

Today marks part five of a six-part series of sermons focusing on the budding mission and vision of Lyndhurst Community of Faith Church. For three weeks, Gene and I preached through our identity and purpose statement (which can be found at the top of your bulletin). Last week, Gene shared with us his vision for the church, and today I will be sharing with you mine. Next week, we are hoping to have three voices from amongst you sharing what it is that you need from this venture we have undertaken. I am aware of at least two people who have shown interest, and am wondering if perhaps there might be one more? If so, please be in touch with Gene and me - and soon.

OK, my vision for the church in a nutshell:

- That every single one of us is willing to take a long loving look at our understanding of Jesus, and be willing to evolve as we hear/read/learn/experience more.
- That every single one of us will take a long loving look at our understanding of being a disciple of Jesus; that, we be less about preserving ourselves, and more aligning with those in our community who suffer.
- That we are grounded enough in our understanding of Jesus, discipleship, church, and purpose, that we will be bold in our ministry.

Alright, now for the background material:

I thank Sharon for working her way through all of those words, and for y'all's attention in bearing with such long readings. I trust by the end of this sermon you'll find how they undergird what I'm sharing with you today.

But I am going to begin with yet another reading from the gospels; this from Matthew (26):

6 When Jesus was at House of Misery [Bethany] visiting the house of Simon, who had a skin disease, 7 a woman came to him with a vase made of alabaster containing very expensive perfume. She poured it on Jesus' head while he was sitting at dinner. 8 Now when the disciples saw it they were angry and said, "Why this waste? 9 This perfume could have been sold for a lot of money and given to the poor."

10 But Jesus knew what they were thinking. He said, "Why do you make trouble for the woman? She's done a good thing for me. 11 You always have the poor with you, but you won't always have me. 12 By pouring this perfume over my body she's prepared me to be buried. 13 I tell you the truth that wherever in the whole world this good news is announced, what she's done will also be told in memory of her."

My hope for who this church becomes lies squarely on my growing understanding of Jesus. And that last phrase is very important for us all to grasp. In my almost 54 years of life I have heard, read, experienced a LOT about Jesus. A LOT! And what I've heard/read/experienced has influenced how I understand Jesus. The same is true for each and every one of you -

how you have heard/read/experienced Jesus has formed an understanding in your mind/heart, and if you call yourself a Christian, that idea of Jesus is the touchstone of your faith. Is that fair to say?

Obviously, not one of us has lived the exact same life, and so all of us will have had some exposure to Jesus that is somewhat different from what everyone within the sound of my voice has experienced. Thus, not ONE of us understands Jesus in the same way – that certainly includes your co-pastors.

And do you know what, it has been that way from the beginning. Look at what Matthew's gospel is showing us. It's late - we are in the 26th chapter and are in the midst of the passion story of Jesus. Those who followed Jesus most closely have had PLENTY of time to absorb Jesus' *raison d'être* – Jesus' reason for being. Jesus—in word, action, prayer, practice, example—had thoroughly imparted his purpose for the world, and the disciples still didn't grasp it.

When the disciples saw what the woman was doing they were angry and said, “Why this waste? 9 This perfume could have been sold for a lot of money and given to the poor.”

But the woman fully grasped Jesus' purpose. Jesus was all about letting people know that God's kin-dom was present with them then and there, and by anointing him **IN THAT HOUSE OF MISERY(!)** (one owned by an unclean man, no less) she affirmed for the world who Jesus was. Jesus was no king akin to Caesar or even David. Jesus was the Lord of all, who,

6 Though he was in the form of God,

did not consider being equal with God something to exploit.

7 But Jesus emptied himself

by taking the form of a slave

and by becoming like human beings. (Philippians 2)

This unnamed woman recognized Jesus' full identity, acknowledged Jesus' purpose, and by putting herself in full risk of criticism and mockery, she bore witness to her faith in Christ. Jesus loved her, telling them that she and her anointing of Jesus would be forever remembered for what it was – acknowledgement of God's presence with all who dwell in any house of misery—'clean' or 'unclean'— and due to the state of our world, my friends, that is all of us, and each of us.

Unfortunately, the state of the world has always been filled with misery, and will forever be filled with misery...UNLESS...

Indeed, Dr. Seuss had it right in his eco-apocalyptic tale, *The Lorax*.

UNLESS. “Unless someone like you cares a whole awful lot,” Seuss' Lorax prophesied, “Nothing is going to get better. It's not.”

In the exact same mindframe, Jesus told his disciples, “You will always have the poor with you.” These are not fateful words Jesus is speaking; as in, “well get used to it folks, there will always be those who just don't have the wherewithal to pull themselves up by their bootstraps and get out of their sad state.” No, these are words heavily resonating from the words of Moses, as we heard from the passage in Deuteronomy. The short version comes from verses 4-5 of Chapter 15:

4 There will, however, be no one in need among you... 5 UNLESS you will obey the Lord your God by diligently observing this entire commandment that I command you today.

A quick search of the internet reveals that there are 613 Jewish commandments (mitzvot) extracted from the Hebrew Scriptures.

Obviously, human beings being human beings, there's no possible way that those who wish to faithfully keep God's covenant will be able to observe the entirety of the commandment. And most unfortunate about it all, is that we in our capacity to give care and compassion have failed so miserably in doing so.

And Jesus is no sucker. He could see straight through the insincerity of the disciples' claim that the money that went towards the ointments and perfume would have better served the poor. Jesus' words are a scathing indictment of those who wish to solve the problem of poverty (read *misery*) by throwing a few dollars at it and making themselves feel better. And Jesus is right in line with the words from Deuteronomy.

