

A CLEAR AND PRESENT MISSION¹

Acts 1: 6-8

A sermon by Thomas R. McKibbens

May 24, 2009

Googol is a mathematical term for a 1 followed by 100 zeros. That little tidbit of information may mean very little except for one thing: two Stanford University students, Larry Page and Sergey Brin, took that term and turned it into the name of what is widely recognized as the world's largest search engine: google.com. Google's mission is to organize the world's information and make it universally accessible and useful. It is a short and helpful mission statement.

Sometimes a company will throw in a little humor in its mission statement. What makes a great breakfast food? Here is the Kellogg Company's mission statement in which they poke fun at their own commercials: We build Gr-r-reat brands and make the world a little happier by bringing our best to you.

I

What is our church's mission? Have you ever noticed that in all the work we did on our Strategic Plan, we never adopted a mission statement? We did adopt a Vision: **We are a community of believers who seek to**

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grow in our faith and understanding as we live the Way of Jesus Christ. It is a worthy vision, but it is not a mission statement. We did adopt a Values Statement that embraces four essential values for this church: **Inclusion, Freedom of Faith, Spiritual Growth, and Service.**

Both the Vision Statement and the Values Statement are promoted in prominent places such as our weekly bulletin, our monthly newsletter, and our web site, but we never wrote a new mission statement.

Why? Because we could never improve on the mission statement provided for us by Jesus himself at the very beginning of the Book of Acts: *...you shall be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.*² That is our clear and present mission. That is the direction we travel. We are not like the proverbial general who jumped on his horse and rode off in all directions at the same time. We may do a lot of different things; we may provide many and varied programming; we may include a wide diversity of people and ideas; but our direction was set by Jesus himself when he said, *...you shall be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.*

That is our mission. Our mission is not achieving success as the world of business measures success. Our mission is not to maintain this

² Acts 1: 8.

beautiful building: that is a means to an end. Our mission is not to have a balanced budget: that, too, is a means to an end. And a worthy means it is! Our mission is not even to grow in membership, as much as we work to make that happen. That, too, is only a means to an end.

Our mission is stated in that one phrase, directly put forward by Jesus, not as a command [this is not an imperative verb], but as a prediction: *...you will be my witnesses*. He is not saying, "Grit your teeth and go out there and give it everything you've got to be my witnesses." That's not it at all! He was saying, "I know you. You are going out into the world to bear witness to what you have seen and heard and experienced. You can't help it! It's in your nature. That's just who you are."

When is the church most authentic? When it has the most meetings? Is it when we have the largest congregation? Is it when we have the most beautiful and inspiring music? The most eloquent preaching? The most theologically articulate members? You already know the answer. It is when we give an authentic and honest witness to the risen Christ working in our lives and in our community. It is our nature. We will do it because we can't help but witness to the one thing that has become the deepest reality of our lives. And we will do it both locally and world-wide.

You will be my witnesses. We all know what a witness does. When a witness takes the stand, we are not interested in the personality of the witness. We are not interested in whether the witness is well-heeled, well-dressed, or well-educated. Our concern is whether or not the witness is well-informed and if that witness is telling the truth- the whole truth and nothing but the truth. A witness is a person who has experienced something and tells about it. A witness is a person who is asked to tell the truth about what he or she has seen or heard.

II

Henry Ward Beecher once said in regard to those remembered on Memorial Day that *they hover as a cloud of witnesses above this nation.* The poet Archibald McLeish was especially aware of that *cloud of witnesses hovering above this nation.* He himself had served in World War I, and then during the Second World War he served as the Librarian of Congress while still writing poetry. When the Library of Congress held a memorial service for all its staff members who had died in the war, McLeish wrote a powerful poem about their witness and about the responsibility of all of us to make their witness count for something good.

