



Sermons from Northwood United Church

**"A Purpose-full Body"
1 Corinthians 12:12-31 Luke 4:14-21
Will Sparks January 24, 2016**

May the words of our mouths, the meditations of our hearts, and the actions of our lives, be acceptable in your sight O God, our strength and our redeemer. Amen.

We need each other. There was an elementary school principle who found himself dealing on a near daily basis with two young boys who always used to be scrapping. Most days the two of them would end up in his office and he had tried everything he could think of. Finally, the school secretary, watching this happen day after day, said "Can I try something?" Exasperated, he said, "if you think it will help..." She disappeared into the custodian's room and came out with two spray bottles of window cleaner and two rags. She turned to the two boys scowling cross armed in the office, and said "boys, follow me."

Well they got up and followed, and she took them out to the glassed-in entrance to the school- huge panes of glass all around. And she stationed one on the inside, and one on the outside. And she said, "your job is to clean both the inside and the outside of all the windows here. You can't move on to the next one until both sides of the one you are working on are clean." Then she turned on her heel and left them with it.

At first they didn't do anything, but at a certain point one of them looked through the window at the other, and pointed the spray bottle and sprayed it in the face of the other, except there was glass in the way... And the other laughed, turned and sprayed back. Well before long there was window cleaner flying everywhere, and the two boys were laughing, and actually cleaning the windows. Oh, they wasted a lot of liquid, and the windows needed re-cleaning when all was said and done, but they walked back into the principal's office friends. Fact is, they were more alike than they were different- two peas in a pod actually. Actually, they needed each other.

Here we have the apostle Paul trying to keep the fledgling church in Corinth from flying apart. He didn't have spray bottles of window cleaner to work with but in a flash of brilliance, he came up with the image of the body of Christ. Wasn't it Benjamin Franklin who said to the assembled delegates in Philadelphia at the beginning of the American Revolution: "Either we hang together or assuredly we shall hang separately." Fact is, in so many situations, we are a body, on two sides of the same pane of glass, more alike than different, we need each other.

And if Paul addressed the question of how we hang together, like an organic body, with warts and gifts, aches and pains, similarities and differences, well then Jesus, quoting Isaiah, addresses the question of why- what is the point- what's the purpose. "Bring good news to the poor, sight to the blind, liberation for the oppressed and imprisoned, and a reordering of wealth and power- the year of Jubilee". For that is, according to Jesus, his purpose.

There was a time, a few years ago, when every church and frankly every other organization was madly writing mission statements. The sense was that without a clear mission, we flounder. True enough. I think it was the very wise Thomas Merton who said, "If you want to identify me, ask me not where I live, or what I like to eat, or how I comb my hair, but ask me what I am living for, in detail, ask me what I think is keeping me from living fully for the thing I want to live for." And Jesus, in his first sermon to the home town crowd leaves no room for wondering what he's living for. "I am here with good news for the poor, to bring release to captives, sight to the blind, to set free the oppressed and to proclaim the year of Jubilee," that great once every 50 year forgiveness of all debt. That is his mission, his purpose, what he lived

for. And I have to admit, all the searching around for a mission statement, though I understand the need to put things in our own words, sometimes puzzles me. Because if Paul is right, we are the body of Christ, then of all the organizations in the world, the church should know what it is living for, because our leader, Jesus, was so very clear about it.

Our mission here at Northwood is to embrace our community with the love of Christ. And that sounds lovely and so very all inclusive, as it should be. But it also sounds, well, neutral, and Jesus wasn't neutral. And whatever else it is, our embrace must be good news to the poor- the poor who walk through our door, the poor who wouldn't dare walk through our door, the poor who are half way around the globe. You see we are a body, and a body has edges. It can't do everything. It has limitations. God knows the longer I live in this body, the more I know the truth of that. And we, as the body of Christ here, are the same. We can't do and be everything. We must choose what we are alive for. And Jesus guides us. Our life is not neutral. It is for the poor, the oppressed, the captive, those whose lives have wobbled off course and need a new beginning- a Jubilee.

Back in late November this body gathered and named the activities and events we love to be about here at Northwood and the things we long to be about here. We mapped out our life, and the words that you used in that mapping are found on the insert in your bulletin today- a report of that event. That gives us a window into our community and what our top priorities are as a body- how we love to live out our purpose. Next Sunday, there will be a gathering after church and I hope you will all try to attend because there we will begin to choose. In the process of reshaping our ministry, we are at the point of choosing our staffing model. It is clear that the size and shape of our staff with 2 full time ministers, office staff, custodial, music staff as we have lived it is not sustainable for now. It needs to change. And you need to know that Kerry and I, your two full time ministers, have seen this coming for years, so there is some relief that we are getting to it. We are at the place of needing to make some choices as a body.

As daunting as it may seem, this choosing has the potential to energize the body because choosing what we will do and what we won't do, though difficult, focuses the energy, guides the energy, and has the power to unite the body. We are reminded what we are here for. And Jesus gave it to us with great clarity.

And so in preparation for that event, I want to propose a practice of prayer for this week. At Bible Study this week we imagined how life would be different for each of us if every day when we got up in the morning we set our intention that in everything we do, somehow it would be good news for the poor, release to those held captive, sight to the blind, liberation to the oppressed, and that somehow it would proclaim a new start for all who have failed. How might we live differently, make different choices, find ourselves re-energized if we got up every day with this holy purpose on our lips and in our minds?

So I invite you into that practice for this coming week, to let your purpose, our purpose as the body of Christ, be rooted in Jesus' stated purpose. It is on a little paper in your bulletin, you can take it home, and I now invite us say it together.

"The spirit of God is upon me, because God has anointed me:
to bring good news to the poor...
release to the captives...
sight to the blind...
to set the oppressed free....
And to give a new start to all who have failed."

Amen.