

July 14, 2019
Rev Jane Florence
“Jesus’ Mission Statement”
Luke 4:18-19



In the May 9, 1993 *Omaha World-Herald*, the editorial page ran a column which sparked serious responses. The reporter warned Omaha of the formation of a new group in town, that wasn't "what it might appear." The group claimed to have religious roots banning together for the good of the city, but the editor was clearly concerned about what he called a "radical movement." His greatest fears seemed to be centered on two fellows from Texas who were "trainers" for this new group. He indicated that their work would be to "challenge the established political system." In the editorial, he introduced Nebraska to a new term. Each time he used it he set it in quotation marks. These men that he feared would shake up the system were called "community organizers."¹

The term might have been new to Omaha in 1993. It was used despairingly by some against a presidential candidate in 2007. The term might still stir up some fearful rhetoric for some today, but surely, the concept must sound familiar to some. Organizing people to work together in community so that all may have a better life and empire dominance might be relieved. To me it sounds like there was a community organizer who started a movement about 2000 years ago in Palestine- based on an ancient dream of just that.

The Gospel of Luke gives us the text for today. Jesus returned to Galilee and word has spread through all the surrounding country. He begins teaching in area synagogues and is being praised by everyone. What first year professor or preacher wouldn't want that on their resume. As he makes the preaching circuit to towns of the Galilee region, he comes to Nazareth, where he had grown up. He's been gone awhile - hometown boy returns with praise.

Jesus went to the synagogue on the Sabbath - a good Jewish man. They ask him to read the scripture. He finds the spot from the scroll of Isaiah - not an arbitrary verse- not one prepared for him and sent to him to read- he *finds* the scripture he wants to read from the ancient prophet of Isaiah and announces:

"The spirit of the Lord is upon me,
to bring good news to the poor,
to proclaim release to the captives,
recovery of sight to the blind,
to let the oppressed go free,
to proclaim the year of Jubilee."

Jesus understood that the Hebrew prophets warned their nation against neglecting to care for the needy of their population. The prophets shouted in the streets, in the pulpits, and in the political arenas. In their warnings, they said, "if we continue to take advantage of the poor and working class, if we continue to ignore the needs of the vulnerable: the women, widows, orphans, children; then our nation will fall." The prophets warned; the people ignored; their nation fell. A thousand years later, Jesus picked up the themes of those old, old prophets, and claimed their message as his message-one and the same message from one and the same God. This text is not new to his audience. They all knew the text. No one said, "I didn't know that was in the Torah."

When Jesus finished reading, he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, sat down. Everyone is eager to hear what this hometown boy whose gained quite a reputation will say. He delivers a one sentence sermon, “today, this scripture has been fulfilled.”

Jesus proclaimed today the ancient promise our people have been waiting for the last 800 years or so- has all come true. Today? the oppressed are free? Today, our debts are all forgiven? Today the slaves are free? Today, all bad real-estate transactions have been redeemed? Today? What’s going on here? Is this inauguration hopes, a visionary mission statement, or just fake news? Is Jesus doing some pie-in the sky imagining? or has the Spirit of God empowered him to launch community organizing in Galilee.

Jesus offers a radical change for the poor by challenging the institutions that kept people impoverished. He announced release to those who were unjustly imprisoned by economic exploitation. He announced liberation to those who were oppressed by the crushing weight of the empire and the year of Jubilee was an ancient expectation that all unjustly acquired land would be returned to its rightful owner.

I think of Jesus as a community organizer when I look at the topics which were of concern to him.

- He told stories about taxation (50% of the Galilean family income went to taxes – both the temple tax and the Roman Empire tax).
- He told stories about absentee landlords who cared only for profits not the welfare of sharecroppers.
- He told stories about day laborers and unemployment.
- And stories were told about him challenging the political parties of his day, the Pharisees, Sadducees, Zealots, and Rome were all political in nature.

Jesus helped people directly in acts of mercy. He took care of people’s needs by feeding the hungry and caring for the sick. Jesus helped people by restoring them to the community. He also helped them in works of justice; he offered new ways to think about the dominate system and new possibilities for changing it.

Over the last 2000 years, the church mostly focused on an soteriological (afterlife salvation) understanding of Jesus’ life and death. It ascribed spiritual meaning to it, but that does not mean that Jesus was not a political figure concerned about the welfare of the whole community in present situations. Crucifixion was the Roman penalty for insurrection, for challenging Roman authority. The Roman Empire did not believe they were working out the salvation of sinners when they nailed Jesus to a Roman cross. In the eyes of the ruling authority at the time, his death was a political execution for challenging the political systems of church and state.

We herald Jesus as the Prince of Peace particularly when his birth is surrounded with vision of Peace on Earth and good will to all. From the very beginning of his story, Luke’s Mary sings: “My soul magnifies the Lord... my spirit rejoices... because of the day when the powerful will be brought down from their thrones and the lowly will be lifted up; the hungry will be filled and the rich will leave empty...”

Luke is clear in his storytelling, Jesus enters as a political and social revolutionary, a community organizer. Jesus is a Wisdom Teacher; Jesus is a Jewish Mystic; he is a prophet of the Lord, but he has his feet on the ground and his heart open to the real day to day struggles of the marginalized, and he is connected to the Divine Spirit to bring change.

In England in the 1700s, life in the cities was precarious, especially for the poor. Regular employment was uncertain; housing was inadequate and unaffordable; sanitation was primitive;

disease was rampant; pure drinking water was scarce; nourishing food was costly. Children as young as four were employed in mines and factories. The established Church of England saw its mission as maintaining the status quo. The church (in alliance with the government) urged people to accept their place in God's scheme of things. A young priest named John Wesley fell out of favor with the established church as he began unorthodox practices of taking a message of God's grace out of the church and to the people. He began preaching in marketplaces and on dockside, to mine entrances and open fields. He began organizing people in spiritual growth and works of mercy and justice. He founded hospitals, orphanages, and schools for the poor. He visited jails and built chapels and cared for the poor. Wesley organized communities to offer a better life. Those who joined his Methodist movement were victims of mob violence for their unorthodox ways and outreach to the outcasts. Still, the movement spread.³

The very beginning of the Methodist movement was about spiritual growth and social justice ministries. In America when men, women and children were exposed to dangerous (even deadly) work conditions, low pay, and long days in sweatshops with no legal voice or rights, the Methodist Church adopted a Social Creed in 1908. Over one hundred years ago, the Methodist Church began advocating for workers' health and welfare. Churches led the movement that ushered in women's rights, and worker rights, and care for the marginalized.

The Prince of Peace comes to life when justice rolls down like a mighty river - then right-living flows like mighty flood waters- and wholeness in community and in spirit abounds. I say that Jesus of Nazareth was a community organizer because we are the descendant community which he organized. We are the fruits of his words and life, and we are the seeds of God's compassion, the very presence of Christ in our world today to bring peace through justice so that today, these words of Jesus may be fulfilled.

Thanks be to God whose Holy Spirit works through us. Amen.