**“‘I Wonder Which Way [We] Ought to Go?’”**

Luke 4:14-21

“I wonder which way I ought to go.” That’s what Alice is thinking when she meets the Cheshire Cat. In the story *Alice in Wonderland,* Alice adventurously follows a white rabbit down a rabbit hole. But not only does she soon lose the rabbit, she also gets hopelessly lost. Just before she meets the Cheshire Cat, Alice passes a tree filled with several directional signs. Up, down, back, forward, this way, that way, point the signs. But which one should she follow? That’s when Alice meets the Cheshire Cat.

“I just wanted to ask you which way I ought to go,” Alice ponders.

“Well, that depends on where you want to get to,” replies the Cat.

“Well, it really doesn’t matter, as long as I…”

But before she can finish, the Cheshire Cat interrupts, “Then it really doesn’t matter which way you go.”

Did you get that? If it really doesn’t matter to you where you want to get to, “then it really doesn’t matter which way you go.”

And so, I ask you: Where are we going as a church? What’s our destination? Where do we want to get to? Or to say this without ending a sentence with a preposition, what’s our destination as a church? Where are all the efforts and energy and the resources we invest in the life, mission, and ministry of this church leading? To what end or purpose? Where are we going as a church?

Have you ever stopped to think about these questions? I hope you have because they are very important questions. You see, if it doesn’t matter to us where we are going as a church or where we end up, then it really doesn’t matter what we do or don’t do. Have you ever stopped to think about the question: Where are we going as a church? Or what is the purpose of the church?

In our scripture reading, Jesus presents the mission statement of his ministry. In the first few verses of our reading, we hear that Jesus went from synagogue to synagogue teaching. Much like a synagogue, a church is a place where we come to learn about the God we serve and where God is leading us.

But then the story gets more specific. Jesus goes to his hometown—the place where he grew up. And, as was his custom, he goes to the synagogue on the sabbath. And then, according to the custom of the day, Jesus sort of serves as the guest preacher of the day, and the scroll of Isaiah is handed to him. And Jesus begins to read Isaiah’s mission statement, and here is what Isaiah says God’s Servant will do, and, as servants of God’s Servant, what we are called to do.

Like Jesus, we are chosen to bring a message of good news to the poor. Well, maybe Jesus just means the poor in spirit. No, that’s Matthew’s Gospel. In Matthew, Jesus says in his Sermon on the Mount, “Blessed are the poor *in spirit*.” But in Luke’s Gospel when Jesus preaches that sermon again on a plain, Jesus simply says, “Blessed are the poor.” Period! The Good News is God loves and cares for everyone, but God has a special concern for the poor, the burdened, and the battered. And God shows the poor and burdened and battered his love and care through Jesus, and today Jesus extends his love and care through the church.

You see, God isn’t concerned *only* about our *spiritual* souls. God is also concerned about our physical well-being. There is no division between the physical and the spiritual in Christian Theology. They are bound together. That’s why this church has a long history of serving with and supporting Greensboro Urban Ministry, CROP Hunger Walks, Angel Tree Ministry, FaithAction Toy Drive, Bread for the World, Guilford Park Guys, and our Deacons’ Fund. Jesus came to bring the Good News of God’s love to the spiritually and physically poor, and today Jesus extends this Good News to the world through the church. That’s our purpose. That’s a big part of our mission. And that’s where we are headed—toward a world where everyone has what they need.

And Jesus also said that he came to announce a pardon to prisoners and captives. Now certainly we are all prisoners to our self-serving and self-righteous natures, and in Jesus we are set free and pardoned from our captivity to our sins. And that’s Good News, but, as this story is told in the Gospel of Luke, it’s clear Jesus also brings Good News to those who are literally held captive in prison. The love of God has no limit; it even extends to death row.

That’s why this church has a long history of struggling to understand issues of justice and social righteousness in our courts and legal system and law enforcement. And this should not be an issue that politically divides us. We need to share our ideas and share our perspectives and open all our hearts to understand these issues together because it’s part of Jesus’ mission statement. So, that’s why it is a part of our mission. And that’s where we are headed—toward a world where everybody matters, but a world where we are especially concerned for the lives of those who are victims of injustice.

And Jesus came to bring sight to the blind—physical and spiritual. Jesus healed those who were physically blind, and we should be concerned for the physical health of everyone. But he also helps us to see our own hypocrisy and arrogance and pride. He helps us to see the self-serving ways we interpret our faith and construct our theology to our own advantage. You see, the people inside the church aren’t always the good guys. There have been many times throughout the 2,000-year history of the church when Christians have been the source of evil and suffering. Jesus came to heal us of this blindness. And that’s another mission of the church: to relieve the world and the church of our blindness. And that’s where we are headed—toward a world where we see reality as it truly is.

And Jesus came to announce the Year of Jubilee. According to Leviticus, every 50 years, all indentured servants were to be freed, and all foreclosed land was to be returned to the ancestral family of the original owner. Folks, I’ve got news for you, if you haven’t already figured it out. Life isn’t fair. The deck is literally stacked against many, many people on the day they are born. And, in many cases, there is very little they can do on their own to change their life circumstances.

The Year of Jubilee was God’s way of reshuffling the deck. And Jesus says that that is what he came to do. You see, God is not *only* concerned about our *individual* souls. God is also concerned about the soul of our nation and the soul of our world. Folks, the world isn’t fair. Jesus came to make it fair, and we are called to carry on that mission. And that is where we are headed—toward a world where everyone truly has an equal opportunity.

But here’s one last thing that I hope you will hear because it is what sets us apart from any other philanthropic organization. You see, there is more to being a church than just doing good deeds because, let’s face it, we aren’t going to solve all the world’s problems in our lifetime. And sometimes when we try to solve one problem, we end up creating another unintended and sometimes even greater problem. And it can be real easy doing good deeds to get tired and discouraged in the outreach ministry of a church. And it can be real easy to lose hope and eventually give up.

Our scripture reading says that when Jesus began his ministry he was “filled with the power of the Holy Spirit,” and, in the passage that Jesus reads from Isaiah, God’s Servant says, “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me.” My friends, the church is not a place where we come to escape from the world or to be isolated from the world. The church is a place where we come to be empowered to go back out into the world—to go out filled with the power of God’s Spirit to proclaim and witness the Good News of God’s love and concern for everyone.

Do we know where we are going as a church? Do we know where we hope to arrive? And how we’re going to get there? In Matthew and Mark’s Gospel, our destination has a name. In Mark, Jesus calls it the Kingdom of God. In Matthew, Jesus calls it the Kingdom of Heaven. In both Gospels, Jesus calls us to turn our lives away from a reality determined by our self-serving wants and wishes and to turn our lives toward a reality determined by God’s reign and God’s rule. The church is called to exhibit the Kingdom of Heaven to the world.

But what does the Kingdom of Heaven look like? And how are we going to get there? In our scripture reading, Jesus tells us what it looks like, and throughout the rest of Luke’s Gospel, he shows us what to do. And, like Jesus, “filled with the power of the Holy Spirit,” we are called to do it too—bring good news to the poor, release the captives, give sight to the blind, and let the oppressed go free. Empowered by God’s Spirit, let’s go out and witness the Kingdom of God.

Let us pray:

Lord, empower us to continue Christ’s mission on earth until heaven and earth are one. Amen.

David A. Cagle

March 21, 2021

5th Sunday in Lent