

“Jesus’ Mission: Proclaiming the Good News”
Luke 4:14-30
January 14, 2007

The Rev. Christine Chakoian
First Presbyterian Church
Lake Forest, Illinois

Last week we celebrated the Baptism of the Lord, when he was baptized by John in the River Jordan, and the Holy Spirit alighted on him, and God claimed him as his own. We celebrated that Sunday in a very meaningful way: by remembering our own baptisms, and the gift of the Holy Spirit on us, and God’s claim on us as his own.

Today we begin to hear what happened *after* Jesus was baptized – the rest of the story, if you will. Because Jesus’ baptism did not just leave him feeling pure and good, claimed by God, and clear about who his gifts and identity. Jesus’ baptism by the Spirit drove him into the wilderness of the desert, where he was tested ... and then it propelled him back to his home community where he began his life’s work in earnest.

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Each of us has a mission in life -- at least one, frankly – a purpose or calling to which we are uniquely called to spend ourselves. Our mission, I have come to believe, has much to do with the gifts that are given. From the gregarious we expect a certain friendliness and welcome; from the intellectual we expect careful thoughtfulness; from the kind-hearted we expect compassion towards those who are hurting. Yesterday we held a workshop for our officers and other leaders in the congregation. As we asked them to explore their particular gifts, it was no surprise that we identified different things unique to each individual: intellect, organization, creativity, even hope. God has made us each with different gifts, and God wants us to play to our strengths. God delights in the fish that swims, not the one that tries to fly; so also our God delights in us when we fulfill our own peculiar make-up.

Many, many books have been written about finding your gifts, about identifying your personality type, about following your bliss. I commend them to you; indeed, I have been helped to appreciate some of the idiosyncrasies that make me who I am: my strong will, for example, and my earnestness; my big heart and my insatiable curiosity, accompanied by an attendant lack of interest in maintenance and detail, which drives my colleagues nuts. Knowing

our strengths and our foibles helps us find our appropriate niche in life. It is ultimately an act not of pride, but of stewardship, to know and use our gifts as we seek our mission in life.

But in seeking our *mission*, there is an additional piece we often forget. Indeed, it's a piece all the secular self-help literature will never help you discover. In seeking our mission, we need to move beyond just asking what our gifts are. We need also to ask this: What is *God's need* for our gifts? That's the difference between genuine *mission* and merely *self-fulfillment*. Self-fulfillment encourages you to be all you can be, to play to your strengths, to make the most of yourself. Self-fulfillment may bring happiness and satisfaction and even great joy. But none of those is as large a goal as what is offered to us as Christians. We are invited to fulfill *God's* mission. That is the calling of our baptism. And it is the calling that Christ himself seeks in his opening ministry in Nazareth: to fulfill his mission in *God's* design for his life.

But how do we know what our mission is? For us as Christians, one of the key ways that we discover our own mission is to seek and follow the mission of Jesus Christ. *Imitatio Christi* is what the ancients called it: the imitation of Christ. It is part of why Jesus came to us – to be *God's* presence in *human* form so that we might most clearly see what it means to live in the image of God. So we begin this week with a brief series of the ways that Jesus fulfilled his own calling ... the way he understood his role and mission in life ... the activities he chose to undertake, the values by which he lived, the purpose for which he marched so purposefully, even when it meant marching all the way to the cross.

Let's look again then at the opening scene of Jesus' adult life. He has been baptized by John in the Jordan, seasoned in the wilderness with testing, and now he has returned to his home territory. Notice first how he begins his life: he goes to the synagogue, and he opens the Scripture to read it. By Scripture, of course, we mean the words of the Hebrew Bible, what we know as our Old Testament; and the section he chooses is found in 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 year of the Lord's favor." Then he proclaims this very good news indeed: today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing.

His reading is met with great joy and acclamation, much in the way we greet our successful sons and daughters, newly launched from college, who have come home on vacation: “Oh, isn’t this Joseph’s boy! Didn’t he turn out well? We’re so proud of him!” No doubt that Jesus relishes this great affirmation. These are the aunts and uncles at whose table he spent many an extended family celebration; these are the Sabbath school teachers at whose knees he first learned Scripture; these are the neighbors and friends of his parents, whose love he cherishes and whose well-being he prays for every day.

But Jesus has been baptized, baptized into a larger mission that he simply cannot ignore. As much as it must pain him to cause his own beloved people pain, he is compelled by the Spirit to use his eloquent gifts, his knowledge of Scripture, even his relationships with his kin, to convey God’s message that has filled his heart. And this is his unwelcome message to them: God will not favor the insiders. There were many widows in Israeli in the time of Elijah, but Elijah was sent to none of them; rather, he was sent into Sidon. And there were many lepers in Israel in the time of the prophet Elisha, but he was sent to cleanse none of them; rather, he was sent into Syria. Now, Jesus is in effect saying, even though there are many among God’s chosen people who are in desperate need, who are hungry for bread and hungry for hope, Jesus was sent to open other eyes, to free other captives, to preach hope to others who are poor.

We don’t always appreciate the deeply human side of Jesus: how easy it would have been for him to settle for worldly success, to stop when he heard the accolades of those he loved and respected. How pleasant it would have been for him to say exactly what everyone wanted to hear, to use his abundant gifts for self-fulfillment and gratifying achievement. But he wouldn’t – he couldn’t – because he was *baptized*. He was baptized with the Spirit of God and propelled into God’s mission, no matter what the cost ... no matter what the rejection.

