

CAN YOU HEAR ME NOW?
Your Mission Should You Choose to Accept It

A sermon offered by the Rev. Dr. Michael D. Castle
January 23-24, 2010 ♦ Third Sunday after Epiphany
Cross Creek Community Church, United Church of Christ
Dayton, Ohio

Luke 4:14-21

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 back 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."

"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because [God] has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. [God] 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."

Luke 4:18-19

A colleague of mine imagines God saying:

"Hello my people. The world is full of darkness, and people are longing for light. There is a serious shortage of justice, kindness, compassion, and mercy. Your mission, should you choose to accept it, is to go to whomever I send you and bring them good news, to share my love, and extend my dominion of peace, leaving no one out. Do this without calling undue attention to yourselves. As always, should you be caught, I will acknowledge that you are mine, my beloved. This tape will replay over and over from your pulpit until you get it right."

This passage from Luke's gospel gives us a major clue about the vision and mission and program of Jesus. In what is considered the inauguration of Jesus' ministry, Jesus goes to the synagogue that particular Sabbath day and finds a story...a story to live by. More accurately, he finds himself in a story passed down in his heritage.

Stories, I remind you, are soul-food. We cannot live without stories, especially our sacred stories. Stories help us "see" who we are. Stories help to "see" the world around us and our place in that world. They can be dreams that animate us. They can be narratives that convey belonging as well as guidance.

So, on that particular Sabbath day, Jesus, during one of his customary visits to the synagogue, found himself in one of the traditional, sacred stories. I suspect that he had been pondering that most basic question of life: now, how can I put words to the purpose and meaning of my life?

It was this story that launched his brief, but impactful, ministry. Jesus goes to the front of the synagogue, unfolds the scroll, finds his place in the narrative from the book of Isaiah.

I am guessing that the writer(s) of the book of Isaiah also must have been pondering issues of identity and purpose. Jesus proceeds to read publicly Isaiah's response (see Isaiah 61:1-4):

"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because [God] has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. [God] 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."

Luke 4:18-19

And then, Jesus puts the scroll back in place, sits down in the proclaimer's chair, and says in effect: "This is it! This is me! This narrative from four hundred years ago describes who I am and what I am to be about. It's my mission statement! It is my reason to be."

The way Luke tells it, Jesus found himself in this faith story told and retold in the synagogue. And on that day, that story clicked for Jesus. A gift...a grace it was to him.

From what we know about Jesus, this is probably the best summary of Jesus' gospel...his good news. This is our best glimpse into what Jesus was all about. And yet today, it seems that the gospel that is proclaimed in most of the churches I know is very different from his. As far as I can tell, the gospel of Jesus has been for some time now, portrayed very differently from what we heard in Luke's gospel this morning.

More than likely, the gospel I hear is that Jesus came to earth (God in human form) to save us from our sins because he loved us, so that we can go to heaven when we die and stay out of the place of eternal damnation, or hell. Now, I know that is a crass, blunt and very general way to say it, but in essence, that is the gospel of Jesus being proclaimed in most of the churches.

And even stranger still is that nowhere in our four gospels do we have any indication that this is Jesus' gospel at all, even though so many say it is, even though so many want to believe it is with all their hearts. And, for so many churches, it is *the* vision that drives their entire mission and purpose for being and doing. This supposed vision of Jesus' gospel is so ubiquitous, and has been for so many years, that it is even hard for us to imagine the gospel of Jesus being anything else but that.

In saying that, I am aware, painfully aware, how far the Church has deviated from the mission and gospel vision of Jesus. And quite frankly, I don't even think Jesus, if he were to return to our day and time, would recognize the gospel that is being attributed to his name.

But Jesus' gospel, as stated in the Gospel According to Luke, is so radical, so upsetting of the status quo, so disruptive of what is convenient and conventional, that most people would rather ignore it, avoid it and deny it altogether. And I will remind you now that there is more to this gospel story than what we read today. Next week, when we pick up the story, the congregation is so upset by Jesus' words that they run him out of town and try to throw him off a cliff!

I read recently that a pastor in Minnesota confessed that the clearer he is with his congregation about the gospel of Jesus and the cost of discipleship, that is following in the Jesus way, the smaller his congregation gets. His church board even suggested to him that he should go on the road giving seminars on church shrinkage rather than on church growth. This pastor says that the church needs leaders who will preach a vision of the kingdom of God that looks like "Jesus' self-sacrificial love. He said that we need visionary leaders and teachers who will challenge the status quo and make people uncomfortable in the pews, who will help them wake up to the many ways that our lives have been co-opted by the culture. (Christian Century, December 1, 2009, pg. 8)

I think this pastor is spot on. I often wonder what the Church, the capital "C" Church is anymore? What has it become? Is it really the Church of Jesus, who envisioned good news to the poor,

release to the captives, recovery of sight to the blind, freedom to the oppressed, and the assurance of God's favor right here, right now? Where is that Church? What I am seeing is anything but that.

