

First Presbyterian Church
Luke 4:14-21, “Jesus Mission Proposed”
by Pastor Matt Johnson, 1/19/2025

Every church has a mission statement these days.

We’ve got one right outside the door. It’s a good one!

Sometimes you have to wonder if these things are just following trendy business world best-practices, or if they really have a purpose.

Well, I think they *can* have a purpose, if we use them right.

You have to actually look at them and consider how what we *do* connects with (or doesn’t connect with) the aspirations found in the mission and vision statements.

From time to time the elders and ministry teams do this consideration... maybe we should do it a little more often than we do.

But what about Jesus?

What was the mission of Jesus?

If you take everyone who says that they are doing the things that Jesus would do and you compare them to each other, you some conflicting perspectives!

It almost seems like what people do is, they take the things they like whether to do with money or social issues or morality, and they find a way to connect Jesus to it, and they say “Yeah – I’m doing this because it’s the Lord’s work.

This is part of the mission of Jesus!”

But...is it? How do you know?

Well, I think we’ve got Jesus’ mission statement on record right here in Luke 4.

At this point, Jesus has been baptized, as we read about last week.

After that he was led into the desert by the Holy Spirit and tempted for 40 days and 40 nights.

Following his time of preparation and testing,

Jesus returns to his hometown synagogue in Nazareth, and he tells his local family and friends what his mission is all about.

This scripture reading initiates the entirety of Jesus’ ministry.

He reads from the scroll of Isaiah, which was handed to him.

The passage is Isaiah 61:1-2 –

**The Spirit of the Sovereign LORD is on me,
because the LORD has anointed me
to proclaim good news to the poor.
He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted,
to proclaim freedom for the captives
and ... release ... from darkness for the prisoners,¹
²to proclaim the year of the LORD's favor
and the day of vengeance of our God,
to comfort all who mourn ...**

Giving the scroll back to the attendant, he sits down.

If you're a modern Western person, that sounds like the show is over.

But if you're an ancient Jewish person,
you know that this is when you need to pay attention.
Because it was the custom for Jewish rabbis
to sit down before they teach.

So Jesus sits down, and all his hometown friends
who grew up with him are looking at him.
They may have heard about his teaching
from around the neighboring synagogues.
They wanted to know what he would say.

“Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing.”

He owns it. He makes it *personal*.
Not only that, he declares the prophetic words of Isaiah
to be fulfilled *in their hearing*.
Which means Jesus' personal presence orchestrates and ushers in their fulfillment.
I mean, that is **BOLD**.

To put this in our own cultural context,
we could say that Jesus sat down and declared, “I have a dream!”

You may know the story, that as Martin Luther King, Jr was speaking
to the immense crowd gathered in Washington DC,
Mahalia Jackson, the great gospel singer, shouted to him:
"Tell 'em about the dream, Martin!"

And he did. You know what he said. He described a dream
of equality not only on paper, or in principle, but in schools, workplaces,
places of fellowship and places of worship:
all the places that freedom must ring across our country.
He closes his speech with these words:

When we allow freedom to ring, when we let it ring from every city and every hamlet, from every state and every city, we will be able to speed up that day when all of God's children, black men and white men, Jews and Gentiles, Protestants and Catholics, will be able to join hands and sing in the words of the old Negro spiritual, "Free at last, Free at last, Great God almighty, We are free at last."

Martin Luther King, Jr. had a dream we still aspire to,
and I will be thinking about it tomorrow on MLK Day.
It's a dream so bold it still inspires, it still calls to our hearts.
at least in part because *it is also a dream that is unrealized.*

By contrast, when Jesus read Isaiah 61, he declared Isaiah's dream to be fulfilled within his hearer's presence.

He was, in the flesh, good news to the poor,
he brought healing for the broken hearted, freedom for captives,
and release for prisoners.

He had initiated the year of the Lord's favor – which is the year of Jubilee and debt forgiveness commanded in the Old Testament.

In the New Testament, the Lord's favor
is known as ... *grace.*

Jesus' mission statement was that his personal presence
brought the life changing grace and peace of God
into the real world that people live in – then and now.

But, some might wonder, if this is Jesus' mission statement,
why such a focus on the poor? Why be so political?
Why so much emphasis on captives and prisoners?
And how did Jesus forget the "pray for forgiveness so you can go to heaven" part?
He was just being biblical.