*The young dead soldiers do not speak.
Nevertheless, they are heard in the still houses:
who has not heard them?
They have a silence that speaks for them at night*

and when the clock counts.
They say: We were young. We have died.
Remember us.
They say: We have done what we could
but until it is finished it is not done.
They say: We have given our lives but until it is finished
no one can know what our lives gave.
They say: Our deaths are not ours: they are yours,
they will mean what you make them.
They say: Whether our lives and our deaths were for
peace and a new hope or for nothing we cannot say,
it is you who must say this.
We leave you our deaths. Give them their meaning.
*We were young, they say. We have died; remember us.*³

So as a nation, we remember them, and we pray for peace and a new hope in the complex world of computerized crime and international terrorism and hate mail and atomic threats. It is a far different world than either Henry Ward Beecher or even Archibald McLeish knew, and a far different world than Abraham Lincoln knew. Yet his call in the Gettysburg Address is as clear a call as ever: **“that we here highly resolve that these dead shall not have died in vain.”** Surely he was talking not only to the crowd gathered there on a Pennsylvania battlefield, but to all the generations to come. He bore witness to a hope for peace.

As a church, we constantly remember the one whom the last book of the Bible refers to as the *faithful and true witness*.⁴ Jesus himself spelled it

³ Archibald McLeish, *The Young Dead Soldiers Do Not Speak*.

⁴ Revelation 3: 14.

out clearly: *No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends.*⁵ He was, of course, talking about his own impending death, but he was also challenging his disciples with the most difficult quandary of their lives. They had to decide how to finish the work he had begun. As frightened and as confused as they were after the crucifixion, something tremendous had to happen to pull them together. They bore witness to the living reality of Christ in their lives, and they created the church to continue that faithful and true witness.

The clear and present mission of the church is not to promulgate doctrine or to create institutions. Those are just means to an end. The end, the mission, the purpose of the church is to bear witness to an experience of the living Christ in our lives in the midst of our complex world.

III

Sometimes I feel as if we are getting crisis fatigued. Every item of news seems to be tagged with the word **crisis**.+There is the energy crisis, the credit crisis, the banking crisis, the environmental crisis, the health **care** crisis, the swine flu crisis, the General Motors crisis, the social security crisis, including personal crises of various kinds for many among usõ you can continue the list with dozens more. All these crises pile up on one

⁵ John 15: 13.

another, and we are left just trying to keep our equanimity, doing what we can, and hoping for the best.

But I have good news for us. We are not alone! When Jesus turned to his disciples and said, *You will be my witnesses...*, the word *you* is plural. As it turned out, he may have thought he was just directing that comment to a small group of disciples, but instead those few disciples spread around the world! It began with one small group, but now it extends to every race and nation: *You shall be my witnesses...!* We have a vast, extended family of faith.

When Christians barely created a blip on the screens of the Roman Empire, there were faithful witnesses. While centuries of religious tyranny tried to force prescribed faith onto others at the point of a sword, there were faithful witnesses. In times of war and brutality, when armies sallied forth under the sign of the cross as if they were doing God's work, there were faithful witnesses. In times of prosperity and luxury, when the wealthy were convinced that God had blessed them because they were righteous and the poor were unrighteous, there were faithful witnesses. In times of greed, when consumerism rose up as the god of the masses, there were faithful witnesses. And in this time, when the public has a vague awareness of the need for God and like to speak of an amorphous spirituality apart from

any organized church that actually gets things done, there are still faithful witnesses.

I was driving home for lunch one day last year, and round a curve a pickup truck came speeding toward me from the opposite direction. The driver of the pickup was going so fast that he could not make the curve, and he plowed into my car. No one was hurt, but after we took down our insurance information, a woman who saw the whole thing came up to me and said, "Here is my name and number. I was a witness to what happened. You can call on me if you need to."

IV

THAT is being a witness!- to volunteer your name and number, to step forward with no arm-twisting, to offer your time and talents and skills and best thinking, to be willing to testify to what you have seen and heard. We are not called to be professional theologians. We are not called to have all the answers. We are not called to have a certain theology or a certain understanding of all scripture. We are not called to be able to explain everything. We are not called to be Democrats or Republicans or Socialists or Independents. We are not called to be Baptist or Methodist or Catholic or Lutheran. We are not called to be eloquent or shy, to like hymns or choruses, or to prefer Bach or Johnny Cash.

We are simply called to be witnesses. That is our mission. Word it any way you want, but the mission is the same: we are to be witnesses, in word and deed, to what we have experienced of the risen Christ in our lives. It is a clear and present mission. And we begin right here, in our own Jerusalem.