

July 10<sup>th</sup>, 2022

## Luke 4:14-21 “Our Mission and Witness to All”

Every Wednesday afternoon at 1:30 a group of local clergy meets at Bidwell Perk to support each other as we try to solve the world’s problems. This past week Ben Colohan and I were the only two who showed up. Ben is the pastor of Faith Lutheran Church which, like most of the churches represented in our group, follows the New Common Lectionary. He said, “So, are you preaching on the Good Samaritan this week?” I said, “Nope, I am unchained from the lectionary for seven weeks.” He said, “Good job!” and asked what I was preaching on. I told him that I was preaching on what it means to be part of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) according to our affirmation of faith. He asked what our affirmation of faith was. I said, “It’s the preamble to the design of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ). Our founders rejected creeds because they thought it divided the church instead of uniting it. We’re a unity movement, so we wanted a statement that affirmed our *common* faith rather than focusing on particular doctrines that we thought made us more orthodox than anyone else.” He asked me if I had it memorized and I said, “Not entirely” so I pulled my phone out and read it to him. He paused for a few seconds and said, “That sounds like a creed to me.” Thank you Rev. Captain Obvious. Yes. I know it sounds like a creed, but it isn’t.

As I mentioned last week, creeds always begin with the words, “I believe” or “we believe.” Then they go on to lay out in detail what one *must* believe about God, Jesus, the Holy Spirit, the church, and the potential rewards of one’s devotion to the specifics of the creed. “Belief” is not front and center in our affirmation of faith. Belief is just an acknowledgment that we support the existence of something or someone. Our statement of faith begins with, “We *confess*.” Confession is the *declaration* of what you believe to be true. It’s giving evidence to what we know in our hearts. It’s what Peter did when Jesus asked, “Who do you say I am?” Peter confessed, “You are the Christ, the Son of the

living God.” Our confession of faith does not begin with mere belief, it begins with who we are in relationship to Jesus.

This week’s section that Barbara led us through is,

In Christ's name and by his grace  
we accept our mission of witness  
and service to all people.

Once again, the words “I believe” are absent. There *is* a “we” though. “We accept.” What do we accept? We accept our mission *of witness and service to all people.*” And you might be thinking, “Oh, I bet Jesse’s going to pull out his ‘all means all’ sermon because that’s one of those little identifying sayings that our movement is famous for.” Believe it or not, I’m not going there this week. We know this and we’re ... mostly okay with it. There’s always room for improvement, right? That’s a sermon for later. The tricky part of this segment is “accepting our mission of witness and service.” So our task today is to try to figure out what *is* our mission of witness and service.

We don’t always get the privilege of knowing exactly what a leader’s mission statement is, especially a historical figure like Jesus. Most of the time, we leave it up to the historians to figure that out based on teachings or other clues that might point to some sort of a mission objective. They’ll say, “Well, Reverend So-and-so over here was always preaching about the importance of ministering to the sick, so I guess it would be safe to say that their mission statement was, ‘In word and deed, go into the world and care for the sick.’” Now maybe that person *never* uttered those words before, but if that’s how they lived their life and carried out their ministry, then it stands to reason that it might have been their mission statement.

Here's what’s great about being a follower of Christ - We don’t *ever* have to make a guess about what Jesus’ mission statement was, because he laid it out very clearly in the passage that Barbara read from Luke.

“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.”

Now some would argue that the gospel writers were working with oral tradition and used a little bit of interpretive leeway to “speak for Jesus” when they put quill to papyrus. And this is especially true for Luke, because Luke was not one of the twelve apostles who were physically present during Jesus’ earthly ministry. But remember what Fred Craddock said a couple of weeks ago: “Scholars take all the fun out of everything.” Jesus wasn’t just speaking words that he came up with out of the blue. He was quoting the Prophet Isaiah. In fact, he was reading from the Isaiah scroll in his hometown synagogue and when he finished he said, “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.” He was saying, “This scripture that I just read from Isaiah? This is my mission statement. This is why I’m here and what I’m all about.”

