

Participants in God's Mission

Luke 4:16-21

Heather Prince Doss
Sea Island Presbyterian Church
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You may have realized by now that Steve, Jack, and I have been using these last three weeks to share and explain the new mission statement that the session wrote for our congregation. You heard from Steve what it means to think of ourselves as a family of faith who gathers for worship and service. You heard from Jack what it means to be equipped by the Holy Spirit and to share in the work of equipping others. The last part of our mission statement says that we are equipped and empowered by the Holy Spirit “to participate in God’s mission of compassion, reconciliation, justice, and peace.” Our mission, the mission of Sea Island Presbyterian Church and her members, is to participate in God’s mission. We have a mission statement because we believe God has a mission statement.

I wonder what God’s mission statement is . . .

Google’s mission is to organize the world’s information and make it universally accessible and useful.ⁱ

Nike’s mission is to bring inspiration and innovation to every athlete* in the world. If you have a body, they say, you are an athlete.ⁱⁱ

The Ritz-Carlton Hotel is a place where the genuine care and comfort of guests is the highest mission.ⁱⁱⁱ

Here’s one more for you: Ikea, the Swedish furniture chain, has made it their mission to offer a wide range of well-designed, functional home furnishing products at a price so low that as many people as possible will be able to afford them.^{iv} (It’s why Eric and I renovated our kitchen with Ikea!)

So what is God’s mission statement? I have a sense of what I think it is, but I have never tried to put it down in fifty words or less. (Sea Island’s new mission statement is 48 words.) There are some Scripture verses that might be good contenders:

For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have everlasting life (John 3:16). Twenty-six words, and its memorable!

Jesus said, “I have come that they may have life and have it abundantly” (John 10:10).

If you like the Old Testament prophets, you might choose a verse like this one from Isaiah: I, the Lord, will give you as a light to the nations that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth (Isaiah 49:6).

As I looked at a handful of corporate and non-profit mission statements, and as I considered short, memorable passages of Scripture that describe the work of God in the world, I struggled to find just one phrase or sentence that captured the fullness of God's mission. I do not think this is a lack of creativity or biblical knowledge on my part. God's mission is not a catch phrase or a proof text. God's mission is a story.

God's mission is a story that began all the way back in the beginning with God's desire to create humankind so that God might love us and we might delight in God. It is a story that winds through the life of Abraham who is called by God to be a blessing to the whole world (Gen. 12:3). It is a story of the deliverance of God's people from oppression and slavery and of compassionate provision for them in the wilderness. It is a story of that people's rebellion and God's effort to restore them, and indeed the whole world, into the glorious right relationship that God intended at the very beginning.

God's mission is made known like never before when God himself becomes a human player in the story through Jesus Christ. When Jesus announces his mission in Luke 4, he is announcing God's mission as it was foreshadowed in the Levitical code and foretold by the prophet Isaiah: to bring good news to the poor, release to the captives, recovery of sight to the blind, freedom to the oppressed, and to announce the year of the Lord's favor. All of this Jesus accomplished in his ministry and finally in his death and resurrection.

But Jesus' resurrection is not the end of God's story. John of Patmos gives us a glimpse in Revelation of what the end of the story will look like. It looks like a city as beautiful as a bride adorned for her husband – a place where God dwells right in the midst of his people, wiping the tears from our eyes. It's a place free from death and mourning and crying where every creature – plant, animal, and human – sings praise to God. We know by our own shed tears that is not a picture of the world as it is today but a vision of the world as it shall be when God's mission is finally complete.

I have done my best to sum up God's mission for you, but the best way to understand it is to read the story for yourself. Pour yourself into this story because the story of what God is doing here is the same as the story of what God wants to do in your life and what God is still doing in our world today. We live after the climax, after Jesus' victory over sin, death, and evil. But we also live before the ending. When we read and know God's story, we can see where God's story is at work in us and at work in the world around us, and we can become characters in that story, equipped and empowered to work with God in moving the story to its God-intended conclusion.

In our mission statement, we have framed that work in terms of compassion, reconciliation, justice, and peace. Surely there are other terms that could fit just as well. But for the most part these words capture the heart of what God has been doing first through Israel, then through Jesus, and still does today through his people, the church.