I am more likely to see a Church that wants to divide and separate people, to say who is unacceptable and who is not, rather than a vision of a Body of Christ bound together in its difference and at work in the world. A Body of Christ that Paul said gives "*greater honor to the inferior member, that there be no dissension within the body, but the members may have the same care for one another.*" (1 Corinthians 12:24-25) I am more likely to see the Church of American nationalism and arrogance. I am more likely to see churches of militarism than peace. I am more likely to see a church that whether by omission or overt action is willing to support and lobby for injustice for some rather than be champions of a justice for all God's beloved. I am more likely to see churches of consumerism...churches of greed...churches looking out for me and my kind... churches catering to the multitude of church shoppers out there, but few churches calling people to give themselves away for the poor, the bound up, the oppressed.

I wonder if the Church today is even capable of hearing the radical nature of the gospel of Jesus. And if it did hear Jesus' gospel, I am wondering if the Church would even listen and pay attention? Would it even care? And my wonderment is not only for the wider Church, the capital "C" Church, but my wonderment is also for us who claim Cross Creek Community Church as our home. Are we listening for the gospel of Jesus? Do we care? Is this vision of Jesus compelling for us in our life together...for us who also claim the name of Christ?

Much to my amazement, and just in the nick of time for this sermon, I found out that Philip Gulley, a Quaker pastor and beloved writer and speaker from Danville, Indiana, has been wondering about this too. Philip Gulley is no stranger to our congregation. He, along with his co-author James Mulholland, wrote two books that many of us have read: *If Grace is True* and *If God is Love*. They have spoken about their books in this very room.

Well, last week, I had a chance to visit with Philip Gulley again. He had come to Cross Creek to attend a memorial service of a friend of his who had died. In our conversation I found out that he has a new book coming out next month. In keeping with the tradition of *If Grace is True* and *If God is Love*, this new book promises to kick up the dust in the Church once again. His new book is called *If the Church Were Christian: Rediscovering the Values of Jesus*. Can you believe it?

The preliminary information about the book says that it will explore how the church has lost its way. An eye-opening examination of the values of Jesus reveals the extent to which the church has drifted from the teachings of the man who inspired its creation. Gulley provides a profound picture of what the church would look like if it focused on the priorities of Jesus.

It goes on to say

While many religions claim to be growing, the largest group in American religious life is the disillusioned – people involved in the church, but see few similarities between the church's life and the person of Jesus. In the midst of elaborate programming, professional worship, and political crusades, they ask, 'Is this really what Jesus called us to do?' While the church has dismissed these people as uncommitted and lacking in faith, perhaps the opposite is true. Their commitment to authentic spirituality over institutional idolatry might be the very corrective the church needs. These people respect Jesus, but question what Christianity has become.

Wow! Well, I can't wait to read what Gulley has to say. I'm just giving you a short sermon on the subject, but I can't wait to see what he has to say in an entire book on the matter!

I am trying hard to work out the arrangements to have Philip Gulley come back to Cross Creek to present his new book to us live and in person. So, stay tuned!

And I have to also wonder, what in the world is going on over there in Indiana. Both Philip Gulley and Carrie Newcomer, two Hoosiers, are releasing new works next month. Both are great articulators of more loving, more welcoming, more justice seeking, more Jesus-like Christian witness...and both live in Indiana. Well, I know this, they are blowing my image of Indiana!

In this season of Epiphany we are confronted with the LIGHT that Jesus sought to shine. We are called to listen afresh to the mission and message of Jesus. We are charged to consider again if that is the gospel that will seed our faith, ignite our vision, and empower our activism. Today, Jesus is calling again, CAN YOU HEAR ME NOW? Can you hear me now?

And when it comes to my ministry in the church, I have become clear in my vision: this gospel text, so important to Jesus' ministry, is what I want people want to say about me. In this text, I too have found a purpose and meaning for my life, and for being Christian. For I won't be perfect in living out this vision, but that is the goal I am striving for. When people think of Mike Castle, I hope people can sincerely say: "This is it! It's the best description of Mike's ministry we can find."

And I hope that is what people say about this church and our ministry together. So much so, that upon reading again this Isaiah narrative, so defining to Jesus, something clicks and continues to click among us. Again, we won't be perfect in living out Jesus' vision, but I hope that is the goal we are working toward. And when they think of Cross Creek Community Church, United Church of Christ, I hope people can sincerely say: "This is it! It's the best description of Cross Creek's ministry we can find."

In his *Book of Games* on spiritual playfulness, Hugh Prather recommends an exercise he calls "Secret Agent." This sounds like a game my 7-year old Gideon would love! Prather says, when you look at yourself in the mirror in the morning, imagine that you are a secret agent who has been sent by God to bring good to every person you meet that day without drawing attention to yourself. God has sent you to bring good news to those whose lives are filled with bad news, to love the unlovely, to help those in need, to make the world a better place, to make a difference for the good. This is your mission from God, should you choose to accept it. And if you choose not to accept it, then what in the world will be your mission in life?

"Hello my people. The world is full of darkness, and people are longing for light. There is a serious shortage of justice, kindness, compassion, and mercy. Your mission, should you choose to accept it, is to go to whomever I send you and bring them good news, to share my love, and extend my dominion of peace, leaving no one out. Do this without calling undue attention to yourselves. As always, should you be caught, I will acknowledge that you are mine, my beloved. This tape will replay over and over from your pulpit until you get it right."

Amen.