

I once had a pastor tell me that he'd been to a workshop where they learned to write a “personal identity and mission statement.” I knew that businesses and churches did these things, but it never occurred to me that an individual might do something like that. Churches and businesses do these things to clarify who they are and what their mission is so their members—and the public—can stay focused on their goals. And I'm sure this process must help a person stay more focused as well... and—if others know the person's identity and mission statement—it must help them better understand what he or she is attempting to do and be in life.

I thought, briefly, about writing my own identity and mission statement, but... there are just so few ways to put my life goals into words without sounding a bit trivial... I was thinking of something like “I procrastinate by habit and vegetate by default, but I remain remarkably handsome for your viewing pleasure!” I know... it's just a draft... a work in progress.

Our congregation has a much better mission statement. The current iteration is: “Empowered by God to serve and inspire!” I think that's pretty helpful.

And in today's Gospel reading it seems that Jesus is claiming a scripture verse as his own personal mission and identity statement: “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.” The preacher of the day—in Jesus' tradition—rose to read the scripture, and then sat to comment on what he'd read, and when Jesus sat down every eye was fixed on him awaiting what he'd say... and he said, “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.” And that's him claiming his identity right out loud and in public. That's him saying “I have been anointed, I have been gifted by the Spirit, I have been set apart to reveal God's love by proclaiming good news to the poor, and releasing the captives, and giving sight to the blind, and setting the oppressed free, and spreading the good news that God loves you, God loves you all. God loves you always and you will remain—now and forever—in God's favor.”

The words he read summed him up; and his reading of them—his own breath voicing those words—was like the breath of God calling creation into being. The words were uttered—and when God uttered a word it was a promise already completed, for nothing is more sure than the word of God.

Christ's claim of identity was that God had anointed him—which was the ritual used to set a king or a priest or a prophet—or the Messiah—apart for a special and sacred role. And his role was—specifically—to bring good news, proclaim release, open the blind eye, free the oppressed, and spread the word of the outpouring of God's favor on all people.

He envisioned his purpose in life in those words, and it was grace and grace and grace and more grace. It was grace for the poor, grace for the captives, grace for the blind, grace for the oppressed, and grace for all people. And when we study his life, that's exactly how he lived! He didn't just mark those verses in his Bible, he didn't just embroider them on a pillow case or hang them on his wall, he didn't just memorize them and quote them to himself and repeat them like a mantra. He lives them; he fulfills them; he is them. He proclaims good news to the poor—both those who were financially poor in this life, and those who were “poor in spirit” as well. He feeds them when they're hungry, and he claims—again and again—that God is on their side, God's in their corner. God's eagerly waiting to flip the script in the last scene and grant them eternal riches that will put the earthly riches—that were out of their reach in this life—to shame. And just so with the captives—he releases not just those in jail or those held in physical chains but also those bound by demons and guilt and greed. And he opened the eyes of those who were physically blind, even as he showed those that could physically see that they often were among the spiritually blind... but he could open their eyes too. And he set the oppressed

free—those oppressed by illnesses and those oppressed by the stigmas and bigotry of their neighbors. And he revealed a God of grace—through his every word and action—a God who loves all people, forgives every sin, and longs for deep, joyful, eternal, loving relations with us all.

He lived those words! He lived them for us. And I say that because we know he didn't just come to live these things and be these things for that one group of people—that one time so very long ago... He came to be those things for us today as well. And I know the Lord's done that for me—and for so very many of us; I've heard some of your stories. But I also know how easy it is to file those stories away in the past and forget they ever actually happened; and I think it's just vital that we recall God's goodness as God has acted powerfully in our lives. It's those memories that fill us with the assurance that since God's promises for us have been fulfilled in our lives before... we can be confident to claim God's promises today and into the future.

And, the deal is, that when we lose that assurance and that confidence then our faith becomes weak and puny, and church becomes something we do for reasons we can't really recall, and our spiritual life is sapped out of us, and all we have left are these rites and traditions that we walk through out of nothing but blind hopeless habit. And that's just not what our faith in Christ Jesus—and our gathering for worship and the sacraments—should be about.

This is a time to praise God for God's goodness that we've experienced in Christ Jesus. This is a time to offer thanks for God's goodness in opening our eyes, and releasing us, and freeing us, and restoring us, and embracing us through our Savior.

And so I'm going to ask you to do something very concrete this week. I want to ask you to take that insert in the bulletin and think about how you've experienced God's healing or release or goodness in the past and then—fair warning—I'd like you to bring that back with you next week and we're going to take a couple of minutes during the offering when we'll ask you to share one of your stories with someone else here in our congregation. And my hope is that as we share our stories—and hear the stories of others—our faith will be recharged and we will recall that God is real, and God is at work in our world today continuing the mission of Christ.

And that's what we're called to do. We're called to be a part of the ministry of continuing Christ's mission. We don't just “like” Jesus on Facebook, or “follow him” on “Twitter;” I don't even think that's it's so much about us just believing our truth claims about who Jesus was: that he was God's Son sent to save us. I mean, all that's fine, but what Jesus called us to do—over and over again—was to follow him in actual fact... and that means taking on his goals, accepting his mission as our mission, living as he lived with his values, his faith, his grace for all people.

And my hope is that as we confirm that God's grace has been active in our own lives we will be that much more ready to share that grace with others.

May we claim the grace of God that has been good news to us when we were poor, given us sight when we were blind, released us when we were captive, set us free when we were oppressed and filled us with the joy of knowing we live in God's favor. And may we reach out in the name of Christ to those who are poor today, captive to fear or hopelessness, blind to the realities of God's existence and love, oppressed by other people or any power of the world, and all those who have yet to hear that God's love is free and abundant, eternal and for all people, all people—yes, that means you and me and every “them” besides—and may we do this only through the grace of the Spirit that anoints and empowers us to live in and for the glory of our God, in the name of our Lord, now and forever, Amen.