

Exploring the OCRC Provisional Mission Statement

Scripture, Story, and Sermon

First Sunday in Lent
February 17, 2002

Genesis 2:15-17; 3:1-7

15 The LORD God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to till it and keep it.
16 And the LORD God commanded the man, saying, "You may freely eat of every tree of the garden;
17 but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall die."
1 Now the serpent was more subtle than any other wild creature that the LORD God had made. He said to the woman,
"Did God say, 'You shall not eat of any tree of the garden'?"
2 And the woman said to the serpent, "We may eat of the fruit of the trees of the garden;
3 but God said, 'You shall not eat of the fruit of the tree which is in the midst of the garden, neither shall you touch it, lest you die.'"
4 But the serpent said to the woman, "You will not die.
5 For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil."
6 So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate; and she also gave some to her husband, and he ate.
7 Then the eyes of both were opened, and they knew that they were naked; and they sewed fig leaves together and made themselves aprons.

Matthew 4:1-11

1 Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil.
2 And he fasted forty days and forty nights, and afterward he was hungry.
3 And the tempter came and said to him, "If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread."
4 But he answered, "It is written, 'Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God.'"
5 Then the devil took him to the holy city, and set him on the pinnacle of the temple,
6 and said to him, "If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down; for it is written, 'He will give his angels charge of you,' and 'On their hands they will bear you up, lest you strike your foot against a stone.'"
7 Jesus said to him, "Again it is written, 'You shall not tempt the Lord your God.'"
8 Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain, and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and the glory of them;
9 and he said to him, "All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me."
10 Then Jesus said to him, "Begone, Satan! for it is written, 'You shall worship the Lord your God and him only shall you serve.'"
11 Then the devil left him, and behold, angels came and ministered to him.

Children's Story

Every year the people of Nottingham and of Sherwood Forest gathered together for a great festival. There were tables piled high with meats and cheeses and berries and pies. There were barrels filled with wine and ale and pure water. There were poets and musicians. There were jokes and stories and dancing. And, best of all, there was an archery contest.

In case you don't know, at an archery contest people stand side by side in a long line, and they use bow and arrow to shoot at targets. Usually those targets are painted with a large bull's eye, and they are attached to big mounds of hay. Each person has ten arrows to shoot at a target. Whoever does the best job—whoever hits the target closest to the center with the most arrows—wins.

That's the way the archery contest usually worked. But one year, things were strange. All the men and women lined up with their bows and arrows—Robin Hood, Little John, Maid Marian, Friar Tuck, King Richard, Princess Eunice. They all lined up with their bows. They all made ready an arrow. They all turned toward the big mounds of hay and drew back the arrow ready to shoot.

But there were no targets. There was nothing for them to aim at. Nothing for them to shoot at. There was no way for anyone to win the contest. There was no way even to have the contest. How can you have an archery contest without targets?

For a while, they didn't know what to do. Soon enough, though, they started looking for the

targets. They looked in dusty attics, they looked in smelly barns. They looked under tables, they looked behind doors. Finally, one little girl looked in the back of a wagon and there were the targets.

In no time at all, those targets with the large bull's eyes were all attached to the big mounds of hay, and the archery contest began. Twenty-three people each shot ten arrows — Wow! That's 230 arrows! And the judges declared Maid Marian to be the winner.

The archery contest turned out to be a great success.

It's a good thing they found the targets. You can't have an archery contest without targets, can you? Of course not. You have to have something to aim at.

Sermon

Introduction

Did you notice common themes that link this morning's readings from the book of Genesis and from Matthew's gospel? Among other things, both stories concern listening to, trusting in, and heeding the voice of God. The first story, from Genesis, is a story of a dramatic failure of listening to the voice of God. The second story, from Matthew, is one of difficult, teeth-gritted success.

Lately at Olentangy Church we have been listening for the voice of God. In particular we have listened for the voice of God to disclose to us our identity and mission. We have listened to Scripture, to our tradition, and to stories that we have told one another. Along the way, we have discovered some things about our identity and mission. And we have expressed those things this way:

*We are called to be
a faithful servant community
in the kingdom of God
from within Reformed tradition
in Columbus.*

What we've discovered needs some testing and proving to see if it's genuine. We have two ways to do that. The first is to measure the statement over against Scripture. The second is to put the statement into practice and see how it works. Today, we'll begin with the first one, testing the Statement over against Scripture.

“Called [by God]”

At the start of the mission statement, we express a basic conviction. We see ourselves “called,” and I think it's clear enough that we see ourselves called “by God.”

