

Jesus' Mission

The Rev. Dr.
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**Sermon Series: From
the Pew to the World**

1 Corinthians 15:3-8

We are not asking Jesus to join our mission. We are joining his mission.

The first Sunday after Easter is called “Low Sunday” in the church. We observed “High Sunday” on Easter. We blew a gasket last Sunday with drama, full choir and orchestra, a stirring minute for witness and record crowds.

“Low Sunday” in church parlance is sometimes called “Cannonball Sunday,” meaning you can fire cannons in any direction in the church and not hit anyone! I was tempted to put the words on our marquee this week “Open between Christmas and Easter,” but I thought it would seem rather smarty pants.

Last Sunday, I began my sermon by saying that Easter is like a church open house. It’s one Sunday in the year when people come and see what’s going on. Ordinarily, I speak to regulars in our church, knowing guests are listening in. But last Sunday, I reversed course and spoke directly to our guests, inviting regulars to listen in.

I bet today I’m speaking primarily to our regulars, given that it’s the Sunday after Easter. Plus it’s raining cats and dogs out there. I suspect some of the faithful hit the snooze button.

For the next four Sundays, our church will be focusing on mission; “From the pew to the world” we are calling it. There is danger in treating mission as just another program in the church.

We treat mission as the job of our Outreach Committee—to parcel out money to local, national and international missionaries.

Let me set the record straight: Jesus is on a mission. Jesus brings good news to people. His mission means good news for all people.

We’re not merely a church with a mission program. We are aligning ourselves as a church with Jesus’ mission. We are not asking Jesus to join our mission. We are joining his mission.

Vienna Presbyterian is a church committed to disciple-making. Let me say it another way: Every Christian is a disciple. Every disciple is a missionary. Every missionary has a sphere of influence. Your sphere of influence is not Moldova—that’s Oleg’s mission field. Your sphere of influence is precisely the places where you live and work.

Our focus today is Jesus’ inaugural sermon from the gospel of Luke. This is not Jesus’ first public appearance. Look closely at Luke 4:14-15. Jesus has been ministering in Galilee, the northern part of Israel, for some time now. There may be as much as a year’s worth of ministry compressed into these two verses.

Luke places this story first in his gospel, because it is representative of Jesus’ ministry. It not only portrays Jesus’ public ministry, it foreshadows what is to come.

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We are told in verses 14-15 that Jesus’ reputation precedes him. The word coming out of Galilee is that Jesus is a powerful, effective preacher.

Our Scripture lesson highlights Jesus’ homecoming in Nazareth. You may recall Jesus was born in the small town of Bethlehem and raised in the small town of Nazareth. (Does John Mellencamp’s *I Was Born in a Small Town* come to mind?) After a year’s worth of ministry in Galilee, Jesus is finally coming home. Everyone in town senses the moment. Maybe they put up “Welcome home, Jesus” banners and plan a parade in his honor.

Jesus attends worship on the Sabbath. He is asked to read the Scripture lesson and preach the sermon. He opens the scroll to one of the most beloved readings from the prophet Isaiah, “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 acceptable year of the Lord’s favor” (4:18-19).

Jesus hands the scroll back to the attendant and sits down, assuming the customary posture for preaching. Luke records that the eyes of everyone in the synagogue are locked on Jesus (4:20). Jesus delivers a one-sentence sermon: “Today this Scripture is fulfilled in your hearing” (4:21). How significant that in Luke’s gospel “today” serves as Jesus’ first recorded word. “Today

this Scripture is fulfilled in your hearing.” God’s era of salvation has now dawned. Salvation is right here and right now!

“Isn’t this Joseph’s son?” they asked each other, “the son of a carpenter” (4:22). Those who had known Jesus growing up find it impossible to imagine Jesus is the anointed one of God.

Jesus counters with two well-known proverbs: “Physician, heal yourself” and “No prophet is honored in his own hometown.” I suspect Jesus’ hometown is more than a little put off by the fact that Jesus took his message on the road rather than bringing it home. If Jesus had anything to offer, they ought to be the first to receive it. Jesus defends his ministry to outsiders by citing two prophets God commissioned to minister to foreigners. Elijah was sent to a foreign widow; Elisha visits a foreigner with leprosy.

