

Sunday, January 27 and Wednesday, January 30, 2019
Third Sunday after the Epiphany + Luke 4:14-21
Holy Trinity Lutheran Church, Marshall, WI
“Jesus’ Ministry, and Ours” + Rev. Nancy M. Raabe

Today is a pivotal day in the life of Holy Trinity Lutheran Church. This is the first anniversary of my installation here. We are moving into a new fiscal year together. And at the Annual Meeting we’ll reflect on the past year and begin to chart the course ahead. Today.

But reflection entails honesty. I am here today to tell you that Holy Trinity as we have known has come about as far as it can go. It’s not that we’re on the brink; in fact, in 2018 we eked our way just barely into the black. What I’m talking about is the condition of our ministry—the state our work in the world.

Our mission as church is to do more than take care of our own house. We are not only here to support, console, encourage, and love each other, as important as those are. God is calling us into ministry. Doing ministry is why the church exists. Worship forms us and God send us out. Our call as a congregation is to be the body of Christ for the sake of the world. This is our vocation. You may have heard that beautiful definition by writer and theologian Frederick Buechner: “Your vocation in life is where your greatest joy meets the world's greatest need.” God is calling. Are we listening?

I am deeply touched by all those who give to Holy Trinity, whether in money, time, labor, and in many cases all three. I don’t see individual giving records, but I know the totals and that tells me how you care for this church.

But how are we doing in the work of ministry, that is, spreading the good news of Jesus Christ to the world? The truth is that, in 2018, less than 3% of our total expenses fell into this category. And virtually all of that 3% consisted of office supplies.

If we believe Holy Trinity Lutheran Church has something to offer the world besides free space for community meetings, then we have to get serious about figuring out what that is and how to come up with the income to support it. We need to break out of the status quo. God clearly has great things in mind for us, or we would not be in a prime location with expansive grounds. We would be in a building that is both beautiful and functional. And we would not be a community of people who know and embrace God's love as a way of life. God has given us all these things, and for a purpose.

Today's Gospel reading lays it on the line. Jesus is here today to tell us about ministry—his and ours. It is a momentous scene. Jesus has just begun his public ministry and has stopped off at his hometown synagogue in Nazareth. His growing reputation as a teacher has preceded him, so all eyes are on Joseph's son as Jesus takes the great scroll of the prophet Isaiah that was handed to him. He knows exactly where he wants to go—the beginning of what is now Isaiah 61. There is long pause while he finds his place; this particular scroll could have been 24 feet long. Imagine the air of expectation hanging over the packed room. Then Jesus reads:

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.

This is Jesus' vocation in a nutshell. Here is everything we need to know about the shape and substance of his call. And since we are the body of Christ, this call is ours as well. What do we hear in it?

First, that Jesus' ministry is empowered by the Holy Spirit. The Spirit activates God's Word. It is the person of the Trinity by which God's Word and Christ's victory over death are made known to the world. The Spirit is the breath of God that blew over the waters at the dawn of creation. It is the same breath that brought the church into being and keeps it alive.

- This tells us that the Holy Spirit must be the driving force in our life together as Holy Trinity Lutheran Church. To let the Spirit in, all we have to do is sweep aside obstacles and old ways of being that keep creativity and innovation at bay. The Spirit then opens our minds and hearts to an infinite variety of possibilities in which God's will and desire can blow through us and bring new life.

Second, we hear that Jesus' ministry was not confined to a specific place. Instead, he is traveling throughout Galilee, as Luke says in Chapter 8, going "through cities and villages, proclaiming and bringing the good news of the kingdom of God."

- This tells us that ministry cannot flourish if it is located solely in a building where we are waiting for people to cross the threshold. For churches, "If you build it, they will come" doesn't work in the long run, although countless churches undertake elaborate building projects thinking this will solve their attendance problems. Imagine if Jesus had arrived at Nazareth only to build himself a new synagogue (since as we'll see next week things

did not go well in his old one) and he just sat there waiting around! Words that fall on only a few ears cannot heal a broken world. Instead, we must take ourselves out into the world with the good news of the gospel.

Third, we hear that Jesus' ministry had specific content. As Jesus announced to his home congregation, the Spirit anointed him to bring good news to the poor, to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, and to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.

- This tells us that our ministry as the hands, feet, eyes, ears, and lips of Christ is more than Bible study, or fellowship, or small-group activities, or even worship, as important as those are in the life of a congregation. We are called to bring good news to those places and people that desperately need it. We are called to be their advocates and to work for their recovery and their freedom. We are called to heal. We are called to listen. We are called to walk alongside people and carry their burdens. We are called to be the presence of Christ to them.

We are also called to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor. Here Jesus is referring to the Jubilee, the ancient Jewish practice every 50 years of freeing slaves and prisoners and forgiving debts. Its purpose is to call special attention to the abundance of God's mercy. If we are to flourish, we must embrace the work of ministry that Jesus lays before us. How do we get there? Perhaps we are looking at a long-range vision motivated by a strategic plan. How it unfolds is up to you.

But whatever the means, how good it will be, one day, to be able to say to those who need it most: "Today, this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."

Amen.