Compassion captures that part of Jesus' mission to bring good news to the poor and recovery of sight to the blind. Compassion is what happens when we share in the suffering of another and work to relieve that suffering. Compassion was the work of Elisah when he healed an enemy

commander of leprosy (2 Kings 5:1-14). Compassion was the work of Jesus when he restored sight to blind men and saved the life of a woman about to be stoned for adultery. Compassion is the work that followers of Jesus do each time we slow down long enough to recognize the suffering of our neighbors, listen to their pain, and offer our hands, voices, or hearts in service. Of course compassion exists through some of the structured ministries of the congregation – like Family Promise or Stephen Ministry – but more importantly, compassion is Holy Spirit work that we are each invited to do everywhere we go: at home, at work, at school, among our friends, and among strangers. When you live compassionately, you are participating in God’s mission.

The work of reconciliation is the work of bringing healing between captives and their captors, between victims and offenders. It is the work that Jesus accomplished on the cross when he healed the divide between God and humans who have wronged God through our sin. Reconciliation is carried out when sinners repent and oppressors renounce their ways. Reconciliation is enacted when those who have been offended forgive. I could preach a whole sermon on forgiveness, repentance, and reconciliation but I am not sure that is necessary today. Like the rest of God’s mission, reconciliation is part of a story. When you reflect on the story of your own life, where are the times when you have needed to repent, to turn around, to make something right? And when have you granted forgiveness to someone who has hurt you? These are reconciliation moments, moments when God has been carrying out his mission in your life. Each time you repent (to God or to someone you have hurt) and each time you forgive, you are participating in God’s mission.

Justice is the work God is doing to bring freedom to the oppressed. Israel remembers this work most vividly in their deliverance from Egyptian slavery. Jesus repeatedly challenged the power structures in his day that kept power and riches in the hands of a very select few. The church has done justice when it has stood up to evils like slavery or Jim Crow laws. Justice is where our faith gets political, where it gets put into action in the social sphere.

My good friend and Christian brother Andy Lower has been working for justice in the clothing industry. After the 2012 fire in Bangladesh^v that killed 112 textile workers, Andy decided that he was tired of wearing clothes that cost people their lives. He began by giving away his entire wardrobe and replacing it with fairly made clothes, all the way down to his underwear. (Don’t ask, or he might show them to you!) With a Kickstarter campaign, Andy and a friend then founded Visible, a company manufacturing clothes in the developing world in fair and safe working conditions.^{vi} Perhaps all of us are not called to start our own clothing label or lead an entire movement to end some injustice. But as long as the work of justice is part of the mission of God, it is also the work of God’s people. You do the work of justice when you vote for candidates who build a better community for all people. Please educate yourself about our candidates and vote on Tuesday. You do the work of justice when you are thoughtful and faithful about the kind of things you spend your money on. If you are a business owner, you do the work of justice when you make sure your employees are treated fairly and paid a livable wage. We do justice for the earth, which will also be redeemed at the end of God’s story, when we live gently on this planet. When we work for justice in any of its forms – in big ways or small – we are participating in God’s mission.

The three of these, compassion, reconciliation, and justice culminate in what we call peace and what Jesus called “the year of the Lord’s favor.” Peace is not only the end to wars and violence, though a renunciation of violence in our personal lives is one possibility for living peaceably. Peace looks forward to that time when all will live with compassion toward one another, when all people will live in right relationship with one another and with God, and when every person is free from injustice. This is what we mean by the *shalom* of God. Peace is the world as God intended it to be.

Maybe this sounds far-off or idealistic, but Jesus reminds us that God’s mission is not only a future reality. “Today,” he says of his mission statement in Luke 4, “Today, this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.” Wherever the people of God live with compassion, whenever we are reconciled with our adversaries, anytime we do justice, anywhere we make peace, we are partnering with God to make God’s mission a reality, not only for the future but for today. This is what it means to be equipped and empowered by the Holy Spirit to participate in God’s mission, in God’s story.

As you go into the world today, may you find your story wrapped up in God’s story and may you offer your life to the powerful work of the Holy Spirit so that you may participate in God’s mission to the world. Go! Amen.

ⁱ <https://www.google.com/about/company/>

ⁱⁱ <http://about.nike.com/>

ⁱⁱⁱ <http://www.ritzcarlton.com/en/Corporate/GoldStandards/Default.htm>

^{iv} http://www.ikea.com/ms/en_SG/about_ikea/our_business_idea/index.html

^v <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/11/26/world/asia/bangladesh-fire-kills-more-than-100-and-injures-many.html>

^{vi} <http://visible.clothing/>