Jesus not only refuses to give preferential treatment to his hometown, he seizes the moment to elaborate on the universal scope of his ministry. God’s salvation will be offered to all kinds of people. This infuriates the townspeople. They form a lynch mob, drag Jesus outside the city (on the Sabbath, no less) to throw him off a cliff. Somehow, miraculously, Jesus escapes.

At the outset of this story, Jesus is welcomed enthusiastically. But once Jesus lays exclusive claim to being God’s anointed Messiah, their adulation evaporates. Then, when Jesus announces he has taken God’s favor to people beyond Nazareth, especially to places in Galilee with

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a significant Gentile population, they go ballistic!

Jesus is on a mission. We are not soliciting Jesus to join our mission, we are joining his mission.

His mission means good *news* to the poor. “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor.” Jesus teaches in his first Beatitude, “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for they shall see God” (Matthew 5:3). In other words, blessed are those who know their need and dependence of God. Those who are poor in soul put their trust in God.

There is a danger in over-spiritualizing Jesus’ words to the poor. The poor are also impoverished physically. Jesus demonstrates a decided preference for poor people. Those who have rights must stand up for the marginalized.

There is no inherent virtue in being poor. Jesus, in fact, spent much of his life trying to eradicate the blight of poverty. Yet wealth has a way of insulating us against human need. The poor are blessed, not on account of their poverty; they are blessed because they are more likely to know their need for God.

Jesus’ mission means release to the captives. “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me because he has anointed me to proclaim release to the captives” and then, later, “to let the oppressed go free.” The pronoun *me* is placed in emphatic

position. “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....” Jesus offers people full release.

I have a vivid memory of visiting Disney World with our family when our kids were small. Andrew and Emily begged me to ride the Tilt O’Whirl with them. My kids found the sensation of centrifugal force pressing against them to be positively exhilarating. After that, we rode the Tea Cups, which hurled us from side-to-side and spun us around. At the outset, we were laughing and having a good time. Then I began to feel queasy. I wanted the ride to stop, but I had no way to communicate to the carnival ride operator. I felt trapped, going round and round in circles. I was so relieved when the ride came to a stop. I stumbled out of the Tea Cups, and headed straight for the park bench. My kids bounded off the ride, ready for the next one. Emily asked, “What’s wrong, Daddy?” Andrew remarked that I was as white as a ghost.

Bondage sometimes feels like that. It’s the sensation of feeling trapped and immobilized. We can live in bondage to other people, places or things. We can become enslaved to addictions and habitual patterns of destructive behavior. Christ offers us full release. The second verse of Charles Wesley’s beloved hymn, “O for a Thousand Tongues,” comes to mind, “Christ breaks the power of reigning sin,

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and sets the prisoners free; Christ's blood can make the sinful clean, his blood availed for me."

Jesus' mission means recovery of sight to the blind. "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me because he has anointed me to bring...sight to the blind."

Oliver Sacks, in his book *An Anthropologist on Mars*, writes about Virgil, a man who had been blind from early childhood. When he was 50, Virgil underwent surgery and was given the gift of sight. But as he and Dr. Sacks found out, having the physical capacity for sight is not the same thing as seeing. Virgil's first experiences with sight were confusing. He was able to make out colors and movements, but arranging them into a coherent picture was more challenging. Over time, he learned to identify various objects, but his habits and behavior were those of a blind man. Dr. Sacks asserts, "One must die as a blind person to be born again as a seeing person."

Some people have eyes but do not see. We may enjoy 20/20 vision yet remain blind to the things of God in the world. St. Augustine said, "It is of no advantage to be near the light if your eyes are closed." Jesus asked, "Do you have eyes, but fail to see?" (Mark 8.18).

Jesus offers full release to people afflicted with poverty, bondage and blindness. We are not asking Jesus to join our mission; we are joining his mission.

Every Christian is a disciple. Every disciple is a missionary. Every missionary has a sphere of influence. Your sphere of influence is the places where you live and work.

