

Nehemiah 8:1-3, 5-6, 8-10

8:1And all the people gathered as one man into the square before the Water Gate; and they told Ezra the scribe to bring the book of the law of Moses which the LORD had given to Israel. ²And Ezra the priest brought the law before the assembly, both men and women and all who could hear with understanding, on the first day of the seventh month. ³And he read from it facing the square before the Water Gate from early morning until midday, in the presence of the men and the women and those who could understand; and the ears of all the people were attentive to the book of the law. ⁵And Ezra opened the book in the sight of all the people, for he was above all the people; and when he opened it all the people stood. ⁶And Ezra blessed the LORD, the great God; and all the people answered, "Amen, Amen," lifting up their hands; and they bowed their heads and worshiped the LORD with their faces to the ground. ⁸And they read from the book, from the law of God, clearly and they gave the sense, so that the people understood the reading. ⁹And Nehemiah, who was the governor, and Ezra the priest and scribe, and the Levites who taught the people said to all the people, "This day is holy to the LORD your God; do not mourn or weep." For all the people wept when they heard the words of the law. ¹⁰Then he said to them, "Go your way, eat the fat and drink sweet wine and send portions to him for whom nothing is prepared; for this day is holy to our Lord; and do not be grieved, for the joy of the LORD is your strength."

Psalm 19 (UMH 750)

1 Corinthians 12:12-31a

¹²For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. ¹³For by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and all were made to drink of one Spirit. ¹⁴For the body does not consist of one member but of many. ¹⁵If the foot should say, "Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body," that would not make it any less a part of the body. ¹⁶And if the ear should say, "Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body," that would not make it any less a part of the body. ¹⁷If the whole body were an eye, where would be the hearing? If the whole body were an ear, where would be the sense of smell? ¹⁸But as it is, God arranged the organs in the body, each one of them, as he chose. ¹⁹If all were a single organ, where would the body be? ²⁰As it is, there are

many parts, yet one body. ²¹The eye cannot say to the hand, "I have no need of you," nor again the head to the feet, "I have no need of you." ²²On the contrary, the parts of the body which seem to be weaker are indispensable, ²³and those parts of the body which we think less honorable we invest with the greater honor, and our unpresentable parts are treated with greater modesty, ²⁴which our more presentable parts do not require. But God has so composed the body, giving the greater honor to the inferior part, ²⁵that there may be no discord in the body, but that the members may have the same care for one another. ²⁶If one member suffers, all suffer together; if one member is honored, all rejoice together. ²⁷Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it. ²⁸And God has appointed in the church first apostles, second prophets, third teachers, then workers of miracles, then healers, helpers, administrators, speakers in various kinds of tongues. ²⁹Are all apostles? Are all prophets? Are all teachers? Do all work miracles? ³⁰Do all possess gifts of healing? Do all speak with tongues? Do all interpret? ³¹But earnestly desire the higher gifts. And I will show you a still more excellent way.

Luke 4:14-21

¹⁴And Jesus returned in the power of the Spirit into Galilee, and a report concerning him went out through all the surrounding country. ¹⁵And he taught in their synagogues, being glorified by all. ¹⁶And he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up; and he went to the synagogue, as his custom was, on the sabbath day. And he stood up to read; ¹⁷and there was given to him the book of the prophet Isaiah. He opened the book and found the place where it was written, ¹⁸*"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, ¹⁹to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord."* ²⁰And he closed the book, and gave it back to the attendant, and sat down; and the eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. ²¹And he began to say to them, *"Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."*

Revised Standard Version of the Bible

Mission Statement

With the new year comes a chance to look at things anew. That is why people use the new year to make resolutions - to make promises to themselves to change the way they behave. It is a new year!

There was a story in the Reader's Digest of a woman who always made it to church every Sunday morning with her six children in tow, all looking a bit ruffled, but nonetheless on time. One woman in the congregation was barely able to get her one child ready, and so she asked how her friend managed her family so efficiently. "Easy," she replied with a smile. "I dress them the night before." If one of your New Year's resolutions is to make it to church every Sunday, maybe you can make use of that idea. I'm thinking of trying it.

Since it is a new year for St. Paul United Methodist Church as well, maybe it is a good chance for us to come up with some New Year's resolutions of our own. It is a chance for us to decide how we want to spend our time in the upcoming year as a church. Think of it as a Mission Statement for St. Paul United Methodist Church for 2007.

