Nu‘uanu Congregational Church

Twentieth Sunday in Ordinary Time

August 19, 2018

Neal MacPherson

*MISSIO DEI*  Isaiah 61:1–4

Psalm 146

Romans 12:9–21

Luke 10:25–37

I want to thank Arthur Goto for raising an important question during last Sunday’s town-hall meeting in the Choir Room. Those who were there may recall the New Beginnings Report, which Wayne Kodama presented. In the report, it was stated that in light of the fact that we would like to become a missional church, we might begin by seeing ourselves as a neighborhood center for the Nu‘uanu Valley so that we more intentionally might serve the needs of the larger community. Our buildings and resources could then be used to serve the needs of those who live in the neighborhoods surrounding us. In response, Arthur said that in that case we would look like just another 501c3 organization. He wondered how our missional activity would relate to the fact that we are a *Christian* church. He further wondered how our serving the needs of the community would increase the membership of our church.

As he spoke, I realized that in our New Beginnings report we had neglected to articulate a *theology of mission.* So I decided by way of this morning’s sermon to begin an exploration of a theology of mission that might spark some further discussion among us.

And so, here goes. In recent years, there has been an important shift in thinking about the nature of Christian mission. From the traditional emphasis on the *mission of the church*, which dominated the study of missions in the years following World War II, in the 80’s and 90’s theologians started to speak of Christian mission as *Missio Dei,* in other words, “the Mission of God.” Mission was to be seen not primarily as the *mission of the church* but as the *mission of God* in the world. The task was no longer to figure out what the church should be doing, which most often ended up with the church trying to devise programs in order to increase its membership. The task was now to discern what God desires for our world, which can be a very different task from one that begins by asking what is good for the church.

To explore *Mission Dei*, the mission of God in the world, we can do no better than turn to the scriptures of the Hebrew Bible and the Christian scriptures of the Newer Testament. This morning, I have chosen four, which have already been read for us.

In Isaiah Chapter 61, the prophet has been anointed

*. . . to bring good news to the oppressed,*

*to bind up the brokenhearted,*

*to proclaim liberty to the captives,*

*and release to the prisoners;*

*to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.* (vs. 1-2a)

It’s important to know that these words were spoken towards the end of the 6th century BCE soon after the people of Israel had returned to Jerusalem from their long captivity in Babylon. They had returned to a city in ruins. The temple was no more. Destitution and poverty were the order of the day. Notice that the mission of the prophet is really God’s mission. It is the Spirit of the Lord that has anointed the prophet to proclaim a Jubilee year of restoration. Notice also God’s mission becomes the mission of the whole people.

*They shall build up the ancient ruins,*

*they shall raise up the former devastations;*

*they shall repair the ruined cities,*

*the devastations of many generations.* (vs. 4)

This is what God will do through them.

The 146th Psalm continues the theme. It is God

*who executes justice for the oppressed;*

*who gives food to the hungry.*

*God sets the prisoners free;*

*God opens the eyes of those who cannot see.*

*God lifts up those who are bowed down; . . .*

*God watches over the strangers, and*

*upholds the orphan and the widow.* (vs. 7-9)

This is *Missio Dei*, the mission of God in the world. By implication, we are invited to participate in that mission.

The Christian Scriptures carry forth the mission of God. In the 12th chapter of Paul’s Letter to the Romans, we are invited to love one another because God loves us. We are to hate that which is evil and hold fast to that which is good because God desires good for the world. We are to extend hospitality to strangers because God loves strangers. We are to live in harmony because God wills harmony. We are to associate with the lowly because God lifts up the poor and feeds the hungry. There are some things, however, that we must leave entirely up to God. We are never to avenge ourselves; vengeance belongs to God alone.

There is but one commandment that is to govern our work and witness in the world; and that one commandment, articulated by the lawyer in the 10th chapter of Luke, is to “love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself.” (Luke 10:27) Jesus says to the lawyer that he has spoken correctly. “And who is my neighbor?” asks the lawyer. He has in mind his fellow Jews. But Jesus answers him with a story about a hated Samaritan who in compassion tends to a wounded stranger who had been robbed and beaten and left half dead on the road to Jericho. By way of the story, Jesus is saying that *anyone in need* is our neighbor. And, besides, the important question is not “who is my neighbor.” The critical question really is “are we the good neighbor to others?” With the Samaritan in mind, Jesus says “Go and do likewise.”

Notice that in the parable, the Samaritan does not put any conditions on the stranger he helped. He does not do a “needs assessment.” The need is obvious. Nor does he place any expectations on the wounded man he assists. He does not help the wounded stranger so that the stranger will think well of Samaritans. Nor does the Samaritan announce his motivation for helping the wounded man. He does not say, “In the name of God I am helping you.” He simply sees the need and responds in compassion.

You are free to disagree with me, but I believe that we do not serve others in order to make Christians out of them. Nor do we serve others in order to bring them into the membership of the church. We serve others only because God wills health and wholeness and peace and justice for all people, and indeed for the whole of creation. We are called only to participate in *Missio Dei*, God’s mission in the earth.

May I also say that the church is not nor can it ever be the object of God’s mission. The mission of God is not to increase the membership of the church. Nor can it be our mission. The context for God’s mission is not the church, but the world. “God so loved the *world* that God gave his only begotten Son.” (John 3:16)

I also believe that if we as a church were to participate in God’s mission in the world, the wellbeing of our church would look after itself. It has always been true for us. It was because Nu‘uanu Congregational Church served the sick, provided refuge for the battered and a home for the orphaned, that it not only survived, but also thrived. We need to re-capture the spirit of those days.

No one knows what God has in store for us as a church. A future Nu‘uanu Congregational Church may look very different and be very different from what we are today. My brothers and sisters, let us not worry about our future. Let us only desire to participate in *Missio Dei*, God’s mission in the world, knowing that in all that we do, God is and will be with us and for us through Jesus Christ our Lord. The rest we leave up to God. May it be so. Amen.