I'm not sure where this conviction comes from. But my suspicion is that it comes from sanctified instinct more than anywhere else. If so, I think we would have to declare it to be a good instinct. Because “calling” is inseparable from “humanity.” So much so, that to be human is to be called.

Genesis 2 recounts the very first calling that was given to the very first human. “The LORD God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to till it and keep it” (v. 15). Leave aside for now the details of that statement. It is clear enough that a calling has been given, that a task has been assigned, from the very beginning.

Moving on from there, the Biblical story is obviously a story about callings. Noah was called by God to build the ark of salvation that would preserve life from the great flood. Abraham was called to leave his home and his family and to go to the place God would show him, wherever that would be. Israel the man was called to become Israel the nation. Moses, Aaron, and Joshua were called to lead that nation, as were Miriam and Deborah. David and Solomon were called to be kings over Israel. Elijah, Elisha and others were called to be prophets, to speak a word from God to the people. And, of course, Jesus was called to be the Christ, to be God's anointed “prophet, priest, and king” in all, through all, and over all.

As it turns out, we too are called. Beyond the basic human calling, we share the calling that was given to Christ. When the Heidelberg Catechism explains why we are called “Christian” it says that “we

share [Christ's] anointing." Put in other words, we have prophetic, priestly and royal tasks.

There's an important thing about some callings, including the one we have as Christians. Some callings reflect who we are at the deepest, most profound level. Think about this: to be human is to be called, to have a reason for being, to have a task. And that is how we see ourselves. We see ourselves "called [by God]."

"A faithful servant community"

We see ourselves called to serve God faithfully together. The second thing we see from our provisional mission statement this morning is our sense that we have a different identity. We have a different identity that separates us from those without the same calling, or from those who are blind or deaf to the calling.

I've not seen the movie *Gosford Park*, but if I understand correctly the movie moves back and forth between the upper and lower floors of an English manor house. The back and forth motion serves to contrast the lives and cares of those on the upper floors—the well-to-do, the titled, the significant—with the lives and cares of their servants, who occupy the lower floor.

We live in a world that prizes life on the upper floors, a world in which wealth, power, and fame are coveted. Yet we see ourselves living on the lower level. Living there by choice. Living there by calling. For we are servants. We do not live for ourselves. We do not work to increase our comfort. We do not argue to defend our pride. We do not scheme to secure our advancement. We are servants. We do not live for ourselves, but for a cause that is greater than ourselves. That, I suppose, is a fair working definition of a servant, someone who lives, not for herself, but for someone or something greater.

Adam was a servant. He lived and worked, not for himself but for the garden he had been charged to tend and keep. Jesus Christ was a servant. He lived and labored and suffered, not for himself but for another. "It is written[, he said,] 'You shall worship the Lord your God, and him only shall you serve'" (Matthew 4:10).

We have a different identity. We are servants. One place in which this identity shows itself powerfully is in the togetherness of our calling. Adam's calling was not the calling of an individual. Adam was the human being, and his calling was the human calling. It is not Adam's calling alone, rather it is the human calling together to care for the creation. In a similar way, Jesus was not called as a lone, isolated individual. The Bible says Jesus was the firstborn among many brothers and sisters. What's more, Jesus' suffering sacrificial servanthood was not merely the fulfillment of his own particular calling. It was a fulfillment of his people's calling. The structure and content of the reading from Matthew 4 make it clear that in his temptation Jesus was reliving the story of Israel, taking Israel's calling upon himself and, instead of failing, succeeding by obedience and faith.

You may recall from recent sermons how Lord's Days 3 & 4 of the Heidelberg Catechism describe all human beings as clearly culpable for human sin and sinfulness. This morning's reading from Romans 5 confirms this. To say, "Adam did it" is to say, "We all did it." We are one, we are together in guilt and corruption. But, of course, that's only part of the story. For at the same time, we are called and equipped to serve God together. We have a shared identity, a shared mission, a shared task. The service we offer to God individually arises from and expresses that shared task.

But I think we have a problem here, and I suppose most churches do. I doubt we grasp the profundity of our mission statement when it describes us as "faithful servant community." That is precisely who we are. That is our most basic identity. Who we are, all of us, is wrapped up in the church of Jesus Christ and in this particular part of it that we call Olentangy Church.

If we think that these Sunday morning services are a weekly gathering of Lone Rangers, that only when we are gathered together for a worship service or some other activity, that only for those brief hours do we become WE, do we become Olentangy Church, then we are WRONG. I know it goes against our individualistic grain—it goes against the grain of our culture, which is strikingly

individualistic; it also goes against the individualism that has so infected the church of Christ—nevertheless we are a community (a community of servants no less), a community first and foremost.