In today's Gospel reading from Luke, Jesus is in effect giving the mission statement for his ministry on earth to the congregation of the synagogue in Nazareth. The mission statement had actually been written about 500 years earlier by the prophet Isaiah.

Isaiah wrote: ¹⁸*"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, ¹⁹to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord."* After Jesus read these words to the assembled people in the synagogue he then added: *"Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."* In effect, Jesus was saying, "Isaiah has foretold of someone who will come to do all these great things, and I am that person."

How many of us know our purpose in life and can live in a way to fulfill God's purpose for our lives? Jesus modeled a journey of self-discovery that began at his baptism when the heavens proclaimed that he was the Son of God. It continued into the wilderness where he overcame

temptation, and culminated in his announcement to the world that he was aware of his ministry and his purpose in life.

In recognizing his mission on earth, Jesus is, in effect, also spelling out our mission as well. What he came to earth to accomplish is also what we are put on earth to accomplish. So, we already have a mission statement for our church - all we need to do is figure out how to accomplish it. We need to figure out what Jesus would do.

A man walked into a gift shop that sold religious items. Near the cash register he saw a display of baseball caps with “**WWJD**” printed on them. He was puzzled over what the letters meant, but couldn’t figure it out, so he asked the clerk. The clerk replied that the letters stood for “*What Would Jesus Do*”, and that was meant to inspire people to not make rash decisions, but rather to imagine what Jesus would do in the same situation. The man thought a moment and then replied, “*Well, I’m pretty sure Jesus wouldn’t pay \$17.95 for one of those caps.*”

Actually, the verses from Isaiah give us a pretty good idea of where to start on our mission statement. “***he has anointed me to preach good news***” One of the things that Jesus wants us to do is preach the good news. I’m good with that. To do that, St. Paul needs to reach out to our community and bring in people that want to - and need to - hear the good news.

There is nothing exclusive about the gospel message, it doesn’t exclude anyone, but Jesus says the gospel is to include all those who are crying out to hear the good news, all those who need some confidence that they are not alone on their pilgrimage of life, but God, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit are present as well.

I have been thinking about it, and I think that our building could hold about 200 persons in worship, if we had two or three services on Sunday and filled the place each service. That is about 10 times as many people as we have now. So my mission statement for St. Paul would be to attract enough people to fill three services on Sunday mornings.

To handle that number would require some changes and improvements to our church building. We would probably need to remodel the basement in

a way that would add Sunday school space. We would need a multi-media system to provide sight and sound to the services. We might need to add parking for more cars. We would probably need to add handicap access - like a wheelchair ramp and an elevator. We might need to open up the balcony upstairs to seat more worshipers, or maybe a choir. All those things are in the mission statement in my head.

“good news to the poor, release to the captives, recovering of sight to the blind, set at liberty those who are oppressed” Isaiah’s words might not seem to be too relevant in today’s world - after all, how many blind people are there today as compared to 2500 years ago? But I think that the meaning of this text from Isaiah is clear - our mission is to help those persons that are suffering.

“You are the body of Christ,” says Paul in today's epistle. Did you hear it? We - the church - are the body of Christ! That means his ministry is our ministry. In defining who he was and what he was about he has defined who we are and what we are called to be about.

In the book, *Holy Sweat*, by Tim Hansel, he tells of a guest preacher in a rather large church who began, *“There are three points to my sermon.”* Most people yawned at the point. They’d heard that many times before.

But he went on. *“My first point is this. At this time there are approximately two billion people starving to death in the world.”*

The reaction through the congregation was about the same, since they’d heard that sort of statement many times aw\’s well. And then he said, *“My second point...”*

Everybody sat up. Only 10 or 15 seconds had passed, and he was already on his second point? He paused, then said, *“My second point is that most of you don’t give a damn!”*

He paused again as gasps and rumblings flowed across the congregation, and then said: *“And my third point is that the real tragedy among Christians today is that many of you are now more concerned that I said ‘damn’ in church than you are that I said two billion people are starving to death.”*

Then he sat down.

The whole sermon took less than a minute, but it is in many ways one of the most powerful sermons ever preached. He was reminding us we are called not to mere piety but to genuine morality. We are called to action, not just to fancy words.

Jesus also preached a short sermon. But what a sermon. He clearly spelled out what kind of ministry he came to pursue. It is to be a ministry to the poor and outcast, the blind and infirm.

