

## Luke 4:16-23 “What is Our Message?”

Back in March, I read an article called *Can the Christian Church Outlast the Next Decade?* It was one of those intentionally pessimistic articles written by someone in the church who is emotionally invested in our movement but isn't happy because things aren't like they used to be. And I get it. I hear it all the time. “Remember when there were more children ... Remember when there were more dinners ... Remember when there were more people willing to take responsibilities and volunteer for things.” Sounds like that Alan Jackson country song that folks play at funerals all the time ... *Remember When*. But you know what? There isn't a church today that's not experiencing some legitimate grief over something they miss. I'll go as far as to say that there are very few churches today who can say, “We're experiencing a huge surge of growth like we did between the 1950s – 1980s!” Even the huge mega-churches hit a peak in the late 1990s and have experienced decline since then. For better or worse (because both apply) the world has moved on and is a much different place than it was even 20 years ago. We're in a period of history where we've seen more technological, sociological, and meteorological change in a short period of time than any other generation in history. So how do we adapt? Good question. But we can't just dig in our heels and *wish* it was all different. Now one of the primary reasons for decline that the author listed in his article is something we've heard before. In fact, I've summed it up in a terrible joke that most of you have heard by now, and that is - “What do you get when you cross a Disciples of Christ with a Jehovah's Witness? Someone who knocks on your door but isn't quite sure what to say.” In other words, this author thinks our biggest problem is that we're not sure what our message is. We don't know what our good news is. I respectfully disagree.

First of all, we are a people of the resurrection. Our hope is built on the resurrection. We wouldn't have celebrated Easter a couple of weeks ago if this were not true. When someone says, “Christ is risen,” we say – “Christ is risen indeed.” And hopefully not out of habit, but because it's something we believe. We know what our hope is built on. As far as

our mission goes, we want our priorities to reflect Jesus' priorities. When we sing, "I have decided to follow Jesus, no turning back, no turning back" we're saying that we want our lives to be like Jesus. We want to say what Jesus said and do what Jesus did. We want our mission to be the same as Jesus' mission. Or as our congregation's mission statement says,

**"Chico First Christian Church is an inclusive, loving community of believers in Jesus Christ who wish to explore and follow his teachings. We strive to provide opportunities to freely develop our faith through worship, Christian education, fellowship, and pastoral care. The Holy Spirit guides us in our personal and congregational outreach and mission where we proclaim the good news and serve in Christ's name. We work for peace as embodied in the person of Jesus."**

Great mission statement. It has stood the test of time. So if we really want our mission to reflect Jesus' mission, where's the first place we should go then? The Bible right? Because that's our roadmap to faith and practice. If we want the world to know what *we're* all about, we need to find out what Jesus said *he* was all about. That's why we're in Luke's gospel today. Luke's gospel gives us the clearest picture of what Jesus' mission was all about. The passage that Barbara read came right on the heels of Jesus' baptism and his temptation in the wilderness. This was his first act of public ministry. This was before he even called his first disciples. Where did he go after his baptism and temptation in the wilderness? He went home to Nazareth in Galilee. More specifically, he went to his hometown synagogue on the Sabbath. I'm sure there were folks there who were thrilled to see him. "Hey, look! Joe and Mary's boy is back in town! Hey Jesus, want to read scripture today?" Oooh. Be careful y'all. And he did. He read from the Isaiah scroll where the prophet declares, "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, and to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." Then he handed the scroll back to the attendant, sat down and said, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."

What was his first act of public ministry? Declaring his mission imperative. Telling folks in his home town what he was all about. This is what God has sent me to do. God has sent me to bring good news. Specifically to the poor. God has also sent me to proclaim release to captives and to help the blind recover their sight. And last but not least I am to let the oppressed go free and proclaim the year of the Lord's favor. How did the crowd react? Not so well. Eight verses later, this rage-filled crowd is chasing him up to the top of a hill where they intended to hurl him off a cliff. His first miracle? "Passing through their midst" and getting out of town. The first miracle in John's gospel is Jesus turning water to wine at a wedding feast. Luke's gospel? Stealth mode Jesus. (Move along, I'm not the messiah you're looking for.) I guess it's true that a prophet isn't welcome in his own hometown.

