



“Mission Statement”
Luke 4:14-21
Sermon Preached by Gregory Knox Jones
January 27, 2013

We are incredibly blessed to live in a country founded on the core principles of liberty and justice. The founders of our nation put their lives on the line to seek independence from Great Britain so that the citizens of the colonies could enjoy the benefits of freedom and pursue their own destiny. Of course, these principles did not originate with Patrick Henry, Thomas Jefferson and John Adams. Freedom from oppression and justice for all were the guiding principles of the Old Testament prophets. They declared that these were to form the foundation for people of faith, because God had been revealed to them as a liberating God who became furious when people suffered injustice.

When the Hebrews had been slaves in Egypt, their oppressors kept them impoverished and subservient. They yearned to burst free from the chains that enslaved them and for the opportunity to create a society based on morality and fair treatment of all.

God called Moses to lead them out of their captivity and to a land where they could govern themselves. The journey was long and arduous, and along the way, God gave them the law by which they were to live. At the heart of the law were Ten Commandments which would provide the basic framework for a just society. These commandments included laws much like the civil laws of any nation: you cannot steal, murder or bear false witness.

However, the commands went further: you shall have no other gods, you shall honor your parents, you shall not covet what belongs to your neighbor. These commands were not civil laws, but religious duties designed to enhance life for the whole human family.

One of the commands, the longest and the most overlooked today, was intended to create justice not only for all people, but even for their livestock and for the very earth itself. The command to observe the Sabbath day and to keep it holy may have been the first labor law instituted in the ancient world. In Deuteronomy, the command says you work for six days and take off the seventh. Not only, do *you* not work, but nobody works. Not your children, not your slaves and not even your livestock. This command provided a framework for a just society in which no person, no animal and no land would be abused.

But, people being people, they did not always live up to God’s standards and so in succeeding centuries, God would call prophets – Isaiah, Jeremiah, Micah, Amos and others – to remind the people of their duty to do what is right and just. This meant not only refraining from criminal behavior, but also caring for the poor and

vulnerable. Providing support for widows, orphans and aliens was not simply an option for those who chose to be generous; it was God's expectation of everyone.

The story of the Exodus and the cries of the prophets played a major role in shaping Jesus as is evidenced in today's lectionary reading from the Gospel of Luke. The episode described in today's passage is at the beginning of his ministry. Jesus has returned to his home town of Nazareth and goes into the synagogue when people are gathered for worship.

It becomes a defining moment. He stands up among those gathered, takes the scroll of Isaiah and reads: "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."

To his stunned audience, Jesus claimed these words of Isaiah as his mission statement. This would be the thrust of his ministry.

He had recently returned from 40 days of testing in the wilderness in which he discerned God's will for his life. What he was absolutely certain God was calling him to do, was to have compassion for the poor, to open the eyes of those blind to God's vision and to set people free from whatever enslaves them.

Most of the people Jesus addressed were not middle class. He spoke to people who struggled each day to put bread on their table. Jesus preached a message of hope by telling them that their poverty was not divinely ordained and that God cared about them and suffered along with them.

When Jesus spoke to the well-heeled, it was often a warning not to be so captivated by their possessions that they neglected people who were living on the edge. He challenged those who had enough to share with those who had little. He taught them that in caring for others, they would heal their own soul.

In every age, people are tempted to find themselves by focusing inward and create a feeling of security by holding onto their treasures. Jesus challenges his followers to focus not inward, but outward, and to find well-being in helping others.

Sometimes the message of the Bible is unclear and we are not sure how God wants us to handle a particular issue. However, when it comes to compassion and justice the Bible is not ambiguous. If you can witness injustice and not become angry, you are a long way off the path of Jesus. But if injustice to the vulnerable makes your blood boil, you are not far from God.

Jesus calls on his followers to adopt his mission statement. We are to be so filled with compassion that we want everyone to get a fair shake and so filled with courage, that we will do something about it.