For example, I am not a minister who happens to be the minister at Olentangy Church. I am part of Olentangy Church, and I happen to be the minister. In the same way, you are not a graduate student who happens to be part of Olentangy Church. You are a part of Olentangy church who happens to be a graduate student. The same can be said wherever we find ourselves, behind a desk, at a hospital bedside, in a meeting. We are all, first and foremost, Olentangy Church, “a servant community.” You see, our primary identity, beyond the fact that we are human beings, is that we are part of the church of Jesus Christ. That church always expresses itself in local, particular ways. Olentangy Church is one of them.

There is nothing new here. Adam was called to serve, not as Adam the individual. He was called to serve as Adam the human, as humanity. In the same way, Jesus was called to serve (as Christ), not as an individual, but as part of the people Israel.

Beyond what we may have expected—certainly beyond what I expected from such a homely mission statement—we have discovered that we are primarily not individuals, not families, but a church. That has huge implications for the life we live together and the lives we live apart, implications we have not yet begun to explore. But the time is coming.

“In the kingdom of God”

Finally, we are called to serve faithfully together in the kingdom of God.

The garden did not belong to Adam; the garden belonged to God. Adam was placed in the garden as a servant, as a caretaker. Adam was a steward, someone whose calling is to tend what belongs to another.

Similarly, the world we live in is not ours. As the Christian Reformed Church’s Contemporary Testimony puts it: “Our World Belongs to God.”

In Matthew 4, the devil showed Jesus all the kingdoms of the earth and their splendor. And he told Jesus: “All these I will give you, if you fall down and worship me” (vv. 8-9). But those kingdoms were not the devil’s to give. Those kingdoms, every one of them, belonged to God.

The Ohio State University belongs to God. So does the Wellington School. Chemical Abstracts Services belongs to God. So does Boeing and Columbia Gas and White Castle.

The kingdom of God is usually a slippery concept for us. But we can say this much: it is not a particular place. The kingdom of God is not a location such that sometimes you are inside the kingdom and sometimes you are outside of the kingdom. To serve “in the Kingdom of God” is to live and work and play anywhere, knowing that Christ is Lord. I know, that’s more jargon, more slippery code words. So let’s try this: To serve in the kingdom is to consciously, purposely connect our work and our play with a purpose that has been given to us by God. In other words, always and everywhere to take aim at the shared target that God has set out in front of us and to let the arrow fly.

Conclusion

I think, by the grace of God, we may be onto something here in our provisional mission statement. For one thing it seems to fit with Scripture. So far it passes that test. There will be more on that Scripture test next week. But for now, what we have seen amounts to this: Life for us is a shared service that aims us together at a target that is not about us but about God and God’s purpose for us, a purpose of gospel faithfulness wherever we find ourselves, wherever we go.

So there you have some first reflections on the provisional mission statement. If nothing else, these first reflections make it clear to me that God is calling us, calling us “to be a faithful servant community in the kingdom of God,” which is to say, if nothing else, that God is calling us toward some change.

Exploring the OCRC Provisional Mission Statement Scripture, Story, and Sermon

Second Sunday in Lent
February 24, 2002

Genesis 12:1-4a

- 1 Now the LORD said to Abram, "Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you.
- 2 And I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing.
- 3 I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed."
- 4 So Abram went, as the LORD had told him; and Lot went with him.

John 3:1-17

- 1 Now there was a man of the Pharisees, named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews.
- 2 This man came to Jesus by night and said to him, "Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher come from God; for no one can do these signs that you do, unless God is with him."
- 3 Jesus answered him, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born anew, he cannot see the kingdom of God."
- 4 Nicodemus said to him, "How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born?"
- 5 Jesus answered, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God.
- 6 That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit.
- 7 Do not marvel that I said to you, 'You must be born anew.'
- 8 The wind blows where it wills, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know whence it comes or whither it goes; so it is with every one who is born of the Spirit."
- 9 Nicodemus said to him, "How can this be?"
- 10 Jesus answered him, "Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand this?
- 11 Truly, truly, I say to you, we speak of what we know, and bear witness to what we have seen; but you do not receive our testimony.
- 12 If I have told you earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you heavenly things?
- 13 No one has ascended into heaven but he who descended from heaven, the Son of man.
- 14 And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of man be lifted up,
- 15 that whoever believes in him may have eternal life."
- 16 For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.
- 17 For God sent the Son into the world, not to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved through him.

OCRC's Provisional Mission Statement

We are called to be
a faithful servant community
in the kingdom of God
from within Reformed tradition
in Columbus.

Children's Story

Farmer Brown is not much of a farmer. His mother was a farmer. And his grandfather was a farmer too. You could say farming is in his blood. But Farmer Brown still isn't much of a farmer.

