

## “The Church at Its Best”

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Text: Luke 3:15-17, 21-22; Acts 11:19-30

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As we begin a new church year, as we get ready to next Sunday install our new leadership and conduct our annual dinner meeting, it seemed appropriate to spend a few moments reflecting on the mission statement with which we've been working these past two years. As I reflected on that statement, it occurred to me that to fulfill that mission, to be faithful to the mission statement, would show the church at its best – we would no doubt be a model church. And then I got to thinking that since we as Disciples of Christ profess that we are a New Testament church – that is, that we look to scripture to tell us what kind of church we are or are called to be, where in the New Testament could we go to find a description of exemplary church behavior? I remembered this text from Acts 11, and some observations that Disciples scholar Michael Kinnamon had made regarding the scripture passage. Acts 11 tells of the church in Antioch, the place where followers of Jesus were first called Christians.

Kinnamon identified four characteristics of the church in Antioch. First, they were a group who embraced diversity – they were perhaps the first ecumenical interracial congregation – Jewish Christians had fled Jerusalem after the stoning of Stephen and ended up in Antioch. They found themselves worshiping in the same pews with Gentiles, people who they had grown up believing were their mortal enemies. Think of a group of people that you can't stand being around, and imagine that group worshiping with you – that's what it would have been like. A new community had been formed, where people belonged not by virtue of skin color, or culture, or language or nationality, but where they belonged only by virtue of their confession that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the Living God. It was a community of unlikeness, which freed those who belonged from the fear of otherness – they didn't just tolerate each other's differences – the celebrated their diversity!

Kinnamon also suggested that the church at Antioch was a community of learners – striving always to discover more about the will of God. Did you know that our name the Disciples means Learners? From the Latin *Discipulis* – Learners.

The church at Antioch was also distinctive – that is to say, the world could recognize it by the way it lived and the things it believed. Its life and witness was such that the congregation became known as Christians.

And lastly, Antioch was a church committed to outreach – to sending people and resources out into the world equipped for mission and service.

Now based on what we know of the church at Antioch, what kind of a mission statement would they have had? Let me suggest that it could have been something like: The mission of the First Church of Antioch is to proclaim the gospel of Jesus Christ in our life and witness, through education, through local and global outreach, and through the celebration of our diversity.

Now, how does that compare with our mission statement? We've declared that we “are called to witness to all humankind with a spiritual vitality that embraces inclusiveness and Christ-like justice. Therefore, we seek to be a community that reaches in to one another, reaches up to God, and reaches out to the world with the love of Jesus Christ.” If we were to truly live with and live out these words, what would that look like? Are we doing that now? Do changes need to be made? What does it mean for us to witness with inclusiveness and Christ-like justice?

It is to proclaim that in our sanctuary there is always a welcome pew, that we have an unguarded door, that there is always a place for anyone at our dinner tables downstairs. To witness with inclusiveness is to practice hospitality. True hospitality, says Henri Noowen, is marked by an open response to the dignity of each and every person. It is receiving the stranger on his terms. A congregation which practices radical hospitality, in the words of St. Benedict, “receives all guests as Christ.”

While hospitality is a blessing, it creates challenges for us. A story said to have originated in a Russian monastery has an older monk telling a younger one: “I have finally learned to accept people as they are. Whatever they are in the world, a prostitute, a prime minister, it is all the same to me. But sometimes I see a stranger coming up the road and I say, ‘Is it you again, Jesus?’” Scott Peck reminds us that true communities are always reaching to extend themselves. He says, “The burden of proof falls upon exclusivity. Communities do not ask ‘How can we justify taking this person in?’ Instead the question is ‘Is it at all justifiable to keep this

person out?” We must look with hospitable eyes at what we do and say as Christians and as a community of faith. Our facilities, our publications, our interactions, our phone calls, even our message on our answering machine – do they reflect genuine hospitality. Hopefully, we do pretty well – there is probably room for improvement.

And what about witnessing with Christ-like justice? In the Biblical witness, justice is more than a legal term, it has moral, ethical, and spiritual dimensions. It describes all the things it takes to preserve harmony, fairness, and equity in the community.

To do justice is to advocate for those who have had their rights taken away from them or who are being oppressed. It is to take the initiative to address issues and situations of unfairness, inequality, and disharmony. Christ came to give freedom to the oppressed and was on the side of the poor and victims of injustice.

In order to address issues related to justice, we have to know what those issues are, and what our responses as Christians might be. That’s why I’ve been pleased many of us were engaged in the Wednesday evening study this past fall when we talked about a variety of social and political issues and the ways in which we Christians can respond. We’ll resume our “Thoughtful Christian” series this week – we’ll be talking about topics such as immigration and stem cell research justice. I am hopeful that our discussions will lead us to being more active in issues locally and beyond.

We are called as a congregation to witness with inclusiveness and Christ-like justice. And we seek to be a congregation that reaches in, reaches up, and reaches out. So how are we doing? We are attempting to be more effective in our reaching in to one another through the Care Cluster program. As you know the congregation’s membership has been divided up so that every person in the church belongs to a care cluster led by at least one elder. Up to now, the level of activity has varied from cluster to cluster – some have functioned more effectively than others, but the Board of Elders is committed to ensuring that the Care Clusters will enable all of us to experience a deeper level of caring and a sense of belonging – a sense of connectedness. Now next Sunday, at our annual dinner meeting, we’ll have an opportunity to meet and sit with and eat with those who make up our particular cluster. So I want to strongly encourage you to be here next Sunday – bring a dish to the potluck, and begin getting better connected to your brothers and sisters in Christ.