There was a lovely concept in ancient Judaism of the Sabbath and Jubilee. I'm sure Gene can give a much more thorough teaching than I, but the commandment dealt with the reality of people treating other people inhumanely, building up servitude and debt. The sabbath and jubilee were meant to forgive debt, to set servants free—one sabbath law after seven years, the other (Jubilee) after seven times seven, or 49 years; the latter to curb generational wealth/ privilege as well as generational poverty/ servitude. Hence the words of warning in Deuteronomy:

...do not be hard-hearted or tight-fisted toward your needy neighbor. 8 You should rather open your hand, willingly lending enough to meet the need, whatever it may be. 9 Be careful that you do not entertain a mean thought, thinking, 'The seventh year, the year of remission, is near,' and therefore view your needy neighbor with hostility and give nothing; *your neighbor might cry to the Lord against you, and you would incur guilt.* 10 Give liberally and be ungrudging when you do so...

Friends, this word speaks to us. Institutionally we are in a position of wealth and privilege. That may sound strange coming from two churches that have come together because we had potential closure in our sights. However, the reality is true. Right now, sitting in these pews or in chairs at home or on the road, are people with connections: family connections, business connections, nonprofit connections, experience in a variety of areas of work and play, of knowledge and wisdom. Together, we have the capacity to increase the well-being of our community when we discern the most effective and efficient ways to pool our resources. One example is the Tutoring program that will be starting back up this fall. ~15 years ago, folks in this church recognized that elementary-aged children in the community needed one-on-one tutoring to help them thrive in school. So a group of educators in the church called upon regular ordinary members of the church (and others in the community) to work with students every Saturday morning. And before the pandemic squashed it, it was a very meaning-filled part of the church's ministry.

Which reminds me - WE are not alone in this venture! Mark down on your calendars now the Community Day that we are sponsoring on Thursday, September 22, from 5-7pm. Colleen, to her credit, has (what was the word used in Deuteronomy? Diligently, yes) Colleen has diligently contacted people from all of the groups who meet in the spaces here at 5312 Mayfield Road, to come together on one day and meet one another. My friends, it is such a beautiful picture: groups that formerly met a Faith–Oxsana Melnychenko, the music teacher, TOPS(?), the Richmond Heights High Culinary Club; groups that met at LCPC before the federation–the CEC preschool, Noble Road Presbyterian, the Nepalese congregation, the Presbytery of the Western Reserve, Heights Youth Theater, Fun with Fitness; and then some who have come on board since we’ve been together, including the Bengali Cultural Society whose community is so large that when they have a weekend-long festival in October, we’re going to be worshiping off-site. (While you have your calendars, mark October 2 for an offsite worship experience – more about that later.)

What can happen when we come together and meet one another?

Where are the intersections in our respective identities and purposes that can spark other endeavors that can bless our community?

We have the capacity to respond to *The Lorax*’s UNLESS—to respond to our Savior’s “unless.” Unless we think of “Church” as something other than a place where a small–but growing–group of people meet once a week, with smaller groups meeting throughout the week, we will be stuck in what feels like an existence that puts ourselves at the center and doesn’t foster life.

I wanted Sharon to read the story of the temptations of Jesus because in each of them the Devil offers Jesus something to save himself:

- To assuage his hunger
- To have power over all the principalities of the world
- Self-preservation

Owing all, of course, to the *beneficence* of the Temptor, and at the same time forsaking the Almighty. Jesus, even in his weakened state, would have none of it; keenly keeping his mind and heart on God. These temptations, it would seem, are timeless: being drawn to those things we want, even if it means turning our back on what and who God calls us to be.

The wilderness gave Jesus the opportunity for a long look at his identity and purpose, and what he concluded was that it had nothing to do with taking care of himself. Instead, Jesus' focus was sharpened, prepared to lose his own life, in order to give eternal life to those who, like the woman unnamed above, believed, trusted, and followed Jesus.

Jesus went directly from that experience to a synagogue where he introduced himself. Purposefully taking the scroll of Isaiah, Jesus read aloud from the part that proclaims,

“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 set free those who are oppressed,
19 to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.”

Remember a minute or so ago when I spoke about sabbath and jubilee – that is to what Jesus is speaking when he proclaims the ‘year of the Lord’s favor.’ God favors all of what came before it.

Now, please take note of what happened next:

20 (Jesus) rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down. The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. 21 Then he began to say to them, “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.”

Why? How has the scripture been fulfilled in their hearing? Because anyone who hears the word of ‘good news to the poor’—which includes you and me and any other Jesus-follower—has been reminded of what it means to be engaged in the ministry of the Holy One. That would be striving to put into one’s pattern of living all 613 mitzvot that are meant to give everyone—everyone!—a true shot of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.

So, what’s a small—but growing—church to do? Take a long loving look at what is real about our lives AND what is real about our faith. This may be extremely difficult and hazardous to our spiritual health. At least the spiritual health as we know it today. Please recall, I said at the outset of the sermon that “my hope for who this church becomes lies squarely on my

growing understanding of Jesus.” This is a major part of who I hope we are as a congregation: People who are willing to challenge their preconceived notions of who Creating One/Spirit/Christ is, what the Church is, and how we are called to exhibit what we are coming to understand as God’s call to us. Friends, this...is...brave...work! I’m calling on us to quit regurgitating the religious and, yes, political, tropes that place self-interest at the heart.

When Jesus said the scripture has been fulfilled in our hearing, that is because he has taken a seat and looked us square in the eye waiting to see how we will respond. What I hope for Lyndhurst Community of Faith Church, is that as our ministry unfolds, everything...okay, MOST things...will be measured by how we have fulfilled the mandate to be allies with those who find misery in this world. That together, we may magnify the presence of God’s reign here and now.