

February 7, 2010

Purpose and Mission

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Luke 14:2

We're going to talk just a little bit today about some of the new words that have been showing up in our bulletin. In December we started putting in our new Purpose, Mission, and Vision in our bulletin and making it part of our worship. I have just been saying it, or Pastor Jeff -- we don't want everybody chanting it because we don't want to sound like Wal-Mart. Has anybody ever been to Wal-Mart early in the morning? They all get together at the snack bar and have a chant of what is their purpose.

Now, at first glance we may say why would the church need a purpose? We're the church. We're the church. We have always been here. We'll always be here until Christ comes back. We know who we are. But what do we do? Our denomination, the United Methodist Church, says that our purpose is to make disciples of Jesus Christ for transformation of the world; that seems pretty cut and dry. When I was in New Jersey on the conference staff, we got together some of the best and brightest and decided to talk about Christian education and what discipleship meant and looked like in congregations big and small, all the way from little preschool infants through adulthood. When we started that conversation, the thing we did not know and could not agree upon was what a disciple was. And I said, this is like Henry Ford making a Model T, but he has no idea what a Model T is or what it would look like, how it would run. So he just decided to collect some stuff from his garage, put it together, then when you start again, put some other stuff together, and, I don't know, maybe it will run, I guess.

What is our purpose for being here? Clearly, there are times that we know we are here to experience the presence of God; that we are not making it through life ourselves, and we need something greater than ourselves. Other times we come because we are empowered, and we want to serve, and we want to help somebody in need because God has blessed us, and we want to share that with others. Other times we come to pray for ourselves, pray for people in our family, pray for people in our world unknown to us but yet our heart goes out to them. Sometimes when we think of the church we think, well, you know what the purpose of the church is, it's to raise money. All churches ever talk about is money. The purpose of the church is to pay the bills to keep the heat on. The purpose of the church is to be here to bury me when I die. I once had someone in the congregation say, Pastor -- not our congregation, another one - I am really sorry you're here. You're sort of wasting your time. As long as the church is here until I die and it can bury me, that's all I care about. You should have been here in the 1940s. I tell you, in the 1940s we had basketball teams and we had Sunday school classes.

Sometimes when we think of the church, we think only in terms of our rearview mirror. As a new pastor, when you get to the church, people are always

telling you what it used to be like. Did you ever try driving with only using your rearview mirror and not cleaning off your windshield of the snow? Not necessarily a good idea. But sometimes in the church we think that's okay, as long as we look back: look back to Jesus, look back to the Bible, look back to the 1950s or 1960s when this place was filled, we would be okay. We're never very good at looking at now and looking at the future.

We're just going to talk this morning about our purpose, what we do: We invite in and reach out to our community, embracing the love of God in all people. **Community.** You know, it's etched in stone on the front of our building. Now we have covered it with a nice banner that says Baldwin Community United Methodist Church, because the stone just says Baldwin Community Methodist Church, what we used to be. But community is etched in stone on the front of the building. So when we, our church council and others, gathered more than a year ago to start talking about our Purpose, Mission, and Vision, community came up again and again. It's who we are, and it's where we sit.

Yesterday we got the call from the police chief of Whitehall Borough saying would Baldwin Community Church be a warming station to be opened for those in our community that have no power and no heat? I just called the snow removal guy and said, we're not having Saturday night worship. You don't have to do anything today. Then I had to call him and say, we're going to be open at 6:00. You're going to have to do something today.

So we were here. And I called just a few people, and people responded, and folks from our church came down to be with the one family that stayed overnight and the others that came. Why did they think of us? Well, we're one of the largest, if not the largest, building in Whitehall, right? We're the community center of Whitehall, right? It is part of our DNA. It's who we are.

In fact, I have this great book that was passed out when our first building, the Chapel -- that was the sanctuary -- was dedicated, and they decided to put in there a history of our church. Now, it's a little shorter than it is now because it was just beginning. We all know that we began with one woman who decided that there needed to be a Sunday school class in this community. That when people first moved out here, they tended to go back to their home churches, possibly Spencer further in Brownsville Road, where they grew up. But then when the war came and there was gas rationing and rubber rationing and everything else, it was impractical all the time to travel back, and they thought we really need to have a Sunday school in our community. It's part of our DNA. It's who we are.

What I love is that Sunday school got so big they had to move and rent space in the basement of Union School. And then it said the adults got interested. I love that part. Because the kids had had Sunday school for quite a while, and then when Mrs. Garmin had a Christmas party, and she had 75 children in her house for a Christmas party, she decided it was time to move it elsewhere. But

when they moved the school, then the adults got interested and decided to have a Sunday school class as well. And then when they decided to have a Sunday school class, they decided to have a church. They were going to be a church.

They had to wrestle with then what will it look like? What will be our purpose? What will we do? And it's interesting in this history it says, now the Garmins were Methodist. The Methodist Church does not require exacting credo promises, and, thus, encourages community churches. That's right at the beginning: The Methodist Church does not require exacting credo promises, and, thus, encourages community churches.

