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St. John's Lutheran Church of Burlington
2 February 2025

Sermon on Luke 4:38-44

Worship Theme:

EPIPHANY MOMENTS: POPULARITY IS NOT PROOF OF SUCCESS

It is easy to think that the more people like us, the more successful our lives must be. Likewise, it is easy to believe the more people like a church, the more successful that church is. So here is an important epiphany for both individuals and churches: popularity is not proof of success. Though there will be times when Christ's gospel and those who proclaim it are popular, that popularity is never the goal. The gospel of forgiveness is to be the center of all our preaching and teaching. The agenda for Christ's Church is set.

Sermon Theme: "The Church's Agenda"

1. Proclaim the Good News
2. Keep On Preaching It

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen!

Did you know every church on earth has an agenda? It's true. I realize that might sound super negative, like something people opposed to the Church would accuse us of! They might accuse us of not being upfront with people about what we're really after or having insincere motivation or a secret plan behind what we do, like the old "bait-and-switch" routine. It's rarely the one they think it is, but anybody who says the Church has an agenda is right! It's quite a simple agenda though. In fact, the entire agenda and mission of the Church is just one thing.

So of course that begs the question: "What is it?" People have been trying to answer this question for as long as the Church has existed. What is the Church's mission and function in society? Unfortunately, instead of taking what a congregation says and does and comparing it to the Bible, many people choose to attend whichever congregation has an agenda that best fits that person's desires and tells them whatever they want to hear.

It's interesting to think about what the mission of the synagogues of Jesus' day might have been. When we think about Jewish worship back then, we think of things like sacrifices and offerings to God, or situations like we saw in the Gospel last week when someone gets up to read the Scriptures and discuss or explain them for a while, perhaps somewhat similarly to the model of our sermons today. But we're not told much else. Scripture doesn't tell us if the synagogues were places where people went for anything besides Sabbath Day worship.

It's also interesting then to see how people reacted to Jesus when he came. We would expect the people of God to react to the coming of God's Messiah with great rejoicing, bowing before him and worshiping him and eagerly running into the streets to tell everyone that he had finally come! The one who would save the world from sin was finally here and everybody needed to know right away!

But that's not exactly what happened. Luke tells us the agenda the people tried to set for Jesus: *At sunset, the people brought to Jesus all who had various kinds of sickness, and laying his hands on each one, he healed them. Moreover, demons came out of many people.* Luke makes it pretty clear that word about Jesus did spread quickly, but it seems to have spread for all the wrong reasons. You can almost hear the cries in the streets or the conversations between neighbors: "Come see the miracle healer! All your diseases cured with a touch or a word!" "He even casts out demons! True story! I saw it happen! There's nothing this guy can't handle – all our problems in life are going to be gone. We've got it made!"

What a demanding agenda. "Jesus, heal me, heal him, heal her. Jesus, cast out this demon and that one. Jesus, do this...Jesus, do that...Jesus, Jesus, JESUS!!" Constantly surrounding him, clamoring for his attention and his power to take care of their wants and desires. It sounds exhausting! Luke continues, *"At daybreak, Jesus went out to a solitary place. The people were looking for him and when they came to where he was, they tried to keep him from leaving them."* And this wasn't just a one-time deal in Jesus' ministry. Everywhere he went, crowds begged him to take care of their physical, outward, earthly needs. Even when Jesus went off by himself, usually to pray, people searched and searched until they found him. And then it was right back to the same situation as before: "Heal this, fix that, me next!"

How did Jesus respond? Contrary to the exasperation and irritation we might expect, almost everywhere he went Jesus DID spend time healing and casting out demons and helping people in need. But he also never forgot his true agenda. Jesus didn't come to earth only to be a miracle doctor or cast out demons, nor did come to make our life as comfortable, manageable, and prosperous as possible. *They tried to keep him from leaving them. But he said, "I must proclaim the good news of the kingdom of God to the other towns also, because that is why I was sent."*

Jesus always remembered who he was and why he came, but it would have been so easy to forget. Compare last week's crowd to this week's crowd. Last week, people took Jesus to the top of a cliff hoping to kill him by throwing him off it. This week, people literally could not get enough of him, constantly begging for his attention, trying anything to keep him from leaving them! But Jesus' reaction to both crowds was the same: he continued on his way, ready to go to the next town or village following his true agenda. Fame and fortune and all the worship anyone ever wanted could have been his right then and there! But Jesus remained focused on the one thing needful, his one true mission, the agenda set for him by God the Father: **proclaim the good news.** *"THAT is why I was sent."*

Thankfully, it's not too difficult to see how Jesus did keeping that agenda. He didn't set himself up as an earthly king, ruling over people for them to wait on him hand and foot. He didn't establish his eternal rule in Jerusalem or any other city on earth. Instead, he spent three years without any home at all, traveling from place to place, yes casting out demons and healing and helping people, but also keeping to his heavenly agenda to **proclaim the good news.** However, he knew this good news demanded more than just talking; Jesus also needed to DO what he said he would – be the Savior of all by dying on the cross to take away the sins of

the world. After he victoriously rose to life again but before he ascended back to heaven, he entrusted his agenda to his followers: *Go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you.* [Matt. 28]

In the 2,000 years that have passed since then, how have we done with keeping the agenda Jesus gave us? This heavenly agenda is crystal clear, so there certainly shouldn't be any confusion about what it is. Jesus set the example during his entire earthly ministry and gave us a simple command – **proclaim the good news!** So is that what the Christian Church does? Is that what people look for when choosing which church to attend? Or does our focus often get distracted?

