



September 6, 2015

15th Sunday after Pentecost

A Sermon by Brent J. Eelman

The Salvation of Humankind

Luke 4: 14-21

14 Then Jesus, filled with the power of the Spirit, returned to Galilee, and a report about him spread through all the surrounding country. ¹⁵He began to teach in their synagogues and was praised by everyone.

16 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, ¹⁷and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written:

¹⁸'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,

¹⁹to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.'

²⁰And 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. ²¹Then he began to say to them, 'Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.'

The art of life is not always knowing the right answers. It is about asking the right questions.

- What is the purpose of life?
- Why do we do the things that we do?
- What is ultimately important?

Seldom do we ask ourselves these questions, because they are troubling and go to the heart of our existence. These questions of purpose are also asked of our institutions. Colleges ask, "What is the purpose of higher education today?" We question the importance and purpose of many organizations from the United Nations to the PTA. Private Industry continually asks these questions in a changing environment, and consequently revisit their mission statements. This same questioning also falls upon the church. What is the purpose of the church? Closer to home: what is the purpose of PPC? Why does it exist? What are the great ends toward which we are working?

I

I was two years into my ministry as an Associate Pastor in Missouri. The congregation was a university church that prided itself on having the latest and the best in terms of technology,

programs, and ministry. The office was always busy. The phones were constantly ringing and flashing. My father (a former seminary professor who taught preaching and church administration) flew in to spend a few days with me, and I, of course wanted to show him to where I worked. I was very proud of my job and all the latest things we were doing in ministry. "Cutting edge" was the term that we used. He came into the office suite and saw the buzz of activity. Phones were ringing and flashing, people were talking on intercoms, copies were being made on copy machines, (this thirty years ago... copy machines were big stuff!) There was a whirl of activity. I knew that my father would be impressed with how "busy" we were. Our office was as busy as any other type of office.

That night, over dinner, I asked my father what he thought of my church. He remarked how busy the office was, and that he never saw so many phones and other contraptions in a church. Then he asked, "Doesn't all of that distract you from your calling?" He posed a question of purpose. Does all of that activity relate to the purpose of the church?

A few years ago I spend 3 months on a sabbatical. It was a time of intense introspection. I looked at all the things that I was doing and the way that I was using my time, and asked the question: "Is the church distracted from its calling?" The question became more personal: "Am I distracted with so much busy work: meetings, problem solving, making sure that there are towels in the bathroom, that the coffee is hot, and all the other things that my work seemed to ask of me? "Am I fulfilling my call or am I just making sure that an organization runs somewhat smoothly and within budget?"

In the midst of my introspection, I made the decision to put a copy of the "Great Ends of the Church" right above my computer monitor. The Great ends of the church were crafted by Presbyterians at the turn of the last century, (1905) They were six simple statements that proclaimed: "This is why the church exists." Each day, before I did anything, those statements reminded that these are the reasons I show up for work. For the next six weeks, I am going to use the *Great Ends of the Church* as the topics for my Sunday message. This is not only about what I am supposed to be doing, but what we are about together.

The first Great End of the church (today's message) is "**The proclamation of the Gospel for the salvation of Humankind.**" Proclamation is teaching and preaching. Salvation implies that humanity is in peril. Something is the matter with the human race and we are headed off the cliff like lemmings marching to the sea. What does this mean for the church? What does this mean for this community of faith, located in Poland, Ohio? How urgent is the situation? Does the world's need for salvation demand an immediate response or can it wait until we take care of some other needs? What do we mean by salvation? Is it only about the after-life or does it have something to do with life as we now live? Is salvation only a ticket through the pearly gates, or is it about how we live and exist together in this world and this life? Those are tough questions and I cannot pretend to answer them in a twenty minute message, but ministry, like life is not always about having all the right answers. It is leading people to struggle and wrestle with the right questions...(like Jacob, wrestling with the stranger on the river Jabbock.)

The church has been struggling with this for a long time. Fifty-five years ago, *Time Magazine* wrote an article about the growing irrelevancy of the church. Ironically, this article appeared when churches were thriving, including this one. People were flocking back to congregations in record number, and yet in the midst of all of this, there was ferment and fear that the church was becoming merely a social institution and it was irrelevant to the needs of the world. One of the interviewees laid the problem squarely on the feet of clergy and offered this proscription:

"Fling him into his office, tear the office sign from the door and nail on the sign: STUDY. Take him off the mailing list, lock him up with his books—get him all kinds of books. – and his typewriter and his Bible.... Force him to be the one man in our surfeited communities who knows about God... Rip out his telephone, burn his ecclesiastical success sheets, refuse his glad hand, put water in the gas tank of his community buggy and compel him to be a minister of the Word." (Time Magazine, April 7, 1961)

Be a minister of the Word: The Word... the gospel... does this not get us back to the great end of the church to proclaim the word: to proclaim the gospel for the salvation of humanity? But faithful proclamation of the gospel of salvation begs another question: **Where** are we to proclaim the gospel of love, hope, and salvation?

The famous quote from the movie, *Field of Dreams* is "If you build it, they will come." That only works in movies. Churches have gorgeous buildings, and they aren't coming. Here is the reality of 2015. Sunday has become one more day of the week. For many it is another day of work. Stores are open. It is an extra day to schedule recreation, leisure and sports. Since the 1950's the work week has increased, and consequently people are looking for the extra hours to do the things that bring joy to their lives. In 1969, couples age 25-54 worked an average of 56 hours a week. By 2000, this had increased to 67 hours.(U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics). Families need to spend time together!

This has been a real challenge for congregations. We have responded by making Sunday "fun-day". Making worship more entertaining, making the music sound modern, etc. It has not been effective. Worse, these gimmicks have distracted us from our purpose. The challenge is to proclaim the gospel for the salvation of human kind where we find people. 2 examples from my history: 1. Bible study at the Compaq Computer plant. 2. Meditation with runners from my congregation in Philadelphia prior to marathon races.

III

Where are the opportunities for PPC to proclaim the gospel for the salvation of humanity? Remarkable job with our mission emphasis: Food Pantry, the Dry Pantry, the Salvation Army, etc. We have discovered that mission means not only going to Nepal to rebuild after the earthquake, it also means going into the city of Youngstown and serving food to the hungry, clothing the naked, and proclaiming hope and salvation to those who are alienated from the mainstream of our culture. We have so many other places and opportunities: the Pre-school (which this year will have over 50 students), the fair, and the many sports programs?

We should not rue the 21st century with all its challenges. The history of the church, the 2000 year history of the church, is one of adaptation to a changing culture: adaptation without

compromising the message of salvation and hope. Poland Presbyterian Church has a great deal on its plate during this time of transition... but it has been given a great opportunity to re affirm its calling and purpose and to discover ways of thinking outside the box, (outside the building?). Let us not be distracted from our primary calling as a community of faith... Let us discover, together, how God is challenging us to proclaim the Good News for the salvation of Humanity! Amen.