Two businessmen were traveling by train to an important business meeting. In the seat opposite them was an old man with a shaggy beard, dressed in a tattered sweater and jeans. Throughout the ride the two told each other crude jokes about bums and tramps, with particular reference to the chap in the next seat. When they arrived at the meeting they discovered this "tramp" was a world class scholar and the meeting's keynote speaker. Realizing he had heard everything they had said on route, they apologized. *"It is not my forgiveness you need,"* he responded, *"but the forgiveness of all the common people you hold in such disdain."*

Last year, we as a congregation, did several things to help those in need. We collected food and clothing for Crossroads Urban Center. We also collected canned goods for the Rescue mission and several members went to serve food there as well. We collected pet supplies and money for the pets of AIDS victims. We did a lot.

God sent Jesus to bring good news to the poor. There isn't anyone who needs good news more than a poor person. There aren't many people who care about poor people. Poor people, by definition, have no money to buy loyalty. Poor people, because they are poor, have little power. Poor people, in their poverty, aren't very appealing. They don't dress well. Sometimes they aren't clean. Sometimes they are drug addicts. Sometimes they are crazy. We see them sitting with signs at stop lights asking for handouts. We see them sprawled on sidewalks.

But Jesus loved poor people — and he calls us to love poor people in his name. Jesus came to bring good news to poor people —and he calls us to

bring them good news too— and Christians have been bringing good news to poor people for twenty centuries.

My mission statement for 2007 is for us to continue to help those who need our help, and to take it up a notch. In addition to helping those in our community, our apportionment payments to the Rocky Mountain Conference mean that we are helping those across our country and across the world. Hurricane victims in the South, earthquake victims in Asia, refugees in Africa. By paying our apportionment in full, and making donations to special UMCOR offerings, we can take it up a notch.

Billy Graham puts our mission this way: God has given us two hands — one to receive with and the other to give with. We are not cisterns made for hoarding; we are channels made for sharing.

In St. Paul United Methodist Church, and I mean not only our beautiful chapel, but in all of you as well, we have a tremendous potential. A potential that we are only beginning to see. A potential that we have just begun to explore.

Brian Cavanaugh, tells about a magnificent harvest in his book "MORE SOWER'S SEEDS: Second Planting." One spring, he and two seminary friends sought permission to plant a garden. He says, *"Our house of studies was located in the downtown area of a large metropolitan city. There wasn't much of a backyard. Actually, it was a stone-covered dirt parking lot with no extra space. However, we carefully planned our garden, taking into account the area that received optimal sunshine."*

"The three of us approached the superior with our plan for a small area to plant some squash, tomatoes and cucumbers. The only real cost involved was to rent a rake, a pickax and a hoe. However, getting the superior's permission would still be difficult. None of us who were involved with this garden project will ever forget his response to our request. With a slightly bored, tilting of his head he glanced at us and abjectly replied, 'You're wasting your time. Nothing will ever grow there! But, go ahead if you still want to.'

"We had received permission from on high! So what if it wasn't

enthusiastic. We rented tools; raked four inches of stones into neat walls outlining the garden; hoisted the pickax and struck what must have been a former refuse area. A gardener's dream – dark, composted, fertile soil just sitting there waiting to be discovered. We looked at each other with broad grins and repeated in unison, 'Ah, nothing will grow there.' As you might have surmised by now, things did grow there, in our garden. In fact, twice we re-staked the tomatoes, topping them off, finally, when they were seven feet tall."

'You're wasting your time. Nothing will ever grow there! But, go ahead if you still want to.'

Don't believe that "nothing will grow there." I like the observation of writer George Eliot, *"It's never too late to be who you might have been."* You may not always see the potential for growth, but it is there. All the rich compost you need may be hidden just beneath the surface, but can only be discovered after you begin digging.

Ralph Waldo Emerson proclaimed, *"Oh man! There is no planet, sun, or star could hold you, if you but knew what you are."* You are capable of doing and becoming more than you might imagine!

What I have been telling you about is my mission statement, my vision for St. Paul. But it is only *my* ideas. I don't expect to accomplish it all in 2007, just to make a start. But what is more important than my ideas and my mission statement - is all your ideas and your mission statements. What is your mission statement for St. Paul? What is your vision for our future? What I ask this morning is to give a little thought to that, and then work to bring that mission and vision to life.

Amen.

