Zarephath in Sidon. There were also many lepers in Israel in the time of the prophet Elisha, and none of them was cleansed except Naaman the Syrian.”

When they heard this, all in the synagogue were filled with rage. They got up, drove him out of town, and led him to the brow of a hill on which their town was built, so that they might hurl him off the cliff. But he passed through the midst of them and went on his way.

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Hello. My name is Pen Peery, and I am a people pleaser.

It's true: I like to try to make everybody happy.

I doubt if I am alone in this – it is a wide spread affliction, especially among pastors and particularly in the South.

It is not that unfamiliar with conflict or needing to say difficult things that I know people won't like to hear – it's just that I don't enjoy it. I would much rather go-along-to-get-along.

If I had it my way, I would delegate the things that needed to be said or done that might upset people. Believe it or not, there are some folks who enjoy being cantankerous. Bless their hearts. I'd rather they do my dirty work for me.

I suspect that being a people pleaser is not only cultural, but also genetic. I base this on the fact that my oldest son, Wells, seems to carry the trait. In my last congregation they had a "Time with Children" as a part of the worship service where children would come forward to hear a short message from an adult.

Wells started staying in worship through the time with children when he was about two. Approximately one week later he realized that the person leading children's time would ask questions. Then he realized that if he answered the questions, he might get a laugh from the congregation. It was as if he discovered the Holy Grail – a place within worship where he could please people and be the center of attention.

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I'm not sure if they had children's time in the synagogue in first century Palestine, but the people of Nazareth certainly remembered Jesus from his growing up years.

They heard about the time when he went to Jerusalem and held his own with the teachers of the Temple. They whispered the rumors about Jesus being called "Messiah." The word was spreading about the amazing things he had done in neighboring Capernaum.

And now he had come back – all grown up – and was sitting right with them in the synagogue.

I bet someone came up to Jesus while they were taking their seats and said, "I remember when you were *this* tall!" "Oh my goodness, I used to babysit you! Look how you've grown!"

He was the local boy made good – and people were hanging on every word that came out of his mouth.

Jesus took a turn reading from the scripture, and the scroll given to him was from Isaiah. He selected a passage and stood up to read,

"The spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor..."

Someone leaned over their pew and said, "*Doesn't he just have the nicest voice?*"

"...to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind..."

"Look at Mary, she is so proud, she's beaming!"¹

¹ With thanks to the Rev. John Bell of the Iona Community in Scotland. I heard John preach a sermon on this text in which he imagined the reaction of Jesus' local community to his newly found fame.

“...to let the oppressed go free, and to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.”

Jesus read those words, and then he sat down – because that is what a rabbi did when he wanted to teach. “Today,” he said, “this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.”

Well, this was great news to the people in the synagogue. It was common knowledge that Nazareth was something of a one-stoplight town. In fact, people were known to say that “nothing good can come out of Nazareth.”

But now, here he was, the hometown hero, getting ready to put Nazareth on the map. People were giddy with excitement – members of synagogue who were in Rotary were already dreaming about the economic impact that a person of Jesus’ stature would bring their community. Why, they would have to change the signs: “Welcome to Nazareth: Home of Jesus, ‘The Messiah.’”

But then, as Jesus kept talking, it became obvious that Jesus was not someone who put too much stock in pleasing people.

As he began to teach, Jesus reminded the crowd of a couple of stories about Elijah and Elisha – two prophets who God called beyond the comfort of their hometown crowd and into ministry with the Gentiles. The names Zarephath and Naaman might not mean much to us, but to the ears of those sitting in the synagogue that day, those names raised their blood pressure quite a bit. You see, in these stories that Jesus told about Elijah and Zarephath, and Elisha and Naaman, his point was that these outsiders received preference ahead of those who were God’s own, chosen people.

In a flash, comments of admiration turned into murmurs of discontent. Jesus was telling his hometown church that his ministry was about more than the hometown. Jesus was saying – in no uncertain terms, though we still tend to

want to explain it away – that he was sent to show preference for the poor, the oppressed, the prisoners...not the poor in spirit, but the poor in wallet. They were the ones who were the primary focus of Jesus' attention; the ones for whom Jesus had been anointed to serve.

Once they actually heard what Jesus was teaching, the crowd grew angry. This was certainly not Nazareth's pathway to economic development. How dare he? Suggesting that the poor deserved more attention than the needs of the hometown? Who does Jesus think he is? Giving alms to the poor is one thing – but to think that God sent *the messiah* to show preferential treatment for them? Well, that is just absurd.

