

“Be Thou Our Vision”
Nehemiah 8:1-10; Luke 4:14-21; I Corinthians 12:12-31a
January 27, 2019

It’s good to ask ourselves the following questions anytime of the year, but somehow it seems even more appropriate to ask ourselves now as we gather at our Annual Meeting: Why does The Church exist? Why does *our* church exist?

Possible answers to such a question - some of which are historical, others of which are theological, others of which are sociological, and so on - can be as diverse as are the followers of Christ himself. For example, some of us are evangelicals; other are orthodox. Some proudly bear the name Catholic, while other proclaim themselves to be Primitive Baptists. And there has been, and continues to be, a great deal of debate among Christians about the nature of the vision, the mission and the ministry of God’s people, and whether Christians should engage in politics to further those goals, or if the Kingdom of God has risen above such things.

Yet despite such questions and debates, there are certain grand, overarching themes in which God has spoken and acted to set forth a vision for his people, and for the mission and ministry God intends for the fulfillment of that vision. From the very beginning of God’s call to humanity, God declared that his people were to be a blessing to the nations. God did not call two individuals named Abraham and Sarah to this task; rather, God created a people - a people with a mission, a mission of blessing and of mediating God’s presence to the world.

Of course, people - even those whom God has chosen and called - fall short of God’s glory and neglect their God-given mission. It is clear that we need to be reminded, over and over again, about the relationship that God intends for us to have with God himself - and with one another - just as we need to be reminded, over and over again, about the God-given mission to the world that flows from those relationships.

Our Old Testament lesson this morning is set in the chaos of God’s people returning home from exile in Babylon. The people of Judah were struggling to rebuild

their lives and their faith among the ruins of the city of Jerusalem. At that time, God raised up two individuals - Ezra the priest and Nehemiah the governor - to guide God's people, to bring them back not only to a physical location - Mount Zion, which the Bible has called God's footstool - but more importantly to bring God's people back into a true and fruitful relationship with God himself. And so, following the rebuilding of the Temple and the completion of the Wall around Jerusalem, Nehemiah assembled the people and called upon Ezra to read to one and all from the Torah - the Word of God as revealed to Moses at Mount Sinai.

During the time of their exile, God's people had been cut off, both literally and figuratively. Not only had they been physically removed from their homeland, but they had also forgotten their historical covenant with God. Now, re-gathered as a re-constituted community, God's people are re-introduced to their common life together and the relationship to which God had called them. And so Nehemiah tells them to rejoice, for their life-giving relationship with God has been restored and through it they can once more claim their destiny to be a blessing to all peoples, a light to the nations.

And so, let us ask ourselves again: Why does The Church exist? Why does *our* church exist?

Our Gospel lesson is set more than 400 years later, when Jesus returned to Galilee and to his hometown of Nazareth. On the Sabbath day he went to the synagogue to pray and to teach. His ministry was just beginning, and it was likely that few, if any, had even the remotest idea of who he truly was and what he would be called to do. It was time to tell them, time to set forth clearly the vision that he had from God and the work that he knew he was called to do.

And so Jesus was given the scroll of the prophet Isaiah from which to read. Isaiah contains 66 chapters: Which words would Jesus choose from hundreds and hundreds of verses to define the mission and ministry that God had given to him? Would he choose the passage describing Isaiah's call in the midst of the seraphim and cherubim shouting

“Holy! Holy! Holy!” in God’s very presence? Would he pick a passage of judgment and rebuke for the wayward: “Woe unto the rebellious children”? Would he favor words of comfort and assurance? What passage would Jesus select to teach the people what God wanted most? What visionary words would best define his mission to a lost people and a lost creation? What would be the singular guiding vision for his life and for the revelation of God that was his to bring?

All eyes were upon him. All ears were anxious to hear. The rabbis were waiting to see what this uneducated, illiterate carpenter’s son would do.

The passage Jesus picked is simple yet breathtaking: “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me because he has anointed me” Jesus read. That is tantamount to saying, “God has appointed me messiah” (for that is the meaning of ‘anointed’) “so that I might do specific things: I am to bring good news to the poor. I am to announce release to those who are captive. I am to bring sight to the blind. I am to set those who are oppressed free. I am to tell everyone that God’s favor is upon each one of us, and that God loves each one of us.” And then Jesus departed from the sacred text and summed it all up this way: “The fulfillment of all these things is to take place in me, and it is to begin today.”

Stunned silence! How amazing that such depth and knowledge of the scriptures can come from one who never studied as a rabbi! But then Jesus confronts them, and us, with some unpleasant truths. Throughout history, the people of God have loved the vision of God’s salvation; we have rejoiced in the calling to be God’s people; but time and time again we have abandoned the work of making the vision a reality. And, Jesus suspects, we will do it once again.

So, let’s ask ourselves again: Why does The Church exist? Why does *our* church exist?

I believe that Christ has made it quite clear. From the beginning of his earthly ministry, Jesus announced the vision; he set down the work that all who would follow him are to do. We are to bring good news to the poor. We are to tell them of God’s favor

and love for every human being, and we are to make that love tangibly Incarnate. We are to labor for justice and equity. We are to destroy all things that imprison and enslave God's children - all things that hold them captive to suffering and evil. We are to open the eyes of all to the presence of God in their lives and to the person of Christ in their neighbor. We are to set people free from the the oppressiveness of disease, hatred, prejudice, war ... *and the delusion that material possessions are the measure of one's worth*. We are, quite simply, to live in such a way that the love of God, revealed in Christ, becomes a reality to the world, and not just a dream.

At a time when our world, our nation, and our churches seem all too divided and polarized, we who claim the name of Christ, who profess to follow him as Lord, must constantly remind ourselves of Jesus' vision for his - and our - mission and ministry. We must remember, as the Apostle reminded the Christians in Corinth, that we are all members of one body - the Body of Christ - and that body is to be a living and active presence in the world. We must never fail to encourage and support one another, and to share our gifts and our talents for each other - for the work we have been called to do is none other than the work of God himself.

And so, as we gather together in our Annual Meeting, let us ask ourselves anew: What does it mean to be the people of God? What does it mean to be the Church? What is the vision that shapes and guides us? What is the mission that sends us forth? What is the ministry that we share?

May we be granted the mind of Christ himself so that clarity of vision may illumine the path that leads to God's kingdom.

Let us pray: