

KEEP THE MAIN THING THE MAIN THING

We are living in the 50 days of JOY, EASTER joy, following the resurrection of Jesus. It's called Eastertide, and it's the SAME 50 days when the FIRST disciples of Jesus LOCKED themselves in a room, WORRIED that THOSE who had put JESUS on the cross would come NEXT for them. It's ALSO the same 50 days when the RISEN Christ occasionally, but briefly, APPREARED to His first disciples. But TODAY, because it's a RETREAT day for ALL the members of ALL of our church's boards and committees, I'D like to skip AHEAD to a Scripture reading that comes near the END of these 50 days of Eastertide. You see: the RISEN Christ does not STAY with His disciples. When they ask Him WHEN He will FINISH His work, He tells THEM to finish it. In other words, He gives them a MISSION: *YOU shall be my WITNESSES in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.* And THEN, He ASCENDS into heaven, and He's GONE! Now, I UNDERSTAND that this story is METAPHORICAL, but I LOVE its IMAGERY! Have you ever lost a helium BALLOON? You WATCH it get smaller and smaller as it floats higher and higher in the sky, until you finally can't SEE it anymore. NOW picture the APOSTLES seeing the SAME thing with the Risen CHRIST. Can't you just PICTURE them standing there open-mouthed, CRANING their necks to watch Jesus DISAPPEAR into the clouds? What a SIGHT that must have BEEN!

Well, Barbara Brown Taylor, one of America's best preachers, imagines the apostles looking up to heaven for a long time after He's disappeared, and then having to *get OVER it* very quickly AS they try to figure out HOW to get ON with the MISSION that Jesus has just GIVEN them. She says: *No one standing around watching them that day would have guessed what an astounding thing happened when they ALL stopped looking into the sky and looked at each OTHER instead. On the surface, it was not a great moment: eleven abandoned disciples with NOTHING to SHOW for all of their following.... BUT, in the days and years to COME, it would become very apparent WHAT had happened to them. With nothing but a promise and a prayer, those eleven disciples consented to BE the church, and nothing was ever the same again, beginning with them. The followers became leaders, the listeners became preachers, the converts became missionaries, the healed became healers, and the disciples became APOSTLES, witnesses to the Risen Christ... and SO, they STOPPED looking up toward heaven, and looked at each OTHER instead. And THEN, they got ON with the business of being the church.* (Barbara Brown Taylor, *Gospel Medicine* [Cambridge, MA: Cowley Publications, 1995], pp. 77-78). Because what ELSE do you DO when you're left on your OWN?

Well friends, they were able to DO it because JESUS had given them a MISSION statement. We hear a LOT about Mission Statements these days, DON'T we? But, JUST in case you DON'T know what a mission statement IS, a MISSION statement is a FEW short phrases that declare the PURPOSE, or the MISSION, of a company or organization. And ONCE a mission statement is written and embraced, then EVERYTHING that happens in that company or organization SHOULD, in some way, RELATE to or IMPLEMENT its MISSION statement. Well, IN our Scripture Lesson today, Jesus gives His FIRST disciples a very succinct MISSION statement for His new church. He says: *It is not for YOU to know the times or periods that the Father has set by His own authority. But (and here it is) YOU will receive POWER when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and YOU will be MY witnesses.* SO, the church is called to FULFILL this mission that Jesus GAVE us, the mission to BE His WITNESSES, or you might say it like THIS: *the church is to WITNESS to the love of God AS it has been REVEALED to us in and through Jesus Christ.* Yes, THAT is the church's MISSION statement in a nutshell!

And MISSION statements are IMPORTANT! For the past 40 years, MANAGEMENT consultants have been getting hired by corporations and organizations ALL over the world to help them STRENGTHEN their company or organization. And for 40 years, these management consultants have been stressing ONE common theme, the SAME thing, even though they COUCH it in lots of big words and fancy phrases. And what they ALWAYS say is THIS: **Remember: the MAIN thing is to keep the MAIN thing the MAIN thing.** Did you get that? Let me REPEAT it! **Remember: the MAIN thing is to keep the MAIN thing the MAIN thing!** And SUCCESSFUL companies always FOLLOW this advice. FIRST, they figure out what the MAIN thing IS for THEIR company or organization, WHAT they're really ABOUT. And THEN, they

SPELL it out in a MISSION statement. And after that, EVERY decision that they make -- BIG or small -- EVERY decision has to ALIGN with their MISSION statement. SO, the VALUE of a MISSION statement is that it HELPS an organization stay FOCUSED on WHAT it's about, SO that it can distinguish between the GOOD things and the BEST things, between the IMPORTANT things and the ESSENTIAL things. After all: so MANY things seem GOOD and IMPORTANT. BUT, an organization CAN'T do EVERYTHING. SO, they HAVE to decide what are the BEST things, what are the ESSENTIAL things!

And the SAME is true for INDIVIDUALS and FAMILIES. In fact, I believe that ALL of us should have our own PERSONAL mission statements. And every FAMILY ought to have a FAMILY mission statement. WHY? Because we're all SO busy these days! And MOST of what we DO are GOOD things, IMPORTANT things. So we NEED a way to decide what's BEST, what's ESSENTIAL, because we WANT to do it ALL. So, our MISSION statement helps us decide how to WISELY invest our LIMITED amounts of TIME, talent and treasure. And if something doesn't FIT into our personal or family MISSION statement, then we need to let GO of it, unless we're NOT as busy I THINK we are. SO, your HOMEWORK this week is to create personal and family MISSION statements.

Well, CHURCHES need MISSION statements as WELL! And IN our Scripture Lesson today, we find Jesus giving His disciples a MISSION statement: *to WITNESS to God's love AS it is revealed to us IN and through the LIFE and MINISTRY of Jesus Christ.* However, in the gospels we find Jesus giving His disciples several OTHER mission statements. In Matthew 28, He says: *Go and make disciples of ALL nations!* At His Last Supper, He says: *Love one another as I have loved YOU.* In His Sermon on the Mount, He says: *YOU are the Light of the World. LET your light SO shine before others that they may see YOUR good works and give glory to GOD.* He also says: *Do unto OTHERS as you would have them DO unto YOU,* and *Remember: whatever you DO to even the LEAST of your brothers and sisters, you DO it to ME.* And when asked to name the GREATEST commandment, Jesus replies: *LOVE the Lord your God with ALL your heart and ALL your mind and ALL your soul, and the SECOND is LIKE it: love your NEIGHBOR as yourself.* So, HOW do we make a BRIEF mission statement out of all THESE commands?

Well, that's the ASSIGNMENT that was given to ME for our Board and Committee RETREAT this afternoon: to prepare a sample MISSION statement for our CHURCH that we could USE, at least as a focus us for today's RETREAT. Now, what I've come UP with is obviously nothing BINDING because we ALL haven't VOTED on it yet, but hopefully it's something that we can all AGREE on temporarily, and MAYBE someday VOTE on. Well, BECAUSE of all the statements of Jesus to His disciples, THIS would have been a difficult ASSIGNMENT for me, EXCEPT that a few years ago, I was given the SAME assignment, along with a month-long SABBATICAL during which to DO it. SO, I spent an entire month back in 2003 or 2004, reading about a dozen books, studying scripture, and looking at MISSION statements from a HOST of churches. And the MISSION statement I ended up CREATING during that sabbatical time will work in ANY church and EVERY church. And maybe ONE day it will be OUR mission statement as well. But for TODAY, for our Board and Committee retreat, we will PRETEND it's our Mission Statement, so that AS we begin planning and working together, we can KEEP the **MAIN thing** the **MAIN thing**, SO that EVERYTHING that we DO, and plan to do, FITS with our Mission Statement. So let's read it TOGETHER from our bulletins: *The purpose of the United Church of Christ in Keene is to: love and worship God, extend God's radically-inclusive love to all people both here and around the globe, make more and better disciples of Jesus Christ, and inspire people and society to become more just, loving, compassionate and Christ-like.*

Now to me, THAT says it ALL! First and foremost, we are HERE to love and worship God! It's the MOST important thing that we DO as a church! To ME, that's a GIVEN. Secondly, we are to EXTEND God's LOVE to ALL people everywhere. And if you DON'T think that God's LOVE is RADICALLY-INCLUSIVE, just look AGAIN at the love of JESUS in the gospels, because Jesus is the BEST picture of God that we HAVE. And NOBODY but NOBODY gets turned away or treated as SECOND-class. Jesus sits down to dinner with ANYBODY and everybody, and in HIS day, eating with sinners and outcasts was said to DEFILE a person. And people shunned Jesus BECAUSE He would break bread with ANYONE. Yes, HIS love was radically-inclusive, which is WHY He ended up on a CROSS! Now, it should ALMOST go without SAYING that we need to constantly be trying to make more and better disciples of Jesus Christ.