You simply cannot read any part of the Bible and not come away
with a clear understanding that God has a unique interest in
those who are poor, marginalized, oppressed, or held captive.

Genesis highlights the role of slaves in the household of Abraham and Sarah,
especially Hagar who is the first person the angel of the Lord
appears to in the Bible.

We also know about Joseph who was trafficked by his brothers, sold into slavery,
and imprisoned before being released into the service of Pharaoh.
Exodus is entirely about the slavery and unjust treatment of the Hebrew people,
including the call of God through Moses to,
"Let my people go!" And on and on the Bible goes...

It's because of this personal history with literal captivity and imprisonment
that we find so many references to these things
in the prophets and the psalms – and into Jesus' mission statement.

There is something baked into the character of God that sees
the plight of those who are suffering, those who are poor,
those who are in need, those who are immigrants and yes,
those who are imprisoned, and says,
"I am the God who is on your side."

That is the character of Yahweh as described by the text of Scripture
again and again.

When Jesus wanted his hometown to know that he was the son
of someone besides Mary and Joseph, he entered his synagogue
and read a passage about relief for the poor,
binding up the broken hearted, and freedom for captives.
In a word, Jesus told them that his life and ministry was about release.

Jesus was about release from physical conditions that kept people isolated.
Leprosy, limbs that didn't work right, eyes that couldn't see.
He healed these things as a sign
of the embodied release of God's Kingdom.

As the body of Christ, we join in this work even today,
when we feed and clothe people who are hungry,
or support people who cannot pay their bills.

Jesus was also about societal release.

His ministry took place among people and at times and places
that highlighted the injustice of the political elites who were
running the show.

As the body of Christ, we join in this work even today when we demonstrate
God's welcome to all people, when we advocate for earth care,
when we ask our politicians to lead in ways that are just.

Jesus was about physical and societal release, as well as spiritual release.

Because, yes, Jesus did talk about forgiveness, abundant life,
and entry into the Kingdom of God!

His mission statement begins, "The Spirit of the Sovereign Lord is upon me."

So here's a point that I hope you don't miss:

If we see Jesus' emphasis on giving food and seeking social justice,
but fail to root our practice of social justice
in the anointing of the Spirit of the sovereign Lord,
we will accomplish *nothing more* than serving
a worldly political ideology. [REPEAT]

So let us not think we can simply do something "social justice related"
in a way that is disconnected from worshipping our Creator
in Spirit and in Truth and still think that we are in line
with Jesus' mission statement.

These things must be *rigorously* connected.

The world wants to co-opt the people of God for its own purpose.

The uniqueness of Jesus was that he didn't fit in the world's purpose.
Jesus brought release that was physical, social, and spiritual.

It's impossible to speak about captivity and release today and not think about
the three women who were held hostage by and have now been released
and are being treated in a hospital.

After 470 days in captivity, Emily Damari, Doron Steinbrecher
and Romi Gonen are free, but many more remain and the process
is expected to take weeks.

In my opinion, the people of Gaza have also been captives in their own right,
both to the self-serving ambitions of Hamas' leadership
and the callous, barbaric attacks and policies of modern-day Israel.

At a larger scale, Israel the nation-state, Hamas, Lebanon, and Iran are also captive
to the cycles of violence, revenge, and bitterness that we see
repeat again and again.

This region is in need of release at all three levels:
spiritual, physical, and social/political.

Our country and our world is in desperate need
of leaders who understand freedom in those holistic terms.

Our world is desperate for someone whose very presence
embodies freedom in those terms.

What I'm saying is that in our longing for something different,
in our lament of suffering, corruption, objectification,
profiteering, and needless pain,
we are crying out for the personal presence of Jesus.

[PAUSE]

Jesus isn't only interested in the world—Jesus is interested in you.

Jesus proclaims your release from captivity.

Jesus is on the side of your healing,
your restoration, your freedom.

God is on your side in your places of bondage.

God is on the side of our neighbors
who are in the chains of poverty or addiction.

The two are not so different.

Any time that we can call for physical, social, and spiritual release,
we're joining in the work of Jesus.

Let us pray that the Spirit will move within the body of Christ
to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.