

Isaiah 58:6-14

Luke 4:14-30

January 24, 2016

Preached by Philip Gladden at the Wallace Presbyterian Church, Wallace, NC

MISSION RATHER THAN MAINTENANCE

Let us pray: Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

Last Sunday night, Nancy and I went to hear Dr. Rodger Nishioka speak at the First Presbyterian Church in Wilmington. He is a professor of Christian Education at Columbia (Presbyterian) Theological Seminary in Decatur, Georgia. Rodger spoke about “Nurturing a Faith That Matters.” During the conversation, Rodger shared eight trends he and others have identified that are and will be characteristic of churches that are “nurturing a faith that matters.”

One of the trends is “moving from discipleship and evangelism to apostleship.” Rodger talked about how discipleship is experiential. Think about the Great Commission in Matthew 28:16-20, where Jesus says, “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations.” He said, “We’ve tended to see this great commission text of ‘go and make disciples’ as a command, but it is more about shaping and forming who we are as disciples.”

He asked all of us, “What comes after Matthew and the other gospels in the New Testament?” We all answered, “Acts!” He said, “That’s right, the acts of the *apostles*.” His point was this: “that means we are sent out by the Holy Spirit to move from discipleship and evangelism to apostleship. That transition requires that we put less emphasis on what we’re doing and more on who we’re becoming and how we’re representing ourselves. We are called to see where God is at work in the world and then participate in this mission of God.”¹

That’s the invitation Jesus gave to his hometown neighbors when he preached in the synagogue in Nazareth where he grew up. Filled with the Holy Spirit, Jesus had returned to Galilee from his forty days in the wilderness and began to teach in the synagogues. He was getting good press coverage because of his teaching and healing ministries.

When he stood up to read the scriptures and sat down to preach that Sabbath day in his old neighborhood, the hometown folks were rightfully proud – “All spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his mouth. They said, ‘Is not this Joseph’s son?’” (Luke 4:22) But it didn’t take long for their admiration to turn to irritation to outright infuriation. In just a few short minutes, his neighbors go from openly praising Jesus to leading him to the brow of the hill so that they might hurl him off the cliff. Some folks would say Jesus went from preachin’ to meddlin’. It sounds like Jesus stomped all over their toes with steel-toed boots! What in the world did they find so offensive in his sermon?

To start with, Jesus apparently refused to do the same kinds of things in his hometown that he had been doing over in Capernaum, about twenty-five miles to the

northeast, up on the shore of the Sea of Galilee. To add insult to injury, Jesus had been hanging out and helping “those people” over in Capernaum, which had the reputation of being home to lots of Gentiles (read: non-Jews!).

Also, like any preacher tends to do, Jesus used some sermon illustrations. He didn’t have to go to www.sermon.net to find his illustrations. Jesus went straight to the source, to the Hebrew scriptures (what we call the Old Testament) and mentioned stories about two great prophets which his neighbors had heard plenty of times before. Some of the men there that Sabbath may have even read the stories out loud in worship. One story was about Elijah and the widow of Zarephath in Sidon who was saved from a famine; the other story was about Elisha and Naaman the Syrian commander who was cleansed of his leprosy. Who do you think saved the widow and cleansed the commander? God, of course! What wonderful stories! What great news about God’s amazing grace in the world!

Except . . . except that the widow of Zarephath in Sidon and Naaman the Syrian commander **weren’t Jews!** Suddenly the mood in the synagogue there in Nazareth turned ugly. How dare this hometown boy come back here and tell us this stuff about God’s grace extending beyond our people, our village, our synagogue, our way of doing things! How dare he do that! “When they heard this, all in the synagogue were filled with rage. They got up, drove him out of the town, and led him to the brow of the hill on which their town was built, so that they might hurl him off the cliff.” (Luke 4:28-29)

Let me stop right here and say, this is a difficult scripture lesson! Not only does a nice homecoming story quickly turn into a mob scene, the story’s message is convicting for all of us in the church today. That’s why I think what Rodger Nishioka had to say last Sunday night is right on the mark and so important – and so very challenging!

As I have mentioned before, your session has been working on a “mission budget.” You will be receiving a copy of the 2016 Mission Budget brochure in the mail very soon. We encourage you to read it carefully and prayerfully. The mission (or “narrative”) budget lays out the reasons why and the ways how our church tries to meet Jesus’ call in three important areas: Worship – Congregational Nurture and Education – Outreach and Benevolence.

As I was preparing the worship sheet for our session retreat, I looked for some clipart online to illustrate the theme of the morning worship. I came across a nice logo – Worship. Grow. Go. – and I put it on the worship sheet. As the elders and I worked on writing the mission budget and putting together the brochure you will receive, we realized that motto – Worship. Grow. Go. – summed up the work we were doing. The graphic was from the North Avenue Presbyterian Church in Atlanta. When I contacted the pastor for permission to use the clipart in our brochure, he immediately responded “Yes!” and sent his blessings to our congregation for our ministry and mission.