That's a GIVEN. It always HAS been. AND, Jesus is clear that it's OUR job to be a LIGHT to the world, and to inspire people and society to become more Christ-like, more just, loving, and compassionate.

Well, to ME, this mission statement captures the **MAIN** thing when it comes to **WITNESSING** to God's love AS it is revealed to us IN and through the LIFE and MINISTRY of Jesus Christ. To ME, this MISSION statement CAPTURES what the church is called to be ABOUT! And I HOPE that, one day, WE as a congregation can VOTE on it, or ANOTHER one LIKE it, and EMBRACE it as our OWN, because WHEN we keep the **MAIN** thing the **MAIN** thing, WHEN we keep our FOCUS on WHAT the church is to be ABOUT, it affects EVERYTHING that we DO and SAY. It affects our entire LIFE as a church family. For example: WHEN we keep in mind that our FIRST priority as a church is to love and worship GOD, it makes our WORSHIP life the MOST important thing that we DO in the church, and we will all get here REGULARLY, and we'll all OFFER to God our very BEST! We won't say: *Oh, we're only doing it at CHURCH, so it can be SLOPPY and half-hearted.* No, we'll say: *We're OFFERING this at CHURCH, we're offering it to GOD, so we'll make it the BEST that we can!* And I'll tell you: THAT will affect our entire worship life, and make it DYNAMIC and strong, LIFE-GIVING and empowering for ALL! Yes, we'll make it our BEST, because that's one CRITICAL way that we show our love to GOD!

OR, when we keep our focus on extending God's RADICALLY-INCLUSIVE love to ALL people everywhere, both here and around the globe, THAT affects EVERYTHING that we DO, and HOW we do it! It means that we will go OUT of our WAY to WELCOME people, ALL people, with an EXTRAVAGANT kind of welcome, and INTEGRATE them QUICKLY into the life and ministry of our church, so that they will feel a PART of it, and even help to GOVERN and shape it. AND, it will affect our OUTREACH and MISSION work as we take God's radically-inclusive love OUT into the streets, both here and around the globe, both personally and WITH our financial support of OTHERS who are doing it. AND it will affect our discussions, because we'll CONSTANTLY be trying to DISCERN what it means for US, with OUR particular gifts and talents, strengths and weaknesses, to BEST extend God's radically-inclusive love.

OR, when we're CONSTANTLY striving to make MORE and BETTER disciples of Jesus Christ, THAT affects the kinds of programs we offer, the sermons we preach, and the way we all TALK about and share and NURTURE our faith. We'll start bringing FRIENDS to church, and helping them get active and involved. Our Christian Education of children and youth will become SPIRITUAL nurturing and spiritual formation of people of ALL ages. Adult study sessions will become as prevalent as Sunday School classes and youth group meetings. Small groups will form and meet constantly! And people will feel GOOD and challenged because they're growing in SPIRIT. You know: WE human beings are spirit, mind and body, so we need to be constantly nurturing and caring for ourselves in all 3 areas. And when we DO, we feel good!

And finally, when we're trying, with everything IN us, to INSPIRE people and society to become more JUST, loving, compassionate and CHRIST-LIKE, it will make a HUGE difference in WHAT we choose to DO with our LIMITED resources, staff and laity. From MISSION trips to social action campaigns, from community involvement, both by church members AND the church as a whole to caring for the needs of our OWN members, EVERYTHING that we DO will be affected.

Yes, friends, IF we adopt and follow a MISSION statement, either THIS one or some OTHER one that takes seriously all the commandments of Jesus, then IT will shape us and MOLD us into the church that JESUS is calling us to BE. It will affect EVERYTHING that we DO and SAY.

You know: Barbara Brown Taylor finishes imagining the ASCENSION story THIS way: *When the apostles stopped looking up and started looking at each other...surprising things began to happen. They began to SAY things that sounded like (JESUS), and they began to DO things they had never seen anyone but (JESUS) do BEFORE. They became brave and capable and wise...* SO, in the words of the angels: *WHY do you stand looking up toward heaven? Look around you! Look AROUND you!* And she RIGHT! WE can do GREAT things together! WE can BE the church that Christ CALLS us to be! BUT, we NEED to **KEEP the MAIN thing the MAIN thing!** Our boards and committees will be working on that this afternoon, but I hope that ALL of us will THINK and PRAY about it, because TOGETHER, WE can make our church ALL that it CAN be. We JUST need to decide the **MAIN thing**, and then KEEP the **MAIN thing** the **MAIN thing!** Amen.