

**Today**  
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**Covenant Presbyterian Church, Staunton, VA**  
**January 26, 2025**  
**Texts: 1 Corinthians 12:18-27; Luke 4:14-21**

A few weeks ago, your session sat down to develop their goals for the coming year. This is a yearly practice in this congregation and, honestly, one of my favorite parts of the session retreat. It takes several hours as the session members gather in conversation to look back at what we've been doing, look at who we are as a community in the present, and look forward to what we could or should do in the coming months as a community of faith. It is an imaginative space, with each member bringing their own specific gifts and their own understanding of the church they love so deeply. And with excited chatter, ideas flow at each table. Then they share their ideas, considering each within the wisdom of the whole group, until they choose three or four to intentionally inform their work over the coming year. You will hear, in coming weeks, what they have set as goals for themselves this year.

At the heart of these holy conversations with each other and with God, are three foundational questions, that of our identity, context, and purpose. While not stated explicitly, I hear them faithfully discussed. A dear colleague gave me the benediction I share with you – for years, it washed over me each Sunday as he said it to the congregation and slowly settled into my bones, popping up whenever I was discerning an action. Remember who you are, whose you are, and for whose purposes you are.

We are creations of God, each with a unique set of gifts all our own that God means for us to share with the world.

We belong to God, who makes us part of the people of God that includes all our neighbors – the ones in here and the ones out there...the ones we like and the ones we don't...the ones who are thriving and the ones who are hurting.

We were made to work with God, for God's purposes, to work as bearers of Christ's light and builders of a different kind of kingdom than the ones humans build in this world.

Jesus also attended to these questions of identity, belonging, and purpose. Today's scripture comes early in Jesus's ministry, following directly on the heels of his baptism and his temptation in the wilderness.

In his baptism, the Holy Spirit descended upon him. He knows who he is – the beloved one, claimed by God and anointed by the Spirit.

In his temptation, he made clear who he belongs to, whose he is. He was tested, but he chose God's way. He claims the power of the Holy Spirit and prepares for urgent ministry to the downtrodden.

And then today, he makes clear God's purpose for his life in his introductory words to the people he served, setting the tone for what his ministry will look like.

Jesus sets four goals for his ministry:

To bring good news to the poor.

To proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind.

To set the burdened and the battered free.

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

Now, Jesus would spend the next three years, literally doing this work.

As people who call ourselves Christ's disciples, we should pay attention to his words and his work.

Jesus brought a message of hope and mercy for the poor and marginalized. And he lived that message – feeding the hungry, uplifting the plight of the poor, inviting the outcast to his side, and healing the sick. This did not mean that he wasn't for the rich or powerful...indeed he helped them too, when they needed it, healing the centurion's servant, answering the Pharisee Nicodemus's questions, raising to life the daughter of the synagogue leader.

It's just that Jesus was wherever people were suffering. Whoever was hungry, thirsty, naked, or sick, that's where you would find Jesus...because that's where his gift was needed.

He set the burdened and battered free. He would welcome the ones no one else would. He uplifted women, children, the disabled, the unwanted. He freed those burdened with anxiety, depression, and other mental disorders. And he would set free those who were held back by fear and misunderstanding. Where people were scared, he was there to share their burdens.

We hear the same call for our work in Paul's message to the Corinthians. Wherever one member of the body is hurting, we are all hurting. We give special attention to the injured part, not because the other is not important, but because it doesn't require any special treatment at this moment. When that changes, we reform, until finally, we create a place where all parts of the body exist in harmony together. For our life, that means always looking for the marginalized. It doesn't mean deciding whether or not they deserve to be there before we help, but simply minding them in whatever faithful ways we must until they are brought back to well-being.

Melinda Quivik, a pastor and professor, puts it this way. "When we see ourselves as a body assembled by the one who stands always outside our walls, on the side of those who do not yet belong, who have not yet been welcomed, who are not easily accepted – then we become grateful people who only want to open wider the doors wherever they may be flung."<sup>1</sup> Jesus is always on the outside, standing with the hurting, and calling the church to *open the doors*.

