

“Sent for this Purpose”

Jeremiah 1:4-8

Luke 4:38-44

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First Presbyterian Church

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Why are we here?

This is a central life question that, sooner or later, everybody has to answer. Not just, why is anyone generically here, but why are *you* here? What is *your* purpose here on earth?

As we heard in Scripture, Jeremiah was clear: he heard the voice of God calling him “to be a prophet to the nations.” Jesus was certainly clear: “I must proclaim the good news of the kingdom of God ... for I was sent for this purpose.” I suspect we all long to be so clear.

In fact, too often we’re not very clear at all about why we’re here. That’s when we’re most prone to becoming complacent, forgetful, restless, anxious, angry or bored. Sometimes those feelings are the first indication we have that something’s wrong – that we’ve lost our sense of purposefulness, our reason to get up in the morning, our measure of a day not squandered.

Why are *you* here? It’s my conviction that there’s an answer for each of us ... a basic sense that my life brings value to the world in some important way. Often the precise manifestation of that value changes over time, as we find our skills and gifts used by God in different ways as our lives alter – from child to adult, student to breadwinner, and so on. But our essential value and purpose – that does not change.

How do we know what that purpose is? Though few of us hear the voice of God as directly as Jesus or Jeremiah did, I believe that if you listen you can discern God’s call to use your gifts, indeed, your very life. During the season of Lent, which begins in just two weeks, we’ll be exploring some of the ways we can reconnect with God’s presence in our daily lives ... ways we can reconnect with God’s voice and our purpose.

If it’s the central question for our individual lives, it’s the central question for every institution too, which everyone in corporate life knows. If you’re not clear why you’re “in business,” you run the risk of squandering your resources and losing your way. Exhibit A is Toyota, which traded brand quality for quick growth. Similarly, if you don’t respond to the changes around you,

you'll also crash and burn, or at least go off track rather badly for a time. Exhibit B would be GM or Ford, I would submit.

Every institution needs to be clear about what it is here to do – corporations, universities, hospitals, and yes, even the church. Over the years, many a congregation has lost its way for lack of clear vision and common purpose, and many are churches are in trouble for that reason. Let me be clear: not every apparently thriving mega-church is faithful to its calling, and not every apparently dying church is struggling because it has been faithless. But the risk is always there for an *institution* to become complacent, forgetful, restless, anxious, angry or bored. Sometimes those feelings are the first indication we have that something's wrong – that we've lost our sense of purposefulness, our reason to get up in the morning, our measure of a day not squandered.

Today, on the occasion of the 150th year of our Annual Meeting, I invite us to measure that faithfulness ... to make sure that we are clear as can be about our church's purpose, our congregation's calling, in this time and in this place. Now, if this is your first time here, I suspect you may be saying, "Oh, great. I've come to the corporate meeting." Think of it this way: you get to look under the hood and kick the tires (and check the gas pedal to make sure it doesn't stick) before you sign on!

So where do we start? One of the keys to discerning our church's purpose is to look at the motivations for our founding. Like the prophet Jeremiah and even Jesus himself, our church's calling was clear as a bell at the beginning. It was as if our founders themselves heard the voice of God. And in a sense, they did. In the upstart city of Chicago, staggering growth brought with it disorder, disease, pollution and decadence. The Presbyterians were roused to respond.

Their priorities quickly emerged. Even before our church opened, the town of Lake Forest was platted, our University chartered, and our Sunday school began meeting in the Old Hotel in what is now Triangle Park. Then, the day our church was founded, "on a bright and pleasant Lord's day, July 24, 1859," the first thing those fourteen members did was gather for the worship of God. Take note of these first things: promoting justice and opportunity through civic leadership and education, providing for the spiritual nurture of

young and old, and proclaiming the gospel through worship. From the moment our founders dared to put flesh and bone on their dreams, this was their purpose.

As any entrepreneur or venture capitalist knows, the founder's carefully honed vision goes a long way to the success of the organization. But they also know there's a vulnerable moment as the decisions and the purse-strings pass to the next generation. That was certainly true for us. Almost immediately after our founding, we faced challenges: conflicts over political issues, first abolition, then economic justice in the Gilded Age. Disagreements between conservatives and liberals over theology threatened to dissolve us. Leadership at the top was either ineffective, caught in the middle, or both. But once the leadership settled down – under Dr. James G. K. McClure – we got right back to our priorities. Under McClure's watch we replaced our drafty clapboard sanctuary with this noble building, for worship every Sunday morning and evenings. We added to Sunday school for adults and children with a Sunday evening prayer meeting for young people. We established a children's missionary group called "Steady Streams," sponsored one of the first youth groups – Christian Endeavor – and established one of the first Scout troops – which we still host. We successfully launched the schools we set out to found, we sent three young people as missionaries to China and Persia, and, under retired missionary Sarah Rhea the women of the church established three hospitals and schools in Persia. Not too shabby for our first fifty years.

Fast forward over the next century. The truth is that we endured some ups and downs. Sometimes we were massively faithful to our mission. We focused on worship – introducing bulletins and installing stained glass windows, hiring extraordinary organists and a paid quartet. We focused on faith formation – adding two Sunday school wings, developing programs like parenting classes and Work Trip for our youth, reaching out to newcomers, including military families at our nearby bases during two world wars, and an enormous influx of families during the Baby Boom. And we focused on mission - both corporately and as individuals, we launched ministries like Association Neighborhood House and what's now 30 Good Minutes, Reading Power and the Career Resource Center. Our members have led hospitals, colleges, and

social service agencies, including the international YWCA, and have spent hundreds of millions of dollars backing national and global mission efforts. There was no doubt what we were here to do.