The people were not pleased. They marched Jesus out of the synagogue and to the edge of a hill on the outskirts of town with the intent of silencing this hometown boy once and for all by throwing him off a cliff – but Jesus passed right through them, and continued on his way to Jerusalem. It was a sign of things to come. Indeed, for the entirety of his short-lived ministry, Jesus seemed to say things that people did not want to hear. Eventually, it all caught up with him – and he paid for it with his life.

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In the fall of 1982 a new student enrolled in Harvard College's School of Medicine. His name was Paul Farmer – and from the second he stepped foot on campus, the administration of the medical school seemed baffled by what to do with him.

Farmer was brilliant. Aside from attending Duke University as an undergraduate, his resume was impeccable. He scored at the top of his class on every test, and seemed to breeze through one of the world's most demanding institutions of learning. What was hard for the administration was the fact that – without asking permission from anyone – Farmer would leave

school for a few weeks or months at a time to work in medical clinics in a small, poor, Caribbean nation called Haiti.

In 1987, Farmer and some other colleagues founded a group called “Partners In Health” just outside of Port-au-Prince in Haiti. Partners In Health is an organization whose mission is to provide a preferential option for the poor by offering free medical care without clinical or bureaucratic barriers. The clinics are operated by locals and reflect the needs of the community.

Currently, Farmer is a tenured professor and chair of social medicine at Harvard and an attending physician at a hospital in Boston. His journey from first year medical student to tenured professor is remarkable; not for the sheer accomplishment of it, but because of his dogged pursuit of social justice in the developing world that put him at odds with many of the people who granted him such a prestigious position. Simply put – Farmer pushed the school, his colleagues (and anyone else who cared to listen) beyond themselves for the sake of people of Haiti. In case you were wondering, putting the needs of a developing nation over that of the institution did not make everyone happy².

A couple of weeks ago we marked the three year anniversary of the massive earthquake in Haiti that left millions without homes or access to basic needs and hundreds of thousands without their lives. In the aftermath of the earthquake, with many Haitian hospitals in rubble and with the difficulty of international aid getting in the country, Partners In Health became the primary vehicle for delivering medical care.

Because they had built trust and learned to adapt their medical practice to fit the culture, Partners In Health was in the position to best serve the Haitian people.

² If you are interested in reading more about Dr. Farmer, check out the book, *Mountains Beyond Mountains*.

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

It is hard to capture the purpose of Jesus' life in a few words, but – in Luke's gospel – these verses from Isaiah are the closest thing Jesus gives to a “mission statement.” The words are nice, but what makes this mission statement special is the steely-eyed and faithful commitment that Jesus demonstrates in living it out.

Good news to the poor.

Release to the captives.

Recovery of sight to the blind.

Freedom for the oppressed.

In the church we call this kind of thing “outreach” – and our church, in particular – is known for the ways we have prioritized serving the poor. You know the history: we've had a hand in starting the Loaves and Fishes pantry, Crisis Assistance Ministry, the Urban Ministry Center, the Men's Shelter...the list could go on. It is a reflection of how seriously we take the gospel's call to serve our neighbors.

At the risk of being thrown off a cliff, the question for us – I think – as a congregation with such an important legacy of outreach is whether this well-deserved reputation serves to comfort us or challenge us.

Do the ways in which we serve the poor, the blind, the oppressed...do they actually help the poor, the blind, the oppressed? And if not, are we open to prioritize our energy in a different direction?³

Do we still have the verve – the boldness – to listen to the needs of the poor and respond in ways that lead to meaningful action?

Are we willing to allow our service to change us – even our community and traditions – as we grow in relationship with those whom we encounter?

And what will happen if our commitment to Jesus and to the people Jesus came to serve leads us into conflict...as the needs of the poor compete with the needs of us who are not?

Hard questions, I know.
Such is the life of discipleship.

Yet as Jesus' disciples have discovered over the ages long, a life committed to Christ – while sometimes difficult – leads to deep purpose and deep joy – because it means that our lives are about more than us.

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Let us pray: To you, merciful God, we commit our lives. Connect your dreams for the world and its people to our own, and give us the courage and commitment to follow in the steps of your son, our Lord, who gave himself for the world's sake that we might experience Good News. Amen.

³ Some of my questions about our ongoing outreach efforts have been provoked by Robert Lupton and his book, *Toxic Charity*, which has been all-the-rage in Charlotte this past year.