Many people agree that this story about Jesus going home again is a sad story. Sad because of how he is rejected by his neighbors. Sad because they try to kill him. But sad, also, because the people in Nazareth miss their chance for a new life and a new opportunity. When Jesus read to them from the prophet Isaiah about the mission of God’s servant, he was reminding them of God’s original and ongoing call to Israel to be

a servant people, to be a light to the nations (which can also mean to the Gentiles), to go out and show people what it means to worship and serve the one, true living God.

Let's consider that motto/graphic on our 2016 Mission Budget:

Worship – that is our first and foremost calling as God's people, “to glorify God and to enjoy him forever.” But listen to these lines from today's Affirmation of Faith: “God has not taken his people out of the world, but has sent them into the world to worship him and serve all humankind. We worship God in the world by standing before the Lord in behalf of all people. Worship is no retreat from the world; it is part of our mission.” (From PCUSA “A Declaration of Faith”) Some churches have these words inscribed over the archway of the door leading out of the sanctuary: “You are entering the mission field.” I get that worship can be meaningful, can recharge you, can fill you up for another week. But if our worship becomes primarily about **us**, rather than about God and the people God sends us to, then our worship becomes ingrown and stale and inauthentic.

Grow – There's nothing wrong with being disciples. After all, Jesus told his disciples, “Go and make disciples of all nations . . .” We need to nurture our faith. We need to grow in grace and in God's wisdom. We need to strengthen our love and fellowship as a congregation. We need to know God's Word. But all of those “need to's” need to lead us beyond ourselves, beyond “me and Jesus” or even “us and Jesus.”

One writer has characterized this as the “hometown syndrome,” which he says “can begin to affect who we are as God's people and how we carry out our mission. We can become so preoccupied with our own corner of the world, that we can assume that the only work of God that is really important is to give all of us hometown folks a new demonstration of his power, that renewal of the saints is more important than new proclamation to sinners. In such an environment God's work is provincialized into maintenance rather than mission, taking care of those who should be healthy instead of seeking out those who need healing. It is expressed in a willingness to settle for security rather than risk everything for the Kingdom. It is a willingness to leave things as they have always been rather than embrace newness. It is an eagerness to face the future only if that future is the same as yesterday. Yes, we believe in what Jesus can do, but we have decided that it is really for **us**, not **them**. ‘Heal yourself, Lord.’ ‘Do it here, also, Jesus!’ Which is really a way to say, ‘We've got enough here to keep you busy, so you don't really need to bother with all those others.’”²

Which brings us to the last word – Go – which may be the most challenging of the three commands/invitations from Jesus. Again, that same writer says, “. . . a true embrace of mission, a true vision of the future will call us out of our comfort zones, may propel us into places that we would not choose, or may call us to paths that we would not walk if we had a choice. But it also affirms that if we have a clear sense of what we are to be about as Christians, and if we allow the power of the Spirit to lead and empower us, God will bring His future in whatever city, in whatever arena we happen to be. It may not be in hometown Nazareth. It may not even be in Jerusalem. Or

Judea. Or even Samaria. It may be in Rome or beyond. It may be somewhere far beyond our hometowns and our comfort zones. But it will come.”³

There was a day when churches – especially mainline denominations such as us Presbyterians – could count on people coming to us just because we were here. Good or bad, that was the pattern. That’s not so true these days, and we churches need to pay attention. Our worship and congregational nurture – our Worship and Grow – are very important for the life and health of our congregation, but they shouldn’t be ends in themselves. The church is called to meet people where **they** are, not necessarily where the church is or has always been. That’s not to say we don’t have something vital to offer – of course we do: we have the gospel of Jesus Christ; we have the amazing grace of God to share with everyone.

In a devotion called “Chosen,” Alan Brehm writes, “Like God’s servants of the past, like Jesus himself, those who claim to have a special relationship with God by virtue of calling and faith are chosen for a reason: to share God’s grace and mercy and love and justice with those around them. That was true in the time of the prophets, it was true in the time of Jesus, and it’s still true today. We are called to give water to the thirsty, food to the hungry, welcome to the stranger, shelter to the homeless, clothing to the naked. We are called to share the blessing of new life that we have been given through our faith in Jesus Christ.”⁴

We are called to Worship – Grow – Go.

May God go with us! More importantly, may we go with God!

Let us pray: Almighty God, by grace alone you call us and accept us in your service. Strengthen us by your Spirit and make us worthy of your call to be followers of Jesus Christ. Amen.

NOTES

¹For a summary of Rodger Nishioka’s point (presented at The Big Tent event), see “Moving from discipleship and evangelism to apostleship” at www.pcusa.org.

²Dennis Bratcher at www.crivoice.org/lectionary/YearC/Cepiphany4nt.html.

³Ibid.

⁴Alan Brehm, “Chosen,” at www.thewakingdreamer.blogspot.com.