So at a dinner meeting on February 13, 1946, the men and women of the Sunday school decided to take the first steps -- I love this part -- towards a community church within the structure of the Methodist church. They did not decide to form a Methodist church; they decided to form a community church within the structure of the Methodist church. This explains why a lot of times Baldwin has been accused of being, you know, just tenderly related to the United Methodist Church -- just like a small tether. They decided to circulate a petition asking for such an organization.

So from the very beginning it was seen as a community church. I love this too; when they finally decided after that to build a building, enthusiastically the members approved the resolution for the building of the church and a launching of a crusade for funds. There was faith behind that crusade as on February 8, fifty members began the work of traveling from home to home seeking pledges for the building fund.

Now, it wasn't like the 50 people that were going to be the church just alone pledged, they took it upon themselves to travel from home to home seeking pledges for the building fund. The goal was \$20,000. Isn't it great to build a church for \$20,000? The goal was \$20,000, and more than \$22,000 was pledged. Plans for the church could proceed.

So they saw that there would be people in the community that would pledge to build a church because there should be a church in the community. They weren't necessarily members of the church, they weren't necessarily planning to come to the church, they thought this is part of who our community should be. This is who we are.

So when we came up with our Purpose, we came up with we invite in and reach out to our community, embracing the love of God in all people. In fact, yesterday when I was talking to the man that clears our snow, he says, I underestimated this when I took the job. I said, we'll renegotiate the contract next year. He says, it really doesn't have to do with money. I have never seen a church that's so incredibly busy all the time. He figured churches are open one hour a week.

You want to clear the snow for a church? Yeah, I'll take the money. Eleven o'clock on Sunday morning, and that's it. He said I have never seen a church that's so busy.

We invite in and reach out to our community, embracing the love of God in all people. When we got to that last part, embracing the love of God in all people, we were sort of divided down the middle because half of us said we should say embracing the love of God for all people. And we wrestled with, well, are we the church that has the love of God? You know, we have it in our pockets, and we're taking it to our community. Or do we believe that the love of God is present out there even before we leave in here? We actually started talking about grace and John Wesley's idea of prevenient grace, the Holy Spirit is working in our lives even when we don't know it. When we're young or when we're old, whether we're going to church or not going to church, that the Holy Spirit, that God's love, is in us. We're not taking it to people. We don't own it. It is not a commodity that we're sharing. We're mutually meeting, whether we're inviting in groups or whether we're reaching out to our community, and our common connection is the love of God in all people.

And our Mission, who we are today, is we are a community. Within this larger community is the community, the body of Christ. For we that are in the church are a community. We have a like of purpose. We are here for Christ. We are here for God the Father and the Holy Spirit. We are a community. We pray for each other; we care for each other, we call each other on the phone; we miss each other when they are not here. We are a community, a larger family. We are a community striving to be filled.

And I would have to say the first things said, we are filled with the love of God led by Jesus Christ and empowered by the Holy Spirit, and then you know, like that movie Big, someone raised their hand and said I don't get it. You know, we are not always filled with the love of God; we are not always led by Jesus Christ; and we are definitely not always empowered by the Holy Spirit. So someone came up with that we are a community **striving** to be filled with the love of God led by Jesus Christ and empowered by the Holy Spirit; that we are not perfect. We are not perfect people because we come to church. We are on the journey. We are striving to be filled with the love of God led by Jesus Christ and empowered by the Holy Spirit.

That's why we came this morning, isn't it? Because we need this. Our life is not perfect; it is not filled if we don't come here. But this week would have been different if we hadn't been here this morning, right? A week without church just messes you up. We come here because we're striving; we come here because we want to be better Christians; we come here because we want to be filled with the love of God. We want to be led by Jesus Christ in our life all week long, and we want to be empowered by the Holy Spirit when we get tired.

Nathan began our scripture. And as Jesus is talking, Jesus so many times has stories about banquets, stories about parties, stories about people being invited, stories about people being invited and not coming, stories about others being

welcomed from the highways and the byways. And Jesus then turned to the host, and he said, the next time you put on a dinner, don't just invite your friends and family and rich neighbors, the kind of people who will return the favor. Invite some people who never get invited out: The misfits from the wrong side of the tracks. You will be and you will experience a blessing. They won't be able to return the favor, but the favor will be returned. Oh, how it will be returned at the resurrection of God's people.

Today we are invited to Christ's table, not because we are perfect, not because we have it all figured out; we are invited because we are on this journey, and we have come because we are in need of this invitation. As we come to this table, we will walk away into snow-covered streets; we will walk away into a community where people are still without power and without heat; we will walk away into a community where elderly are wondering how they will get out of their house again; we will walk away into a community rejoicing in some homes and sorrowful in other homes; we will walk away into our workplaces and into our schools knowing that we have been invited, and we can invite others as well. Let us pray.