The mission into which we are called is so much more than our self-satisfaction. Our mission is so much more than identifying our gifts, following our bliss, playing to our strengths. Our mission is not always successful on the world’s terms; it does not always gain great numbers, nor affection. Our mission is not always applauded. But it is ours to do, because it is God’s agenda we are privileged to serve.

I am struck, on this Martin Luther King weekend, I am struck by the fact that this church has known that great privilege, and fulfilled God's agenda, at various points in our past, all the way back to the point of our founding. It is in our DNA. In the middle of the 19th century, when our country was at war with itself about the nature of slavery, and what it meant to be human, and who the good news of freedom was for – at this painful and difficult time in our nation's life, leaders in this church were on the forefront of God's mission. At a time when, in Martin Luther King's own words, at a time when "men convinced themselves that a system which was so economically profitable must be morally justifiable," the abolitionists of this congregation stood up faithfully and strongly ("Love in Action," *Strength to Love*, 1963). They used their gifts – their money, their voice, their position, their power – they used their gifts not to support the status quo, but to fulfill their mission as they saw it. Unpopular as it must have been ... unapplauded as it often was ... they stood up for what was right. They proclaimed the good news to the poor, they freed the captive, and they tried their very best to bring sight to the slave-owning blind, even when they did not want to see.

God's agenda is so much greater than our personal happiness. God's mission is so much more breathtaking than our personal fulfillment. God's mission is to bring wholeness and justice, good news and peace, healing and joy to all of his children. And we are called, every one of us, to fulfill this mission with whatever gifts and skills we bring.

This week at our Moveable Feast preaching colloquium, Cynthia Campbell, president of McCormick Seminary, told a story that illustrates for me the power of that calling in our life. This fall, they asked one of their recent graduates to be on a panel in an introductory class for new students – students who were exploring their own mission in life. The panelists were asked to share their story of call to ministry. On this Martin Luther King weekend, it's appropriate to share a particular story: the story of an African American man whose life had been spent in service to his own success, and who was utterly transformed by God's mission. This is what Cynthia told us:

"Anthony is ordained in the Church of God, Anderson, Indiana. He is probably in his early 40's, but there is something about him that seems older. I think of him as a distinguished gentleman with almost old-fashioned manners. I've never seen him

without a suit; in the winter, he wears a fedora. He is not quite six feet tall but very slight of build. He speaks softly, very deliberately. He's fond of saying, 'I'm a McCormick man.'

"He took introduction to theology the last time I taught it, and was a very average student – but no one worked more diligently. I was frankly surprised when he said his goal was to get a PhD in theology. I was even more surprised when he was admitted to the PhD program at LSTC where he is now about to begin his dissertation. He has already been interviewed by his denominational seminary for a teaching position.

"His story is this. Before coming to seminary, Anthony was on his way up in the leadership of one of the largest gangs on the south side of Chicago. He sold drugs; he managed a 'staff' who sold; he made a lot of money. But, as he said, he violated one of the cardinal rules of dealing; he started using. One weekend, he went through \$15,000 worth of cocaine. When he came to, he realized he didn't have the cash to cover the debt. I'll shift to his voice.

"So I was watching TV and found the Vernon Park Church of God. And I'm wondering where I can get the money I need. I see all these people sitting in church with fur coats, and I think, 'This is where the money is!' So, I call a couple of my guys and we head down to the church. The plan is to hang around, jump the ushers and make off with the offering. (This is all before I knew that all people usually put in the plate is a couple of dollars!)

"Finally, the preacher got up for the sermon. His topic was 'Things That Don't Mix With Salvation.' There's things that don't mix together, like oil and water. It's the same with salvation. What I didn't know until later,' Anthony said, 'is that Pastor Wyatt had already started into Alzheimer's, and he had preached this same sermon for the last three weeks. But I swear he looked out at me and said, 'There are things that don't mix with salvation, son, like coming here to rob this church.'

"He finished the sermon and called for people to come up and give their lives to the Lord. I knew he meant me, so I went up. I took my 9mm out of my pants and put it on the table with the words on it about remembering. All the deacons jumped back, but I

knelt down and gave my life over. I've never looked back.” (As told by Cynthia Campbell in an unpublished paper to the Moveable Feast, January, 2007.)

We all bring gifts to this life of ours. The gift of intellect, the gift of creativity, the gift of organizing, the gift of hope, whatever your gifts may be. Anthony's gift was a 9mm gun and a masterful ability to organize. Cynthia believes that Anthony would have made a fabulous CEO. It goes without saying that his colleagues were not pleased at his decision to give his gifts up to the Lord. But Anthony knew, he deeply knew, what Jesus had also come to believe, and to follow. The Spirit of the Lord was calling him to give it all up, to lay it all down at the table of grace, for the sake of God's mission.

God's agenda is so much greater than our personal happiness. God's mission is so much more breathtaking than our personal fulfillment. God's mission is to bring wholeness and justice, good news and peace, healing and joy to all of his children. And we are called, every one of us, to fulfill this mission with whatever gifts and skills we bring. May we who are baptized in the amazing Spirit of the Lord find our mission – our mission in God's own remarkable agenda. Amen.