Have we always been faithful? Hardly. There have been seasons in our church's life – sometimes painfully long seasons – in which we have succumbed to the very problems that on other occasions called forth our noblest efforts. Economic pressures, external threats, internal divisiveness, overweening growth, challenging decline ...all of these have revisited us again and again. Sometimes we have met them valiantly, and other times, we have failed miserably. Today, in the face of daunting economic pressures and political partisanship ... in the face of external threat and cultural decadence ... in the face of moral, environmental, and ethical pollution, we can rise to our calling ... or not. It is ours to decide ... and I can't tell you what will happen.

But I can tell you what I hope. I hope we will embrace our identity. Over the past year, our Session and staff have taken a good hard look at why we are here.

For our founders, worship was always our primary purpose. But in recent decades, cultural norms and competing interests – like Sunday morning golf and soccer – have eroded our expectation of ourselves. It used to be that *everyone* went to church on Sunday. Now, in our society, it's just part of our entertainment options – like movies and TV shows – or self-improvement – like the salon and the gym. Worship is no longer the default for Sunday morning ... now it's a choice, and to some extent at counter-cultural choice.

Our Session is challenging us to reclaim worship as our first priority. We have started by investing in a third worship service each Sunday at five o'clock. Now, in addition to our traditional morning worship we bring the gospel message using the vernacular of acoustic and global music. But you also must choose. Your presence or absence, your enthusiasm or indifference – this is the measure of whether we reclaim worship as our first priority.

For our founders, a close second was spiritual nurture, and throughout the years we have sought to provide comfort and welcome, compassion and

nurture – through our pastors and staff, Stephen Ministers and Deacons, Sunday school teachers and volunteers.

But part of spiritual nurture is also Christian Education - not just for children, but for youth and adults. In the South it's still the assumption that adults will go to Sunday school – just ask any transplant. But in the North, well, not so much. While most of us can't imagine finishing our secular education at eighth grade – a vast number of us here have advanced degrees – peculiarly, we think nothing of finishing our religious education at confirmation. Frankly, I find it a little bizarre. More importantly, it leaves us woefully ill equipped for the ethical and moral challenges we face – choices which are becoming increasingly complex every day.

Our Session has targeted lifelong faith formation as our second goal. With on our vibrant Sunday school, preschool and high school programs already in place, we are focusing now on ensuring every age is appropriately nurtured and challenged. I am elated that, even in this weak economy, we have added Erik Dailey as pastor for youth and young adults and deployed Kristie to focus on Middle-schoolers, a long neglected age group. Even without targeted staffing for adult education, which we eventually need, our weekly adult Bible studies and book groups are thriving, and we frequently have extraordinary speakers who address some of the most difficult ethical issues of our time. But you must make a choice: if lifelong faith formation is a genuine priority for us, it is not enough to offer great programs. It is your presence or absence that will affirm or deny this purpose for our church.

Finally, for our founders, the promotion of justice was the third purpose for our church. Worship and spiritual nurture are not ends in themselves; only when they bear fruit in mission - what Dr. McClure called “the work of the Kingdom” – only then do they show forth the love of Christ. Our founders were devoted to their purpose of mission, especially through education - first Lake Forest Academy, then the Female Seminary, and finally the College. We have never lost that passion, in all of the ups and downs of our history. Our Neal School partnership in North Chicago is just the latest example of that commitment.

Now the Session has made even greater effectiveness in mission our third long-range goal. For many years, our Session, board of Deacons and

Presbyterian Women have each pursued mission separately. Now they have committed to pooling their efforts. Instead of focusing geographically they are shifting their attention to three priorities: educational mission, relief and development, and evangelism (which is largely new church development). But again, the real test of effectiveness comes not in structural realignment but our participation. We have so many opportunities to roll up our sleeves with hands-on volunteering, opportunities to lend leadership and expertise on non-profit boards, to engage in the pursuit of justice through our own economic choices – the question is only whether or not we will *do* them. The choice, once more, is ours.

Why are we here? It was clear to our founders. I pray that it will be just as clear to us. Dr. McClure, pastor from 1881 to 1905, summarized our congregation's purpose when he wrote that we have always been here for this: for “worship, fellowship and the work of the Kingdom.” It is our turn now.

And I am convinced that the world has never needed our commitment of faithfulness so much. I know that I am not the only one here who feels that way.

This week I had the privilege of having lunch with Frank Farwell. If any of you don't know him, Frank is a child of this church – in fact his forbears were among those who founded this place. Every week at the 11 o'clock service he still sits beneath the stained glass window that bears the Farwell name – the Guardian Angel window. Frank loves this community – he served as Mayor here, worked on reclaiming our lakefront when it was eroding, helped found CROYA after the suicide of two of our young people, and continues to roll up his sleeves on countless quiet projects. Frank also loves this church, and sees the urgent need for us to step up to the plate. When we met this week, on the heels of the State of the Union address, and with this week's primary around the corner, Frank counted it “shameful” that commentators have stooped to such vitriol, and our government leaders succumbed to such partisan bickering. When I asked him what we most need, he said this: he said, “We must reclaim leadership ... we must be creating statesmen” – for our community, for our country, for our world. And it is the church, he said, that must lead the way.

We must lead the way – just as our founders led 150 years ago. Proclaiming the gospel in a world that has gone deaf to truth. Providing a community of spiritual nurture – up-building instead of tearing down, training ethical leaders instead of pandering to popularity. Promoting God’s vision of justice, instead of sitting on your hands and waiting for someone else to take up the mantle and lead. Isn’t this why we are here? It seems clear to me, and it is what I dearly hope. But in the end ... in the end, it will be yours to decide. Amen.