

Practicing Forgiveness and Solidarity

Part 3 in series: "What Good is the Church?"

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Luke 24.44-53

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In this season of Epiphany, the season of light and clarity and the dawning awareness of who Christ is in this world, we have been exposing ourselves to another kind of revelation: an exploration of what Christ told us the church was to do and be. The church, which someone said is like Noah's ark—it leaks and is smelly, but what's the alternative?!—for all its lack of perfection, remains not a human idea, but Christ's idea. "Gather together, pray, remember me in communion, baptize in my name, make disciples" these are not things that we would naturally think to do on our own. We need to periodically get clear about the purpose of the church, and about Christian discipleship, otherwise we might find ourselves in the following hypothetical situation. Jesus has returned in "clouds of glory", and is making his way to the Vatican, in Rome. A Monsignor rushes down the hall to inform the Pope. "Holy Father, it is Him, Jesus has returned, and he is coming to review everything the church has done in his name. What shall we do?!" The Pope thinks for a moment, and says, "Everybody looka busy." This joke is so old it presumed an Italian pope, when now we would need to give the Pope a German accent, but you get the idea. Every organization can drift from the purposes of its founder.

The two questions that business management expert Peter Drucker says every organization needs to ask are these: "What business are we in?" and "How's business?" Vital, healthy congregations have a compelling, Biblically-based and theologically informed purpose or reason for being that shapes and focuses everything they do. Did you know that Jesus gave the church a mission, a charge, a direction, following his resurrection? And it's NOT just "look busy"! Each of the four gospels has a version of what Jesus told us that his followers should be doing.

In Matthew, Jesus said "Go and make disciples."

In Mark, Jesus said "Preach the Good News to whole creation."

Today we look at what Luke's gospel reports. Each of the gospels has a particular point of view, and was written for a certain kind of audience. For example, Matthew wrote to people who had a Jewish background, and so was concerned to show how Jesus fit into the Hebrew prophecies. But Luke wrote to people from outside the Jewish faith, the "Gentiles," converts from paganism, mystery religions, and other options available to people in the religious marketplace. They were drawn to the uniqueness of the Christian message, and to the refreshing community of grace and love of those Christ-followers who, in a brutal and unforgiving world seemed to genuinely care for one another.

Luke reports that when the resurrected Christ first appeared to the "eleven" (disciples) and "their companions," he told them what they were to focus on doing, in his name, in this world. This is the "mission statement" according to Luke: "Thus it is written, that the Messiah is to suffer and to rise from the dead on the third day, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations."

Repentance simply means turning "Godward"--turning toward God. That's what repentance means. Actual turning, actual steps. For some this will mean heading in a

completely new direction. For others it may mean more of a “course correction.”

Forgiveness of sins—part of the Good News is that the brokenness and alienation that sin is shorthand for has been met by God who is determined to overcome it. And the life and ministry of Jesus is the way God overcomes our sin.

At the beginning of Luke’s gospel we find Jesus’ first sermon, the one he preached to the hometown crowd at his hometown synagogue. He chose as his text the reading from Isaiah 61, that we used today. It tells of the new and coming age of God. When “deliverance” comes from God, this, says the prophet Isaiah, is what it will look like: “The spirit of the Lord is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me; he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners; to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor...” Jesus quoted this passage, then sat down, and said, “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.” God’s deliverance came in human form, in him. We notice that this list does not soar off into visions of other-worldly fantasies or pie-in-the-sky promises. These address social, economic, and political problems that we face.

Luke reports a consistent pattern of attention to those kinds of issues through the stories he tells of Jesus’ life and ministry. Jesus has a heart for the last, the least, and the lost. Luke tells of a dinner party that some of the religious leaders held in honor of Jesus. You’ve been invited to dinners before. It is a pleasant and satisfying thing to be welcomed into someone’s home and offered a wonderful meal. At this party, something strange happened: a woman came in off the street and knelt at Jesus feet and cried as she wiped his feet with her hair, and kissed his feet. Not many of us have had this experience, at least I haven’t. This woman was someone who we might say had a “checkered” past. And the host told Jesus about it, in case he did not know. “Who has the most gratitude” Jesus asked, someone who was forgiven a debt of five dollars, or five thousand dollars? This woman has been forgiven a lot, and she is showing her gratitude.” (Lk. 7.36f)

The least: Luke 14.13: “When you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind.”

Zacchaeus is our poster boy for those who are “lost” (Luke 19). He was lost to true human community. So intent on gaining riches (security?), he cheated and muscled his way to the top. Every community struggles with the question of how to minimize the possibility of that kind of behavior, without stifling creativity and initiative.

We began with two questions we are to ask ourselves as Christians serious enough to express it through church commitment: “What business are we in?” and “How’s business?” Peter Drucker, who formed the questions, suggests answers as well: “The business of a church is to change people; the business of a corporation is to satisfy them.” We want to move from seeing our connection to church as “members”, to seeing it in terms of “discipleship.” Why are we here? We are here to grow disciples of Jesus Christ.

You’ve heard how Jesus defines our business. Jesus worked on a personal, direct scale, which is the strength of a church community. We find the calling, redeeming, transforming movements of God to be most effective when we have personal relationships with other followers, and work to build communities that invite deep and meaningful engagement with God. It is in such face-to-face, covenant communities that we will find ourselves in Jesus’ picture of the church, and of what faithful discipleship means. “Go and make disciples.” Yes, that’s us. Proclaim the good news.” “Repentance

and forgiveness of sins to all nations.” To that, we are witnesses, because we have experienced it; and pass it on as he calls us to.