Here's what I mean:

What do you suppose grows when a farmer plants corn? [Corn.] And what do you suppose grows when a farmer plants tomatoes? [Tomatoes.] And what do you suppose grows when a farmer plants an apple orchard? [Apples.]

Very good. I think you understand farming. But I don't think you would understand Farmer Brown's farm. You see, when Farmer Brown plants tomatoes, cucumbers grow instead. And when he plants an apple orchard, the trees are full of pears. And his cornfield . . . well, his cornfield isn't full of

corn, that's for sure. His cornfield waves with dancing sunflowers.

Like I said, Farmer Brown is not much of a farmer.

How do you suppose it happens that Farmer Brown has all the wrong things growing on his farm? I'll tell you how it happens. It happens by accident, sort of.

When Farmer Brown accidentally plants sunflower seeds in his cornfield, sunflowers grow instead of corn. And when he accidentally plants pear trees instead of apple trees, it's no wonder that the trees are full of pears instead of apples.

All those wrong things grow accidentally. Except it's really no accident at all, is it? Sure Farmer Brown makes a bunch of mistakes. He accidentally plants the wrong things. But it's no accident that pears grow where pear trees are planted. And it's no accident that cucumbers grow where cucumber seeds are planted. Everything grows exactly where it has been planted.

Do you know that we are all like seeds? We're not accidental at all. We all grow where we have been planted. Maybe we don't know why we live in Columbus. Or why we live with our family instead of another family. But the Bible tells us that these things are not accidental. God plants us exactly where God wants us. And that is the place for us to grow.

Sermon

Introduction

Last Sunday we looked at the first part of OCRC's *Provisional Mission Statement*, testing its content over against Scripture. Along the way we found some resonances between the mission statement and biblical stories of calling and testing. We also found some encouragement to see ourselves as part of something bigger than ourselves—and to live that way.

Today we will continue the testing process on the second half of the mission statement, though it is harder this time than it was last Sunday. For one thing, there is no mention of the Reformed tradition in Scripture. And the last time I checked my concordance, I saw no references to Columbus. All the same, we'll do our best to rub the mission statement against Scripture and look for sparks.

A Particular Branch

According to our provisional mission statement, we see ourselves called as part of one branch of the church's family tree. On the one hand, we could say that we are in this branch quite by accident and, therefore, not make a big deal out of it, certainly not use it to define who we are. After all, we're in this particular branch of the tree, the Reformed branch, because we were born into it, or because we happened to grow up in the only town in New England that has two Christian Reformed Churches, or because we stumbled upon a school in West Michigan called Calvin College. It's not a big deal. It's accidental.

But, of course, this branch would not view any of these happenings as accidental. This branch says, "All things come to us, not by chance, but by [God's] fatherly hand" (Heidelberg Catechism, A 27). Which leads me to note with appreciation one of the particular emphases on our Reformed tradition. The Reformed tradition builds much of its understanding of the world and of life in the world from this basic insight: God is the actor in the story of redemption.

Human beings certainly have their place, and their role to play, in the story of redemption, whether we refer to Abraham, David, John the Baptist, Paul the Apostle, or you and me. But the God who creates heaven and earth also creates their renewing. God made a promise to Abram, and no one else but God would be keeping it: "I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and him who curses you I will curse . . ." God is the actor in the story of redemption.

There is a tendency these days, both among the agnostic masses and the theologically inclined, to see human beings as victims of fate or blind chance. The Reformed tradition has steadfastly denied that. The Heidelberg Catechism says that God "so rules [heaven and earth and all creatures] that leaf and

blade, rain and drought, fruitful and lean years, food and drink, health and sickness, prosperity and poverty—all things, in fact, come to us not by chance but from his fatherly hand” (A 27). Human beings are not victims of fate or of blind chance. God is in control.

Yet this is problematic in our experience. There is so much senseless hurt and agony in the world, whether terrorist attack or genocide, whether famine or flood. It’s hard to fit that together with our “God picture,” a God picture that sees everything ruled by God.

Here I think we meet up with a weakness in our tradition. That weakness is a tendency to undermine the mystery of God. With logic, with careful philosophical thought, and with nuanced biblical interpretation, we have painted a detailed picture of God, a sovereign God who rules over all things for our good. But is that really an accurate picture? And is it even appropriate to have a “God picture” at all? When Moses wanted to pin God down (“Tell me your name”), God refused (“Nothing doing; I will be who I will be”). Even Abram, the father of believers, appeared quite content to live with the mystery of God. God spoke to Abram from out of nowhere—there is nothing in the biblical account to indicate that Abram had any prior experience with or knowledge of God, that Abram was anything other than a pagan, like his neighbors—yet when God spoke to him from out of nowhere, Abram believed and acted.