Last week I said something a little snarky about our movement. I said of the three branches of the Stone-Campbell heritage churches, we’re the “now wait, what are we doing again?” movement. That tells you that we, as a denomination, have trouble articulating our mission. There’s a bad joke that started circulating twenty some-odd-years ago relating to this problem of ours. “What do you get when you cross a Jehovah’s Witness with a Disciple? You get someone who knocks on your door but isn’t quite sure what to say.” That hurts. No church wants to be known for not having a clear understanding of their mission. Even when our leaders put some time and effort into figuring out how to articulate our mission, we still end up casting a broad net that is often ambiguous. The latest mission statement that came out a few years ago is that the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) is a “movement for wholeness in

a fragmented world.” Now I like that. It hearkens back to our founders’ fondness for little sayings that are easy to memorize and that describe a *part* of who we are. “Where the scriptures speak, we speak, where the scriptures are silent, we are silent.” Great. That says a little bit about us, but I wouldn’t call either one of these maxims a mission statement. So, back to the original question: What *is* our “mission of witness and service to all people” and what does it mean to “accept” it?

That’s where we go back to the opening section of our affirmation of faith:

As members of the Christian Church,  
We confess that Jesus is the Christ,  
the Son of the living God,  
and *proclaim him Lord and Savior of the world.*

Who do we proclaim? Jesus. Jesus the Christ. The son of the Living God. The one who was quite clear about his mission and witness. The one whose mission and witness we accept. What does it look like to be one who accepts Jesus’ mission of witness and service to all people?

Consider Ladonia “Doni” Hansbrough. Don’t bother looking her up on Google. She doesn’t have a Wikipedia page. She’s not a major historical figure by any means. She was one of six women who met in the basement of the First Christian Church in St. Louis, Missouri in 1886 to “pray about the plight of the homeless and helpless.” They met weekly and after a year, these six women “conceived as their sole purpose the task of helping the helpless—to give a home to the homeless, to provide care for the sick, and comfort for the distressed.” There’s a mission statement for you! The fruit of their labor was the National Benevolent Association whose purpose was “to restore to the church the brotherly love and benevolence taught by Christ and practiced by the disciples in the early days of the church.” That’s a decent mission statement too! Go ahead and Google the National

Benevolent Association. They are still going strong 136 years later. And Doni Hansbrough served as the NBA's secretary for over 50 years.

Consider William J. "Bill" Barber, Junior, son of a physics teacher who moved his family from the comfort of Indianapolis to Washington County, North Carolina when Bill was only in kindergarten. Why did they make this move? Because both of his parents, as educators, wanted to participate in the desegregation of the public school system in North Carolina. You can imagine how difficult his childhood must have been. He became the secretary for the local NAACP youth council at age 15. At age 17, he became student body president of his high school. At age 19 he became the student government president at North Carolina Central University where he eventually received a bachelor's degree in political science. After college, he received a Master of Divinity degree from Duke University and eventually was ordained in the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ). He was diagnosed with Ankylosing Spondylitis or AS. It's a debilitating type of arthritis that affects the joints of the spine. At one point, the disease rendered him unable to move or even speak for a period of time. He served as the pastor of a small Disciples congregation in South Carolina and was the founder of Poor People's Campaign: A National Call for Moral Revival. Like the Apostle Paul, Bill has been arrested on several occasions for his civil disobedience. Because of his AS it is painful for him to walk let alone be handcuffed. But still he marches on. Why does he do this? Because he accepts his mission of witness and service to all people, and he understands that his mission is the *same as Jesus* – "To bring good news to the poor. To proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, and to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." See, he doesn't have to come up with a mission statement. He just adopted Jesus' mission statement who borrowed his from the Prophet Isaiah.

These are just two people who call themselves Disciples and who have accepted their mission of witness and service to all people. Neither one of them came from wealth or status, but they both found a way to fulfill

their call to be Disciples of Christ. We're going to hear about many more Disciples over the course of next 5 weeks with the hopes that their stories can inspire and direct our stories.