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## Paradigm Shift

A mission statement should describe what an organization or company is called to do – its purpose – in just a few sentences, or even just a few words. It should be bold, concise – something people can hold onto.

For example, the mission of TED (the Technology, Entertainment, and Design speaker series) is: to spread ideas.

The mission of Google is to organize the world's information and make it universally accessible and useful.

And the American Red Cross's mission is to prevent and alleviate human suffering in the face of emergencies by mobilizing the power of volunteers and the generosity of donors.

A Vision statement – like what we have on the front of our bulletin – can be a bit longer. It describes what you hope to accomplish, the kind of organization or community you hope to create.

As a church, we don't have a textbook mission statement. We have a statement that describes *how* we engage in mission: we are called to Speak Up, Reach Out, and Build Bridges, a catchphrase that came from our Going Forward Task Force's work a few years ago. We claim our vision each Sunday: a community of the PCUSA where all are welcomed and valued, a vibrant people make a vital difference, etc.

A good mission statement guides and directs work. It clarifies and helps us discern the best ways to spend our time and energy. It helps us know which direction to go. Speak Up, Reach Out, and Build Bridges led us to create our UKirk partnership for college ministry; it has helped us explore opening our church to our neighbors in new ways, it has taken us out to the street on Ash Wednesday and to nearby parks for Vacation Bible School, and it's inspired us to become more vocal advocates with and for our community partners.

Some read this morning's passage from Luke as Jesus' mission statement. We are still in the season of Epiphany, where week by week the lectionary passages reveal a bit more about who Christ is and what he came to do. I love this passage – not just because of what it says but because of how it is written: bold and concise, Luke describes the scene so vividly we can't help but picture it. Jesus in his hometown synagogue surrounded by the people who raised him – his old Hebrew and Torah teachers, friends from middle school, Mary and Joseph. He reads from the scroll of Isaiah and then shocks everyone by declaring Isaiah's prophesy to be fulfilled ...by him.

The work described in the passage he reads is, indeed, the ministry Jesus undertakes in the Gospel of Luke. He shares the good news of God's kingdom with the poor as he travels through Galilee and makes his way to Jerusalem. He shows the power of the Spirit by healing the sick and helping the blind to see. He reaches out to the marginalized and the outcast, to tax collectors and the woman with the hemorrhage and the Gerasenian demoniac, and he brings them back into the fold. He frees Zaccheus from past wrongdoing, he brings Jairus' daughter back to life, he shows the rich young ruler the path to liberation. He preaches a subversive vision of God's kingdom within and around us, with a claim on our hearts that far surpasses the power of any earthly government. And he lives out the Spirit of Jubilee, offering forgiveness wherever he goes. Jubilee, of course, is the year in ancient Israel when people returned to their ancestral lands, debts were forgiven, and slaves were freed. We're not sure if it was ever actually practiced, but the year of the Lord's favor was a vision to guide the community back to equality, to rebalance the scales.

When Christ has read this, he rolls up the scroll, hands it back, and takes his seat. The expectation and tradition is that he would then teach on the passage he has just read. The first word of the first sermon Jesus preaches in this gospel is *Today*... today this has been fulfilled in your hearing. Not tomorrow. Not soon. Now, *today* this has been fulfilled.

Am I the only one who wonders... isn't this a little premature? He hasn't even really begun his ministry, and he already is claiming that the captives are free and the blind can see? Is it because he is God and already knows how things will turn out? Is it just the power of a goal – that if you will it, dude, it is no dream? Or is that the nature of God's kingdom, already here but not fully realized?

I think, maybe, it's just the way of liberation: one has to dream of freedom, and have a vision of a liberated life, before the struggle begins.

