Jesus’ Mission is Our Mission Peace Presbyterian Church

Luke 4:14-21 Annual Meeting Day

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Jesus is baptized, he is then tempted in the wilderness, and then he begins his ministry. People are wowed by him, because they think he’s going to turn things around for Israel, make life great again for them, like back when they had powerful kings. But they misunderstand his message. Why would a group of people love him one minute and want to throw him off the cliff the next minute? Crowds are fickle, and leaders who try to please the crowds will always disappoint. Jesus was not interested in pleasing the crowd. He came to demonstrate true love and power. His mission was not nationalism, and that’s why he disappointed those who wanted to make Israel powerful again. His mission was to help the vulnerable, as his mother said, to bring down the powerful from their thrones and lift up the lowly. Christ’s mission is our mission, for we call ourselves Christian.

**Luke 4:14-21 (NRSV)**

**14**Then Jesus, filled with the power of the Spirit, returned to Galilee, and a report about him spread through all the surrounding country. **15**He began to teach in their synagogues and was praised by everyone.**16**When he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, he went to the synagogue on the sabbath day, as was his custom. He stood up to read, **17**and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written:

**18**“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,  
**19**to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.”

**20**And he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down. The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. **21**Then he began to say to them,

“Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.”

So let’s talk for a moment about each of the people groups on Jesus’ merciful agenda.

**The poor.**  They are blessed and God is determined to let us all know that we who have power and means should give preferential support to the poor. There are over 200 references to the poor in the Bible. Many of them instruct us to care for the poor, and not to mistreat them.

*Woe to those who make unjust laws, to those who issue oppressive decrees, to deprive the poor of their rights and withhold justice from the oppressed of my people, making widows their prey and robbing the fatherless. What will you do on the day of reckoning, when disaster comes from afar? To whom will you run for help? Where will you leave your riches?*

  — Isaiah 10:1-3

**The captives:**  The scriptures make it clear that God is concerned that people get liberated, freed, released, visited and treated with compassion. You only have to read the judgement of sheep and goats in Matthew 25 to hear that if you do not treat those in prison as if they are Jesus himself, you are missing the mark.

That has serious implications for Christians who live in the country where more people are incarcerated than any other country and where people with dark skin or mental illness are imprisoned at astonishingly higher numbers. Half of those imprisoned once return to prison, which demonstrates how difficult it is for the system to make a real difference in the rehabilitation of inmates. Research shows that the perception or certainty of being caught and punished is a deterrent to crime, but the actual time spent in prison increases the chances of a person being involved in crime again. So the only people stuck in prison should be people who are truly a danger to society.

**The Oppressed.**  Just like the Israelites who were not imprisoned but were oppressed as captives, so in our day, we have people trapped or caught in oppressive situations, at no fault of their own. They often become refugees or wandering immigrants seeking a better life, hoping to help their children live and not die. Others stuck under the oppressive rule of tyrants, or those who are unable to access opportunity without breaking the law, like many in this country, who are here because they needed to be able to feed their families. It is so easy to judge them and ask why they crossed over illegally into our country…until you seriously imagine being forty years old with absolutely no opportunity for work and a family of hungry children, and so you flee to a place where you’ve heard it might be better, even if dangerous to get there and stay there. Those of us who have had access to opportunity need to open our eyes to what is like to grow up without that. That leads us to the last of Jesus’ four groups of people.

**The Blind.** When the prophets or Jesus speak of blindness, they are often talking about literal, physical blindness, which we can assume was a condition nearly everyone understood at some level, because there were no corrective lenses. How many of you in this room are wearing no lenses, or have not had eye surgery? But scripture also uses the term “blindness” to mean without knowledge, without seeing what is true. Jesus called the Pharisees blind for not seeing that integrity of faith involved cleaning the inside as well as the outside of your life. NRS **Proverbs 28:27** Whoever gives to the poor will lack nothing, but one who turns a blind eye will get many a curse. (NRS) Those who are blind to the needs of others are not following Christ very closely for he was aware even when a person in need touched his cloak. We may be blind to our own weaknesses or prejudices, blind to the injustices that we ourselves perpetuate.

Healthy churches that are serious about following Jesus are interested in people on the margins of life, interested in supporting systems of living that offer dignity and opportunity for self-development. This means we are so committed to being hope-bearers, that we are willing to embrace discomfort. A church on the wealthy side of the county cannot turn a blind eye to the poor. A church with many people who have enjoyed the privileges that come with being white in the USA needs to listen to those who have had a different and generally more challenging experience of life. We have to open our eyes to how systems might be changed to make life more fair and just for all.

*Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere,* said Martin Luther King, Jr. From the Birmingham jail he wrote, *Shallow understanding from people of good will is more frustrating than absolute misunderstanding from people of ill will.*

I want to conclude with a few lines from the scholarship applications that I have recently read as a Board member of Beth-el Farmworker Ministries. These are for scholarships of $500 or $1000. No names will be used, to guard confidentiality. *My mom is a farmworker and does not get paid very much money. She has relied on government programs – food stamps and WIC to get us through. In summer school of 3rd grade, I remember having only one set of clothes which I wore every day. I worried that the kids would make fun of me.* Another student said, *A farmworker’s income is not enough for a family of six people so I remember that I always wanted toys that I could not have. I used old, dried up magic markers as my pretend dolls. Sometimes we had to sleep in my father’s old green van when we travel to many states to pick the cucumbers, tomatoes, apples, oranges. Even when I was seven and very small for my age, I tried to help my parents in the fields because I saw how tired they were. I want to provide for my mom one day. I dream of being an immigration lawyer to help people get the rights they deserve. I want them to be able to fulfill their dreams, giving a life to their children that they never had.*

So as we ordain and install elders, as we commission ministry team leaders, as we recommit to our mission and our goals at Peace, let us hold up that mission to the words and life of Jesus Christ, thinking of those who are poor and vulnerable. Let us be clear that we are doing all we can to make sure we elevate the truth that black and brown lives matter just as much a white lives, poor lives as much as rich lives, refugees, prisoners, immigrants, and captives lives as much as the lives of people who enjoy all kinds of personal freedom. Christ’s mission is our mission.