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<sup>1</sup> Ronald J. Allen, Dale P. Andrews, and Dawn Ottoni-Wilhelm, *Preaching God's Transforming Justice: A Lectionary Commentary, Year C*, (Westminster John Knox Press, 2012), 150.

Jesus announced pardon to those held captive and brought sight to the blind. Now, he literally freed those who were held captive by injury, restoring the paralyzed and the lame and healing the bleeding ones. And he literally brought sight to the blind, washing scales from the eyes, spitting healing spit that restored sight.

But he also restored sight for those who could not see the kingdom of God. He was a bright light for those seeking the way of God and his actions helped people see a glimpse of the kingdom right where they were, the way the world could be for us, the way God wants it to be for us. He made it clear that, in the kingdom, no one is a bargaining chip, no one should be forced to be assimilated into someone else's definition of right, no one should be a slave to anyone or anything else.

We, the church in this world, having seen Jesus's light, are to be light for others. We may not be able to restore sight to the blind. I wish, with all my heart, that we could. But we can restore sight to those who are blind to the kingdom. David Fagerberg, a liturgical theologian, says that worship is our weekly eye surgery...our chance to catch a glimpse of the kingdom at work in the assembly here. Perhaps, with our sight restored, we might see the whole world with the eye of Christ, inviting others to see what we see and to experience what we experience through our words and work all week...in our praise, in our sharing, in our welcoming, in our eating, in our community-building.<sup>2</sup>

The year of the Lord's favor that Jesus proclaims likely connects with the year of Jubilee, a biblical tradition that proclaimed the release from debts and indebtedness every fifty years. What had been yours was returned to you, debts owed were wiped clean, and slaves were given freedom. It's unclear as to whether this actually ever happened, but then, the people of God have always been a striving people, trying to do the right and faithful thing and not always getting absolutely right. Interestingly, the verse from Isaiah that Jesus read continues, proclaiming also the year of God's vengeance. But Jesus leaves this part out. Jesus's mission wasn't one of vengeance right here...his focus was on healing and justice.

We, too often, jump to judgment, blaming, and revenge, something that we are not even called to do. We are quick to decide who is at fault and then take sides one against another. As humans, we are prone to march into silos and blame the other side for all our struggles. You can have this or I can have it. We can help this group or that group. We see things as either/or. We limit our imagination from seeing the both/and that is Christ's healing and justice. And we are quick to lean toward retribution theology...people get what they deserve. We are blinded to the ways that the world is stacked against people because of a history they did not create, but still bear.

The Matthew 25 initiative implores us to free those kneeling under the pressure of structural racism that makes it harder for people of color to do the things that would help build educational, financial, and social freedom. It means understanding the way racism is built into the systems and how we subconsciously perpetuate it because of long-standing patterns of belief. In addition, we are to uplift those bearing the burden of systemic poverty by addressing the issues that cause it as opposed to just putting a Band-Aid on it. It means including, in every conversation about

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<sup>2</sup> David W. Fagerberg, *Consecrating the World: Mundane Liturgical Theology*, (Angelico Press, 2016), 91.

helping those in poverty, how society is making it harder to overcome poverty and how we might create spaces where people can, not just survive, but truly move forward. This is the work of releasing our neighbors, and maybe ourselves, from debt and indebtedness.

Then Jesus rolled up that scroll and sat down. The whole congregation waited with bated breath. They knew about this promise of salvation and were waiting. Jesus was going to make it clear. “Today. Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing,” he says. And then he’s done.

Whatever they expected, apparently Jesus’s explanation was not it. They would turn on him quite quickly. Six verses later, they would be seething in anger, yelling at him, and trying to kick him out of town. Not a good sermon, apparently.

But that word...today. That’s God’s today. The Holy Spirit’s today is right now. And tomorrow, well, it will be God’s today then. And every day after that, well, it’ll be God’s today too. When we live in God’s time, as God’s people, listening to God’s Word, and *hearing* it, every day is God’s today.

And as Christ's body in this world, we are called to live into his mission statement today. When we live in God’s time, as God’s people, listening to God’s Word, and *hearing* it, we must live every day as if it’s the first day, the last day, the only day we have to live and serve.

Friends, remember who you are...whose you are...and for whose purposes you are. Jesus gave us our mission statement...let’s go live it. Today.