The work for the abolition of slavery took shape long before it became a reality in our country. Abraham Lincoln was, by many accounts, not an abolitionist. He abhorred slavery personally, but he was a pragmatic politician. Although the evil of slavery was a main cause for the conflict, Lincoln entered the war primarily to maintain the union, not to abolish slavery. As the battles raged, abolition became a strategy of the war, to destabilize the South; as time went on, the war became more and more about freedom. The Emancipation Proclamation was first signed in September of 1862, but it didn't go into effect until January of '63. It freed slaves only in areas of rebellion, but that was the vast majority of enslaved peoples – some 3.5 million people.<sup>1</sup> There was much rejoicing and a veritable flood of liberated people making an exodus from the South in early 1863 as word of Emancipation spread. But in some states, slavery persisted. The holiday of Juneteenth<sup>2</sup> commemorates the pronouncement of liberation in Galveston, Texas on June 19, 1865... two and a half months after the end of the war, two and a half years after the Emancipation Proclamation, and five months after the thirteenth amendment was passed by Congress. Some 200,000 people were freed on that day.

News of liberation can travel slowly, it seems. Too slowly. If we look at our own city, our state, our country, we can see that there are a lot of people who still aren't free. At the March on Washington in 1963, the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King stood on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial and evoked the Emancipation Proclamation. He observed that black people still aren't free, that they are “crippled by the chains of segregation and the manacles of discrimination... and [live] on a lonely island of poverty in the midst of a vast ocean of ...prosperity.”<sup>3</sup> Michelle Alexander, Bryan Stevenson, and others have traced the path from slavery to Jim Crow to our current system of mass incarceration. The US imprisons more people than any other nation

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<sup>1</sup> I drew from both the National Archives' and Wikipedia's entries on the Emancipation Proclamation for this section, <https://www.archives.gov/exhibits/featured-documents/emancipation-proclamation> and [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Emancipation\\_Proclamation](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Emancipation_Proclamation).

<sup>2</sup> Which we should celebrate in Alabama instead of Jefferson Davis' birthday...

<sup>3</sup> King, Martin. “I Have a Dream” speech at the March for Jobs and Freedom, Washington, DC, August 28, 1963, <https://www.naacp.org/i-have-a-dream-speech-full-march-on-washington/>

in the world – more than 2.2 million of our citizens are behind bars, and that's not counting detained immigrants and who knows how many children separated from their parents at the border, now trapped in the shelter system. Here in the land of the free and the home of the brave, a lot of people are not free. Liberation can take a long time to become reality.

But I believe that Christ proclaimed release to the captives and freedom for the oppressed because a vision of liberation, naming freedom as a goal has to precede the experience of it. We have to know where we're going if we're ever going to get there.

Now, I've been quite literal in my interpretation of liberation, talking about concrete, external liberation. But what about internal liberation? Don't we all need to be liberated? Each one of us is held captive in one way or another, whether it is by fear, or worry– fear of failure or decline, worry about things over which we have no control. Here in 21<sup>st</sup> century affluence we are held captive by our stuff, by our addictions to technology or to food or to numbing the pain in one way or another. We are trapped by past transgressions, by the choices we've made, by our inability to forgive others or ourselves. We are captive to doubt, to despair and depression, to a sense of helplessness in the face of the debacle in DC or climate change.

I wonder what it is for you? What is holding you captive? What it is for us, as a people, or us, as a church? What holds us back?

We'll hear this: Christ comes to us and proclaims good news to the poor, release to the captives, and recovery of sight to the blind. He lets the oppressed go free and proclaims the time of forgiveness and restoration has come. Sometimes news of liberation travels slowly. Sometimes liberation takes a long time to be made real. But naming freedom as a goal precedes our experience of it.

Writing about the current state of the church, former GA co-moderator Jan Edmiston calls for a paradigm shift. She says we need to stop thinking that God wants us to *go to church*. And, instead, realize that God calls us to *be the church*. Don't go to church, be the church. That is: be the living, breathing, perfectly imperfect body of Christ in the world. Spirit anointed and empowered to bring good news, and to work for release, healing, freedom, and justice.

Could we, First Presbyterian Church of Birmingham, shift our thinking? Could we *be* the church to one another? Could we *be* the church in the world? What might happen if we claimed the power of the Spirit and worked to liberate ourselves and others from all that holds us captive? After all, Christ has already set us free and shown us the path to freedom: Freedom from all in here that holds us captive, so that we can be about the work of emancipation out there. And I don't know about you, but I believe that is very good news, indeed. Thanks be to God.