But there it is. Jesus' mission imperative. Bring ... good ... news. "Good news." Or like the signs on our bulletin or the signs tacked up all over our church say, "Good news is coming." But what's the good news? See, this is where that author thinks we fall short and why we, as a denomination, have been in a decline

Okay, let's start from the beginning. The good news is that God is reconciling the world. "Ok. To what? To whom?" To God. "God is reconciling the world to God." Yup. Bridging that gap. Making the space between Kingdom of Heaven and Kingdom of Earth very thin. Transparent even. "How?" Through Christ. "God is reconciling the world to God through Christ." Yup. "How does that bridge the gap? How does that make the space between God and humans thinner?" Because when we understand Jesus ... when we learn to model our lives after him, we'll know and understand the heart of God. We'll be rescued ... saved from the power of sin and death. "Really?" Really. "And this is what Jesus came to do." Yup. Jesus says it right here. *The Spirit of the Lord has anointed me to bring good news.* "Doesn't seem like it worked out so well for him though. They ran him all the way out of town to the edge of a cliff?" Yeah. "Dang, that's rough." Believe me, it gets rougher. The good news isn't always good news to everyone.

Especially people who have to give up something they don't want to let go of.

And here's where I want to come back to this article. Here's where I want to revisit this notion that we don't know what our good news is. See, I think we *do* know what the good news is! And it scares us! "God is reconciling the world through Christ" puts us in a position of vulnerability. We're told to pray prayers like, "keep me away from temptation" and "thy will be done" and "forgive us in the same way that we're willing forgive others." That's the kind of stuff that might get a person run out of town. At some level anyone who has been in a church for any length of time and who was studied the life of Jesus and has followed his story from birth to death to resurrection knows that following Jesus isn't always easy. There's a price.

What do you mean, there's a price? "Jesus paid the price so we don't have to," right? I don't have time to unpack that statement this morning, but I'm going to say, "Right. Jesus paid the price. And isn't that great? *That's* good news too." But I'm also going to say that following Jesus is *not* a free ride that exempts us from the consequences of fearlessly proclaiming the gospel. If we jumped ahead in Luke's gospel, chapter 9 specifically, Jesus said, "If anyone wants to follow me, they must deny themselves, take up my cross daily, and follow me." And let me tell you, life is *full* of crosses. Some are relatively small, and others are pretty big.

So let's talk about some of the crosses we're facing right now. The one that seems the biggest at the moment is this mess that was caused by 5 inches of rain falling on our church in a matter of 3 hours. Stuff happens. There wasn't a thing we could have done about it. Plans to move forward were going pretty well until our insurance group said that the carrier who deals in property damage notified us back in November that they weren't going to cover asbestos removal anymore. Now we have to come up with a big chunk of money out of pocket to repair the damage so we can get our offices and classrooms back online. The cool thing is that we have it. We could write a check tomorrow from what we have in

savings and investments and make this happen. In fact, tomorrow is when the asbestos removal team will hopefully be coming in to start pulling out the affected drywall so that we can move on with repairs and restoration. Hopefully the abatement team won't find a nest of endangered bats that will require a team of bat extractors to find a new home for them. Sadly enough, I think the insurance *would* cover that. But what that's going to do is leave a hole in our savings and investments where we receive interest that makes up for any shortfall in offerings. It has been decades since we were able to carry on without that interest. So the challenge, now, is figuring out what adjustments we need to make to continue carrying out our mission to bring good news. There will probably be a half-dozen options we can choose from all with pros and cons, and it is likely that there's not going to be a clear, sure-fire, infallible plan that everyone will agree on to make it happen.

But here's the good news. "God is reconciling the world to God through Christ." Same good news that we read about in our Bible. Same good news that has been preached for 2,000 years. Same good news that Jesus proclaimed at his hometown Synagogue in Galilee. And ... same good news that the Roman Empire and the corrupt religious establishment of the day killed him for. But ... we are a people of the resurrection. And God is still reconciling the world through Christ. This is and isn't simple by any means, but we are called to proclaim this message no matter what. And that is what we'll do. Because as a people of the resurrection, we know exactly what our good news is.