What is God nudging you to do? What is God whispering in your ear? Could it be to get involved in one of our feeding ministries such as Saturday Morning Breakfast or Emmanuel Dining Room? Perhaps God is nudging you to help the homeless by building a Habitat house or spending the night at church when we house people who have lost their home or preparing a meal for Code Purple when the temperature is so life-threatening that those on the streets are brought into a warm shelter. Perhaps God wants you to work for reasonable gun laws or support peace and justice for Israelis and Palestinians. Perhaps God wants you to mentor an at-risk child or drive someone to a doctor or go on a mission trip. One of the many things I love about Westminster is that we provide so many avenues for fulfilling the mission statement Jesus gives us.

And this mission statement is not simply for us as individuals or even simply for us as a church. It can serve as a blueprint for our society and our world.

Many of us have become accustomed to hearing our political leaders – whether Republican or Democrat – say they will pursue a foreign policy that is in the best interest of the United States. It sounds very patriotic and it makes a great applause line. However, if we genuinely desire to move in the direction of *ending* hostilities between peoples and nations – if we want to reduce the incentives for terrorism and war – then we must cease thinking in terms of narrow self-interests. Policies based on self-interest usually lead to actions that are good for *us* at a cost to *them*. Such actions only increase hostilities.

Every enduring religion teaches some form of the Golden Rule – Treat others the way you want to be treated – because we are all children of God. God did not create a world of millions of independent entities, but rather an interdependent world. We share the same water and air and natural resources. Everyone wants to prosper, to be respected and to be treated fairly. Jesus calls on us to be compassionate toward others and to work for justice for all, not simply because these are noble ideals, but because our individual well-being, our societal well-being and our future as a planet depend on the well-being of everyone. When we strive for justice for other tribes, other nations, other races and other religions we are affirming the *unity* of God’s creation and acting in harmony with God’s will. The amazing truth of God’s interdependent creation is that what is genuinely in an individual’s or a group’s best interest, is what is also best for all others. It is why early church leaders called on Christians to work for the common good. It is why the best way to defeat your enemy is to make him your friend.

My father fought in World War II and it was so effectively drilled into his head that the Germans and the Japanese were our enemies that he had a difficult time believing that our nation could become friends with people who spent years killing each other. For a long time it drove him crazy that our highways were filled with Toyotas and Mercedes. But our nation and our world are safer with Germany and Japan as our allies than if they were still our enemies.

Jim Wallis of Sojourners remembers going to South Africa back in the days of apartheid when Nelson Mandela was in prison and the majority of South Africans were oppressed by the minority white government. Wallis managed to sneak into the country so that he could support church leaders like Archbishop Desmond Tutu. Wallis was planning to attend a political rally that had been called by leaders of the black community, but the government cancelled the rally. Archbishop Tutu said, “Okay, then we will just have church.”

Hundreds of police lined the streets outside of St. George’s Cathedral in Cape Town to threaten and intimidate worshipers as they streamed into the church. Then, as the service began, many of the police marched into the sanctuary and stood along the walls. They had their pads of paper and tape recorders to document everything Tutu said.

When Tutu preached, he said, “This system of apartheid cannot endure because it is evil.” It sounded good, but there were few people back then who believed it would come to an end. But you could tell that Tutu believed it. Then he pointed his finger at the police who were standing along the walls and said, “You are powerful. You are very powerful, but you are not gods and I serve a God who cannot be mocked.” Then tension was unbelievable.

Then he flashed that wide, wonderful Desmond Tutu smile and said, “So since you’ve already lost, since you have already lost, I invite you today to come and join the winning side!”

At that, the congregation erupted. They began dancing in the church. They danced out into the streets and the police were completely dumbfounded because they did not know what to do with dancing worshipers!

Tutu proved to be a prophet because God's side was the winning side and apartheid collapsed. A few years later, Nelson Mandela was elected president and Wallis attended the inauguration. He went up to Bishop Tutu and said, "Do you remember that day at Saint George's?" Tutu smiled and said, "I remember." Then Wallis said, "Bishop, you were absolutely right. And today, they have all joined the winning side."¹

Our lives are better and the future of our planet is more hopeful if we bring good news to the poor, release the captives, free the oppressed and if all of us who are blind gain Christ-like vision.

NOTES

1. Jim Wallis, "We All Get Healed," November 21, 2000.