In addition to wanting all of you to know each other better, I want to continue learning about you. I want to continue the “Take Your Pastor to Work” program that I began last fall. To date, I’ve gone to work with eight people, gone to coffee groups with two, and participated in group activity with three others. I’ve had a wonderful experience, and it gives me a deeper appreciation for the paid and unpaid work and activities in which people are involved. If you’d allow me to shadow you in work or retirement, I’d be eager to find out how you spend your days.

As I suggested a few months ago, I want us to be a place where everybody knows your name. But more than that, I want us to be a place of healing and comfort – a place where our bruised spirits can be treated in gentle love. I believe we’re called to be a place where our woundedness is acknowledged and where we can come to minister and be ministered to – to have someone provide us support and encouragement and bless us so that with the help of those around us, and with the healing touch of Christ, we can be comforted, healed, and made whole again.

We are called to reach in to others and also to reach up to God. As you know, during the past three years we’ve been emphasizing personal spiritual growth, with spiritual life groups, and silent prayer retreats as a focus on spiritual gifts. And our adopting a different means of governance and structuring our ministries is also part of that commitment to spirituality. The major impetus, in my estimation, of our moving away from the functional committee structure to ministry areas was not to change for change’s sake, but to return to the spiritual character of the work to which we are called – it was in part to refocus our attention on doing not church work, but the work of the church. In other words, we want to remember that we are all called to various ministries and equipped by the Holy Spirit for those ministries. We don’t want to just fill slots – we want to be intentional about being open to God’s leading about where we all can utilize our spiritual gifts, and then undergirding those ministries with spiritual disciplines.

We’ve also been intentional about seeking consensus rather than taking votes. Again, that is an attempt to remind us to rely on the Spirit of God to tell us when we’re ready to move ahead with a particular project or issue. That we don’t want to take divisive notes – but we want to proceed in a way which listens to

and respects differences of opinions. We have a ways to go, but it is still my prayerful hope that this change in governance will not just be a change in name only, but that we begin to embrace the idea that all we do in the context of the church is in fact ministry and that those of us involved in those ministries must approach them with a spiritual foundation – with a relationship to God – with a connectedness to Jesus Christ, the one who is the vine to us as branches.

The final part of our mission statement is that we seek to reach out to others with the love of Jesus Christ. I believe we do that in variety of ways. We do that through making our facilities available to community groups. We do so by giving of our financial resources. Our Christmas Eve offering which was given to the Emergency Shelter totaled over \$1200. Beginning in 2007 our congregation will financially support the Flint Hills Community Clinic. This is in addition to the support we provide each year for Shepherd's Crossing, Ecumenical Campus Ministries, and Meadowlark. When it comes to Disciples of Christ support, I'm proud to say that we are the second highest among Kansas Disciples congregations in support of the Disciples Mission Fund – second only to First Christian Church, Topeka.

We reach out through projects like the recent collection of items for those in Darfur. We have several from our congregation headed to Jamaica in a few weeks. You'll hear more about their mission next week.

And in about a month, we have the opportunity to expand our global outreach through participating in a workshop entitled "Congregations Connecting with Global Partners." It will be a way to learn how we as a congregation can be paired with a local church or agency somewhere in the world – El Salvador or Nicaragua for example. The workshop is on Saturday, February 3, at St. Andrews Christian Church in Olathe. I'm planning to attend, and I would love to take a car full or a church bus full. If you feel a calling to explore how our congregation would connect with others around the world for the purpose of serving God and one another, please speak to me.

I began this sermon by looking at the passage from Acts and reflecting upon our corporate life as a congregation. But we can't leave it there. We also have to take a cue from the other scripture – the baptism of Jesus. As you recall, the baptism of Jesus is His induction into the office of Son of God – it is His ordination into the ministry. That is also the case for us – our baptisms induct us or ordain us into the ministry in which we all share. You and I are in this together – we're partners in ministry, as you've heard me say many times before. Today is a day not only to welcome a new year as a church community, but also a day to remember our baptisms and the fact that we – all of us – have a responsibility to assist our congregation in living out our mission statement.

Listen to these words, which I first shared with you a few years ago, which put the mission statement of every Christian in a different perspective. We're part of the fellowship of the unashamed, we have Holy Spirit power. The dye has been cast. We have stepped over the line. The decision has been made. We are disciples of Jesus. We won't look back, let up, slow down, back away, or be still. Our past is redeemed, our present makes sense, our future is secure. We're finished and done with low living, sight walking, small planning, smooth knees, colorless dreams, tamed visions, mundane talking, cheap living, and dwarfed goals. We no longer need pre-eminence, prosperity, position, promotion, or popularity. We don't have to be right, first, tops, recognized, praised, regarded, or rewarded. We now live by faith, lean on Christ's presence, walk by patience, lifted by prayer, and labor by power. Our faces are set, our gait is fast, our goal is heaven, our road is narrow, our way is rough, our companions few, our guide reliable, our mission clear. We cannot be bought, compromised, detoured, lured away, turned back, deluded, or delayed.

We will not flinch in the face of sacrifice, hesitate in the presence of the adversary, negotiate at the table of the enemy, ponder at the pool of popularity, or meander in the maze of mediocrity. We won't give up, shut up, let up, until we have stayed up, stored up, prayed up, paid up, preached up for the cause of Christ. We are Disciples of Jesus Christ.