Fortunately—maybe someone in the Reformed tradition shouldn’t use that word!—fortunately, we have the mystery of God made known in Jesus Christ. But if we think we have Jesus figured out, we haven’t looked closely enough. We’re more like befuddled Nicodemus than we realize. We know a bit—“we know that you are a teacher come from God; for no one can do these signs that you do, unless God is with him”—and we cling to that. But we are far from having Jesus, let alone the great mystery of God, figured out, despite what our tradition might seem to say.

So we are part of a tradition that tends to crowd out the mystery of God. That’s alright. We can respond to that. If nothing else we can respond by giving ourselves to disciplines of prayer and of Scripture reading and of silence before the mystery that is God. And all along we’ll cling to this root of confidence and trust: God is the actor in the story of redemption always and everywhere—even in this chapter, even in this place.

A Particular Place

Which brings up the last part of the provisional mission statement. We see ourselves called to serve God’s kingdom in a particular place.

In the Bible, God shows care and concern for particular places. Adam and Eve were instructed to tend a particular garden. Abram was instructed to go to a particular land: “Go . . . to the land that I will show you.” Much of the Old Testament story is about that land, the land that Israel struggled to occupy, the land that one day the meek would inherit.

God’s concern was not limited, however, to the promised land, nor even to its special city, Jerusalem. Through Moses God performed great signs in Egypt so that the Egyptians would come to recognize that he was God (and, we may presume, find life). God sent Jonah to the city of Nineveh out of concern for its people (and its cattle too). God’s concern, according to the story told on the pages of Scripture—God’s concern is as wide as the earth, which, the New Testament teaches us, the meek will inherit.

One especially telling episode in this story occurs at Jeremiah 29:7, where God instructs the exiles, who have been ripped up from the holy land and forcibly resettled in Babylon, to live into the place where they find themselves: “But seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare.”

We, too, are exiles. The world is not our home. We are on our way to another city, a city with foundations, a city whose architect and builder is God, a city that will fill the new earth. Meanwhile, we see ourselves, like the exiles in Babylon, obliged to live into this place, this place where we find ourselves, this city called Columbus.

Here in Columbus, we are part of a larger “servant community” than Olentangy Church alone. We are not the only “faithful ones” in Columbus, not by any stretch of the imagination. With others who belong to Christ, we work, we study, we play, and we pray in greater Columbus. We are, by God’s design, together with other Christian communities, light and leaven in a dark and sorrowful city.

God promised Abram “in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.” John’s gospel says, “God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. For God sent the Son into the world, not to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved through him.” We have been and remain on the receiving end of these promises and blessings. But we have not received such gifts in order to be mere reservoirs. We don’t receive blessing and retain it for ourselves. Rather we pass it on. Somehow, according to God’s design, through Christians like us and Christian communities like ours, blessing comes to particular places, even to Columbus.

I know, that sounds rather triumphalist. It sounds like we have a lofty self-opinion to think that God will bless Columbus through us. Well, let’s beat that down right now. We admit, from the start, that we are flawed, weak people, that we are captive to a carnival of cares. We are like Abram, whose obedience was less than complete. (Told to leave his kindred behind, he nevertheless took his nephew Lot with him, Lot who would prove to be nothing but trouble.)

We’re honest enough about our own weaknesses and flaws to recognize that any good that comes to Columbus through us will not at all be our doing. You see, we’re back close to where we started. God is the actor in the story of redemption. God is the agent who will bring good to Columbus. God is the Lover of Columbus and its only Savior.

Conclusion

Honestly, I’m not sure where to go with all of this. Some actions do suggest themselves, however.

To begin with, we can purposely reconnect with the strengths of our Reformed tradition. That’s the goal of recent sermons on the Heidelberg Catechism. At the same time, we can also acknowledge the weaknesses of our tradition and move beyond them.

Second, we can find out who the Lord’s people in Columbus are and take steps to make visible our unity with them, through shared worship, shared celebration of Holy Communion, times of mutual prayer, and common acts of service.

Which is a third action: we can make a consistent effort to acquaint ourselves with what the Lord’s people in Columbus are doing and to consider joining with them.

Fourth, we can make our city and our communities a priority in our prayers. And with a renewed focus, we can base those prayers on knowledge, love, and involvement. God cares about particular places, and it’s no accident that we are in this place.

Through it all, though, we will never forget this: the redemption of every city, as of every heart, is the work of the Lord, who calls, who blesses, who saves.