

Epiphany 3C
January 24, 2010

St. Andrew's and St. Swithin's
Annual Meeting
Presentation of Greening Congregation banner/recognition from Earth Ministry

Nehemiah 8.1-3, 5-6, 8-10
Ps 19
1 Corinthians 12.12-31a
Luke 4.14-21

As you no doubt remember, today is the Annual Meeting; the one event we are canonically required to hold during the course of the year. Annual meetings are not anticipated with quite the enthusiasm as the summer picnic at VanCalcar's but nonetheless they are a gathering of the faithful in this particular place each year to do the business of the church. And see some slides of the year past. [And enjoy some music/fellowship.] And eat!

When thinking of the business of the church, things like mission statements come to mind. St. Andrew's has done a fine job over the years of creating a mission statement which is direct, easy to remember, and printed on all our materials [including your bulletins this morning.] *To know Christ and make Him known.*

So I looked up a definition of "mission statement." Here is what that always reliable and authoritative source, Wikipedia, has to say:

A mission statement is a formal short written statement of the purpose of a [company](#) or [organization](#). The mission statement should guide the actions of the organization, spell out its overall goal, provide a sense of direction, and guide decision-making. It provides "the framework or context within which the company's strategies are formulated."

Mission statements often contain the following:

- Purpose and aim of the organization
- The organization's primary stakeholders: clients, stockholders, congregation, etc.
- Responsibilities of the organization toward these stakeholders
- Products and services offered

Historically it is associated with [Christian religious](#) groups; indeed, for many years a [missionary](#) was assumed to be a person on a specifically religious mission. The word "mission" dates from 1598, originally of Jesuits sending ("missio", Latin for "act of sending") members abroad.

I don't know that Luke knew a thing about mission statements, but what he gives us in the gospel for this morning, is Jesus reading a text that will be his mission statement as Messiah: bring good news to the poor, proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, let the oppressed go free and proclaim the year of the Lord's favor. I think Luke did pretty well including the purpose and aim of this organization, defining the stakeholders, and the responsibilities to them. All that before Wikipedia.

Fred Craddock notes that “Luke places [this] Nazareth visit first because it is first, not chronologically but programmatically. This is to say that this event announces who Jesus is, of what his ministry consists, what his church will be and do, and what will be the response to both Jesus and the church.” It’s his inaugural address as he begins his public ministry. Jesus was announcing that he came to liberate from real oppressive structure the marginalized, the poor in health, the political prisoners, says Ernest Hess.

This is pretty challenging for those of us who benefit from those structures Jesus says are going to be brought down. And it’s challenging for us to understand how persons who are in those very situations can hear with joy and renewed hope this good news of social transformation.

The people about whom the reading from Nehemiah speaks are just such people. The Israelites have been in exile in Babylon. Their land, security and prosperity are long gone. They spent three generations out of Israel. David Jones writes that by the time Cyrus the Great told them they could go home, many of them had forgotten most of what they’d known about their own religion. Their return was a crushing disappointment. The walls of Jerusalem had come down; the great temple was rubble. The countryside was a wasteland. So an urban renewal plan put into place to rebuild. That accomplished, they could now gather at the Water Gate, the town square, to hear words of guidance and assurance against the Persians who still dominated them.

They were overwhelmed at hearing the words of God’s promises. After generations again in the spiritual desert, it became a day of remembering who they were and who God is. Their sacred memories, lying fallow over the generations, were alive again. After Ezra completed his reading, the people began to weep. Perhaps from regret at the loss of Torah during the exile; perhaps they realized how far they had wandered from God and how far short they were from God’s expectations of them; perhaps they were tears of joy and abiding relief that God’s word had been recovered which provided a deep sense of God’s abiding presence and care of them.

We have been there. We have heard words of scripture that took our breath away when we most needed them; spoken by the Word made flesh when the words themselves seem inadequate: *Come to me, all you that travail and are heavy laden, and I will refresh you. The Lord is my shepherd. Do not worry about your life. Seek and you shall find. I have been anointed to bring good news to the poor.*

We see in Nehemiah that God’s word and worship transforms lives. We are reminded of God’s presence and love when we might otherwise feel abandoned and alone, writes Carter Lester. We gather in worship not only to hear God’s word through scripture, but to have it interpreted to address changes as the circumstances of the people change. Even Torah, the Law, needs interpretation and hearing with understanding in light of the new situation of believers. Kathleen O’Connor hits it pretty hard when she writes that this lesson about reading Torah does not inflict the rigid orthodoxy of the past on the gathered people, but urges them to meet God anew in the changing times in which they find themselves. The people are called to unity and invited to renew their life in God. Holy Scripture is recognized not as legalistic edicts which are cramping or restrictive, but as divine compassion and guidance about how to live together in justice and joy. As much as we might hear to the contrary today, scripture is not self-explanatory. It cannot have been

sealed in stone at Sinai, but must be continually reinterpreted to show the path to community and joy.

The people's response to the Word of God, lifting up their hands, bowing their heads to worship the Lord with their faces to the ground and weeping with relief, was an outpouring from their worship. Liturgy in church today can be filled with welcome, friendliness and hospitality. But we must also work to convey the holiness of God's transcendence and mystery; that which sends us to our knees in awe and gratitude; that which makes us bow our heads in thankfulness and humility.

As we come together each day or each week, to worship God in this place, touching the divine Spirit as the Body of Christ, we hear Jesus' mission statement and overlay it with ours own. We learn what Jesus came to do, and we follow in our ministry by measuring our mission and ministry against his. Jesus didn't limit his ministry to named categories of: poor, blind, or captive. His ministry was to all those in need of a savior, in need of restoration of relationship with God.

Our mission as church, St. Andrew's and St. Swithin's, must be informed by Jesus' understanding of his purpose and mission. And we interpret for these days that which God would have us do. We know that care for all of creation and stewardship of our resources is one of those missions. One about which Jesus may have been unaware and wasn't on Luke's or Isaiah's lists, but it must be on ours as the gospel demands that we respond to the needs of the world, literally. This is the vision of church: the body of Christ as people sharing a common mission statement with Jesus, caring for one another and sharing the work of God in the world, all made possible by the gifts of the Spirit, who works in and through each of us, leading us into a deeper relationship with God; as we strive to know Christ and make him known.

Gail Wheatley+