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*Living With Purpose: The Big Picture*  
A sermon on Luke 4:14-21/1 Cor. 12  
January 27, 2019

Last fall, our church adopted a new mission statement. Can you say it with me? “Loving God, loving neighbors and living with purpose.” This winter, we are talking about living with purpose. As followers of Christ, our purpose is to become more like Jesus: to do what he did, to follow his teachings, to love as he loved and live as he lived. Every Sunday between now and Easter, we’ll be looking at the Gospel readings in the lectionary together, and watching what Jesus did and hearing what he said and asking, “What does this mean for us? What does this mean for me in my life, and what does it mean for this 160 year old congregation in downtown Topeka, KS?”

Last week we began with the first miracle Jesus performs in the Gospel of John, and heard the marvelous story of Jesus saving a wedding from disaster by changing water into an enormous amount of the best wine anyone had ever had. It’s a powerful message about grace and celebration and abundance.

Today’s story from the Gospel of Luke is also about grace and celebration and abundance, but in a different way. Jesus has been on a teaching tour around Galilee, and it’s gone well, but now he’s come home to Nazareth. And now instead of a wedding, he’s at the synagogue, where he goes every sabbath, like any good Jew of his day would do.

When I went to the Israel last fall, we spent an afternoon in Nazareth and there was a little church there that was constructed to show us what the Nazareth synagogue would have been like. It was small, MAYBE about as big as our chapel. It was made out of rough stones, with no ornamentation, and just had a couple of tiny windows cutout near the roof to let in some

light and air. Instead of ornately carved pews, just some simple benches to sit on. Of all the buildings and churches we looked at in the Holy Land, this was the LEAST impressive.

Remember Nazareth was not a particularly important little town.

Jesus stands to read the scripture, as people did and still do today. It sounds like he CHOSE what he read, from Isaiah 61: “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 recover of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.” Today, we also stand to teach and preach, but in those days, if you wanted to address the congregation, you sat down in the Moses seat, which was reserved for the teacher, and that’s what Jesus did. And with all eyes on him, waiting to hear what he’ll say next, Jesus riveted the town by saying, “Today, this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.”

In other words, Jesus gives us his mission statement. HIS purpose.

Have you ever worked on a big jigsaw puzzle? I love those things. I’ve got one spread out all over the kitchen table at home right now. My daughter Rachel and I bought it to work on together when she was home from college for Christmas Break. It’s got 1,000 pieces, according to the box. It’s a puzzle of a multi-story European castle in the moonlight. And I don’t know about you, but when I’m putting one of these things together, I’m constantly having to look at the picture on the box. Without that picture, I’d be lost—I’d have no idea what I was doing, or how the pieces were supposed to fit together. The picture keeps me focused, and inspires me to keep going, especially when it’s taking me forever just to get two little square inches of sky completed.

In this passage, Jesus gives us the picture. This is what we hold up, and look at, as we put the pieces together. The one who brings good news to the poor, pardon for prisoners, sight

for the blind, and freedom for people who are burdened and battered. We're constantly looking up, checking to see where our piece fits in.

Sometimes we're looking at the wrong picture. No matter how much we may know that we need to do things differently, some of us can't help looking at a picture from the 1960's, or the 1970's, or the 1980's, or even the 1990's, when this church, and the pews were full, and the balcony was full, and we didn't have to worry about going out into the community, because the community came to us. That picture isn't there anymore, and the pieces we hold will not make that picture come back.

Sometimes I realize that I'm looking at a picture that's too small. It's too small because I'm the only one in it. Or, I'm in it, and my family is in it, and maybe a few other people I really care about, and maybe you beloved saints of First Presbyterian Church are in it. But that's it. When I'm busy focusing on me and MY picture, the poor aren't there, the blind aren't there, the captives and the oppressed aren't there.

Jesus says, look at me. Here I am. I'm the picture.

To live with purpose that aligns with the purpose of Jesus, we hold up what we do in the light of what he said and did. He said: I'm here, the Holy Spirit is ON me and IN me, and I am preaching good news to people who are used to hearing bad news, I am unlocking the doors for people who are trapped, I am coming to people who have been stumbling around and helping them SEE again, and I am lifting the burdens of people who are weighed down with suffering and shame and injustice and humiliation. God is acting NOW, not some distant time in the future, but NOW. That's what Jesus said, and that's what he did.

As a church, we look at that picture and say, OK—which ministries fit that picture? Our Blessing Box . . . Souper Bowl Sunday . . . Stephen Ministry . . . Flash Blessings . . . Caring

Cards . . . visits from the Deacons' Caring Friends ministry . . . Harvest Offering and Christmas Adoptions . . . anything that equips and inspires people to see and act with compassion, including Bible Study and worship. Does everything we do fit this picture? Are there things we can let go of, are they things we could do differently?

It's common today to talk about metrics—how do we measure the impact of what we do here? At session meetings we talk about number of members and ages of members, how many people are giving, and how many people have increased their giving, how many people come to Sunday School, how many people come to worship, how many baptisms have we had, and how many visitors come to see our windows. This isn't bad, but it's just such a tiny part of the picture. Jesus, and his ministry to people in desperate need of good news, and help, and a fresh start, and that God is real and here NOW, and here for THEM—that's the picture. The more our church engages in those kinds of activities, the more our church is truly the body of Christ, and ultimately that is the metric that matters.

Speaking of the body of Christ . . . the wonderful good news for me is that I don't have to do this all by myself. We are the body of Christ. God has given each of us different pieces of the puzzle. I don't have to be something I'm not. I'm not responsible for the whole thing—just my pieces. But I am responsible for connecting with the people around me, so that together we can be part of something much more wonderful than any of us could be on our own.

Now back to the question of what this means for you, in your own life, as a follower of Christ here in Topeka, KS: you are part of the big picture. The picture is not complete without YOU. Have you ever tried to put a puzzle together, and one of the pieces was missing? Well, first of all, it's much harder to put a puzzle together with a missing piece. Second, once you do get it together, there's a hole where that missing piece ought to be. This is not just nice sounding

churchy talk from the pastor. This is Gospel truth. I've said this before, and I'll say it again. Your presence here matters. Your voice when we sing matters, even if you're singing out of tune—we still need you. Let it out, folks. However you're dressed, we need you and your style—it's absolutely fine if it's not like everyone else. YOUR sense of humor, YOUR gifts, your particular way of passing the peace, and ESPECIALLY YOUR PRAYER—don't fall on the floor and let my cats slide you under a chair—we are not complete without you. Our call is to connect, and to look for others who need to connect, and to keep looking up at the picture Jesus offers. Not at empty pews, or the church down the road, but at Jesus.

Living with Purpose starts with looking at Jesus' purpose. Next week, let's find out how his message went over in his hometown of Nazareth. We'll learn about the courage it takes to stick to our purpose.