

## **“A Purpose Oriented Church”**

Isaiah 61:1-3, Luke 4:18-19

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What is the church? I assume that we know the right answer. Every Sunday, we sing a song, *We are the Church*, to remind us of who we are right after Children’s Time. It is right that the church is not a building but “people of God”. The word church in Greek means “an assembly” or “called-out ones”. In other words, the church is the body of Christ who are called to work for God and God’s purpose. Our United Methodist Church’s motto is that “open hearts, open minds, and open doors.” Our mission is to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world. Then, what is our congregation’s vision for our neighborhood as the church? Have we ever thought about a role of our church that we want to be known in the community? The next four Sundays, we will have a special opportunity to think about the role of our church in our community. Next Sunday, ‘a mission oriented church.’ The service will be led by Rev. Thompson, a retired pastor from Turlock United Methodist Church. He will be talking about our United Methodist Church’s mission organization, UMCOR, and the importance of mission in our church. This morning, I will be talking about ‘a purpose oriented church’.

Someone shared a story which helps me to think about my attitude as a Christian as well as the church. Let me share this story with you. Several years ago, a preacher from out-of-state accepted a call to a church in Houston, Texas. Some weeks after he arrived, he had an occasion to ride the bus from his home to the downtown area. When he sat down, he discovered that the driver had accidentally given him a quarter too much change. As he considered what to do, he thought to himself, "You'd better give the quarter back. It would be wrong to keep it." Then he thought, "Oh, forget it, it's only a quarter. Who would worry about this little amount? Anyway, the bus company gets too much fare; they will never miss it. Accept it as a 'gift from

God' and keep quiet." When his stop came, he paused momentarily at the door, then he handed the quarter to the driver and said, "Here, you gave me too much change." The driver, with a smile, replied, "Aren't you the new preacher in town? I have been thinking a lot lately about going somewhere to worship. I just wanted to see what you would do if I gave you too much change. I'll see you at church on Sunday." When the preacher stepped off of the bus, he literally grabbed the nearest light pole, held on, and said, "Oh God, I almost sold your Son for a quarter." Our lives are the only Bible some people will ever read. This is a good example of how much people watch us as Christians and will put us to the test! Always be on guard and remember that you carry the name of Christ on your shoulders when you call yourself "Christian." In the same way, our church should know how much people watch us as the Christ. They may put us to the test checking on us whether we deserve calling ourselves as "the church" or not. Do you think that we are a faithful church in the eyes of God?

Let us revisit our Scripture readings. Today's Scripture readings for both the Old Testament and New Testament are the same messages because Jesus used the words of Isaiah for his first message at his hometown in Nazareth. We often call this reading as Jesus' first official sermon in his public ministry. Let's look at the Old Testament reading first. Our first Old Testament reading refers to the Israelites who were captives to Babylon. The reality that the Israelites struggled was bitter and harsh. They lost their land, homes and their spiritual center, Jerusalem. There was nothing that they could hope for the future, but sadness, despair and hopelessness dominated their hearts. To those who were in crisis and in despair, God still brought blessing and hope. God gave them a new vision through the prophet Isaiah that they would be restored and return back to their home country. That is "to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners".

We knew that this promise was not fulfilled in Isaiah's lifetime, but the Israelites anticipated a future time when the Messiah would come, these will be fulfilled in God's time. Our New Testament

reading describes the vision of Jesus Christ for his church. What is Jesus' ministry all about? That is simple and clear. First of all, God's Spirit on Jesus, he started his ministry and preached the message of good news to people. When we talk about the church, the first thing is about God's spirit whether this spirit is always on our church and members and leaders. Without good Spirit, there will no church. That is why we do lift up our prayers for nation and church during the prayer time in our worship. Let the Spirit dwell in our church and each of our hearts first. When the Spirit dwells and inspires us, our souls will be filled with love, forgiveness and grace. Secondly, we should be compassionate to the poor and the burdened so that they can hear a word of encouragement and hope for a better life. We keep open our eyes for the need of people and never stop preaching the message of hope in Jesus. The church should preach the message of good news to people even in the midst of failures and despairs, not giving up, but being patient in hope. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the great German theologian, gave us his own definition of hope in Christ that "the essence of optimism is that it takes no account of the present, but it is a source of inspiration, of vitality and hope where others have resigned; it enables a man to hold his head high, to claim the future for himself and not to abandon it to his enemy." The church is a place for seeking and finding hope for those who are in a desperate need, in despair and in crisis.

Last thing, the church does not pursue a membership oriented institution, but others-centered church. Jesus never talked about an exclusive membership gathering but his vision was to bring all people to join and experience the unlimited and unending love of God. His vision for the Kingdom of God always has been a welcoming place for strangers, new people and even gentiles who never belonged to the privileged Jewish community. William Temple made a definition of the church in a different way, saying that "the church is the only cooperative society in the world that exists for the benefit of its nonmembers." Our Methodism founder, John Wesley described that the church must have three things in it. "Is there a new person? Is there fire? And is there fruit?" What about our church? Are we interested in ourselves, or others? God's purpose oriented church is to

preach the message of good news to the community, unchurched people and people in need and let them hear good news, and join us together as children of God in one family. Do we have Jesus' passion in our hearts? Are we making effort to reach out to the margin where they need to hear words of good news in Jesus for their lives? Do we live fruit of the Spirit? Let me paraphrase Jesus' message using Eugene Peterson's *The Message* and put our church's name instead of Jesus, "God's Spirit is on Fair Oaks United Methodist Church; he's chosen FOUMC to preach the Message of good news to the poor, sent Fair Oaks Church to announce pardon to prisoners and recovery of sight to the blind, to set the burdened and battered free, to announce, 'This is God's year to act!'"

I hope that God's spirit is always on our Fair Oaks United Methodist Church and we never stop reaching out our neighbors, and serving the needs of community through local mission and beyond our neighborhood. We keep our eyes being opened and proclaim the message of hope for those who are in despair and in crisis. Tell them God's love and hope and help them to have faith. Most of all, in Jesus, I hope that our Fair Oaks church continues to carry on what Jesus began through our mission and ministry as God's people. I believe this is why God calls us here together as the church. Amen.