State of the Union

Isaiah 58:6-12, Isaiah 61:1-2 Kimby Young

Luke 4:14-21; 1 Corinthians 12:12-13 January 26, 2025

On this Sunday of our annual meeting, I thought I would remind us to try to measure ourselves and our mission as a church. That’s what the annual meeting is supposed to be – a moment to stop and check ourselves. We share what we have been doing. We share what we hope for the future. As always we should measure ourselves by Jesus Christ who is the only true head of the church. Are we measuring up to Christ’s call for us here and now?

The lectionary reading for today from Luke is often called Jesus’ mission statement. In Luke it is the first public statement Jesus makes as he begins his ministry – his first recorded sermon. It is lectionary for this Sunday of Epiphany when we follow Jesus baptism and first miracle with his first public statement of purpose – revealing God’s will for the world through Jesus. The text is a rephrasing of Isaiah 61 (which is quoted in Luke) and Isaiah 58 (which we read today). Jesus says, this is what I will be doing, this is why I am here, this is how the world can see and experience God’s love. And in the stories that follow in the rest of the gospel, Jesus lives out these words in concrete acts of healing and grace. Good news for the poor. Sight for the blind. Healing for the broken. Release for the oppressed.

The readings from Isaiah grew out of a time just after the exile, when the people of God were trying to rebuild their lives and strengthen their faith. They were struggling with each other and fighting with neighbors. They were arguing over the right way to please God and serve God. Isaiah said it is not about pretty sanctuaries and fancy words. It’s not about rules and boundaries. It’s not about who is better and more worthy. It’s not about the proper way to worship. It’s not really about us at all. It’s all about God. Isaiah says that being faithful - serving God - is about concrete action, visible caring, healthy relationships and generous loving ways of living. Isaiah gives specific examples – feed the hungry, clothe the naked, house the homeless, welcome the stranger, comfort those who mourn, give hope to the broken hearted, release those who are bound and burdened, bring healing and wholeness, offer sight and insight, do the right thing, the just thing, the loving thing – whenever the opportunity arises in daily life. That’s how you please God. That’s how you serve God.

Fast forward 500 years and Jesus takes up the challenge of Isaiah – to live God’s love in the world. In Jesus day, as in Isaiah’s day, people were arguing about the right way to please God. They were struggling with each other. They were defining rules and regulations and boundaries. They were judging others and putting others down and trying to prove they were better than everyone else. Sounds like today too, doesn’t it? People arguing about faith instead of living God’s love. So Jesus pulls out the words of Isaiah and says, Remember? Remember what God wants us to do. Remember how we are supposed to love and care. Are you doing that now? Are we doing that today?

Jesus last words in this passage from Luke are “Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing.” There are a lot of different ways to understand that phrase. Most clearly it is Jesus saying “I am the one who has and will fulfill this scripture.” During the years between Isaiah and Jesus, this scripture had come to be associated with the Messiah – the Anointed One – the one who would come to save Israel and initiate the kingdom of God on Earth. So when Jesus spoke these words, some present would hear Jesus saying – I am the Messiah. I am the One who will save God’s people. I am the One who will introduce the world to God. And I am the One who will make all things right as Isaiah and the other prophets predicted. I am the One who will bring good news, release, healing, wholeness in God’s presence, as God wills. By saying “This scripture has been fulfilled,” Jesus was saying the kingdom of God on Earth has begun in Jesus. It is now possible to know God on Earth and to live completely in God’s presence on Earth. And how you do that is by living out all those activities Jesus listed – caring for the poor, feeding the hungry, standing up for justice, offering healing and love.

In addition, the word “today” is important. And I don’t think it is meant to be that one day way back when in Nazareth when Jesus spoke in the synagogue. Today, as Jesus uses it here, is an ongoing word. Each day is a new today. Today has been every moment down through the ages – whenever the people of God hear the word of God and act on it. That is today. Today is right here and right now – when you hear God’s call to service and act on that call with love. Today is that moment when anyone hears God’s call. Today this scripture is fulfilled. Today is the day of our Lord’s favor and power. In the act of hearing and responding to God’s call, this scripture is fulfilled. Today, in your hearing, God’s love is alive.

So even beyond Jesus’ mission – this scripture has become the mission of the church. Jesus says “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me because God has chosen me,” and we believe Christ has shared that Spirit with us. That Spirit has been poured out over us in baptism and poured into us at Pentecost. We have received the Spirit of God and so like Jesus we are chosen by God to serve God. If we follow Jesus, then we serve as Jesus served. We have been called "to bring good news to the poor, to proclaim release to the burdened, to let the oppressed go free, to comfort those who mourn, to tell everyone about God's love and favor."

How will you do that? How will we do that as a community? You can’t do it all alone, but together we can share God’s love. Your mission statement here at First Presbyterian Church of Gardner, says “we are the hands and feet of Jesus.” We are the “boots on the ground” so to speak. We are the ones who can do what needs to be done in the world, what God wants to happen in the world, right here and now. We are the ones who can live God’s love in concrete caring ways, just like Jesus did. We put God’s love into action.

This is a very exciting time in the life of this church. Your session has chosen to step out in faith. You have approved their recommendation to call a new associate pastor. You are about to elect a search committee to move forward. There is a great deal of unknown in our future together. But it is absolutely clear that God is with you, that Jesus loves you, that the Spirit is inspiring you. God has tremendous plans for this church. And you have promised to be the body of Christ here and now, serving God and Gardner. You have promised to listen and to lead, to offer your gifts and to care for one another. You have promised - to bring good news to the poor and afflicted, offer sight to the blind, healing and release to the oppressed, love in concrete caring ways, that all may see and hear and come to know the love of Jesus and the glory that is our gracious God. This is the year of the Lord another year of God’s favor. Thanks be to God. Amen.

January 26 2024

Isaiah 58:6-9a

Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the straps of the yoke,

to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke?

Is it not to share your bread with the hungry and bring the homeless poor into your house;

when you see the naked, to cover them and not to hide yourself from your own kin?

Then your light shall break forth like the dawn, and your healing shall spring up quickly;

your vindicator shall go before you; the glory of the Lord shall be your rear guard.

Then you shall call, and the Lord will answer; you shall cry for help, and he will say,

“Here I am.”

Luke 4:14-21;

Then Jesus, in the power of the Spirit, returned to Galilee, and a report about him spread through all the surrounding region. He began to teach in their synagogues and was praised by everyone.

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, and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written:

“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 set free those who are oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.”

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. Then he began to say to them, “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.”

1 Corinthians 12:12-13

For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. For in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and we were all made to drink of one Spirit.

The Word of the Lord

Thanks be to God