You and I both know the answer to that question, and sadly, it often isn't good. People today are no better at seeking Jesus for the right reason than the people who saw him face-to-face were. We still seek the outward and the physical. Whether we personally struggle with all these things or not, they are incredibly prevalent and common in our world. When someone is looking for a church to attend and belong to, what do they look at? How big the church is, as if that were a measure of success. How much money the church has, because a richer church can do more things for me. Will this church pay my bills or give me free food? Does this church have a second-to-none childcare program, rockstar youth leaders, and an award-winning school? Does this church make me FEEL good, as if feelings ought to be the deciding factor. Does the pastor have a fun personality? What kind of music do they have, and is it the kind I prefer? How welcoming are the people? What kind of technology do they use – are they with the times or way behind?

You get the point. We've all seen it and we've all thought it: "What can the church do for me?" The obvious implication behind that question is, how can the church make my life better right here, right now! Pay my bills, satisfy my wants, teach and take care of my children, and make me feel good. Otherwise I'll go somewhere else that WILL *suit my own desires* and give me *what my itching ears long to hear*. [2 Timothy 4]

But unless we missed something earlier, I don't remember that being the agenda Jesus followed, nor was it the agenda he gave to his Church. While the Church certainly can offer help and assistance to people in time of need (Jesus did, and we are happy to as well, when and if we can!) and while we are not oblivious to the things people like and dislike, these are not to be the main focus or driving force behind what we do. The agenda of the Christian Church is never dictated by the desires of people or what "itching ears" want to hear. We are always first and foremost **proclaimers of good news**, the message of Jesus Christ, the Savior who lived and died and rose to save sinners and give them an eternal home in the perfection and peace of heaven. THAT is the agenda of the Church, because that is the agenda of the Christ.

"I MUST proclaim the good news of the kingdom of God." Jesus didn't say he "MUST" about very many things. The ones he did were always centered around his one mission as Savior. That is the one item on **the Church's agenda** which Jesus says we MUST do: **Keep on preaching it!** If people would stop and realize

what that message actually says, we might not be so quick to give it up or put it aside. Why do people come to the Church for help? Because we want life to be better and more comfortable and we want healing and relief from our problems. It's the same reason we spend so much time and money on medical attention and care – we want to be comfortable and happy and live as long as we possibly can!

Yet it is exactly those things that the good news of the kingdom of God offers us. A life that is not only comfortable and better, but perfect in every way, entirely without sin and guilt and shame. It's not just a life with a little healing or pain relief, as if we were given a shot of morphine; it's a life without any pain ever again. No pain, no problems, nothing that ever needs to be healed again! And it's not a life we have to try to lengthen by working out or eating right or taking vitamins; it's already forever. You and I are going to live forever with a perfect body in a perfect heaven, and it's not because the Church paid the electric bill or had a cool program for kids or filled a football stadium by telling people God wants them to be rich and successful. No, it's simply by keeping to **The Church's Agenda**. One thing and one thing only – the easiest agenda there's ever been: **Proclaim the Good News and Keep On Preaching It!**

That's why Jesus came. To save unworthy people simply because he loves us and has chosen to show us incomparable grace and mercy. That was always Jesus' highest priority. He certainly cares about our lives in this world – don't ever think he doesn't! God never stops watching over our time here. But he cares infinitely more about our eternal lives. Even if we all live to be over 100 years old, that's a microscopically small amount of time compared to forever. So Jesus focused his agenda on "forever." And when we know how great our "forever" is because of Jesus, it easily makes our "here and now" better too. Life in this world is not all we get – we have heaven waiting for us!

Dear friends, that's how greatly Jesus loves you. His agenda was all about cleansing you from sin, giving you a place to belong in his family, and preparing a perfect eternal home for you. There's no bait-and-switch here, no push for popularity, no gimmick or catch, no hidden agenda or secret motivation. Just the pure beautiful Gospel message of Jesus Christ our Savior. Always remain focused on that, **The Church's One and Only Agenda to Proclaim the Good News and Keep On Preaching It!** May the God who is always with us to the very end of the age bless and strengthen us now and always as we follow HIS agenda, and to him be the glory forever. Amen!

And the peace of God which goes beyond all understanding will guard and keep our hearts and our minds through faith in Christ Jesus. Amen.