

## Vision 2023: 4. Where Life and Purpose Connect

Luke 19:1-10

February 23, 2020

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In the summer of 2018, I spent a week in a silent retreat in the mountains of New Mexico. It was the culmination of a six month program devoted to restoring healthy spiritual practices and also discerning God's purpose for the next stage of life. It occurred to me that I could divide my life into three periods. The first 25 years were most focused on me – getting an education and figuring out what I would do with that education. The second period was 35 years and was mostly focused on we – marriage and family and supporting our children as they determined what they would do with their lives. That left the final third and whatever years are left. It could be another 30 years or more or less than that. I don't know. But there in the mountains of New Mexico, I began to write a personal manifesto – a focus or a purpose for whatever amount of time I have remaining. Here's how my manifesto begins: **My life is a gift. I entered this world with the breath of God, welcomed into a family of love and devotion to God. My life purpose is to use all that I am and all that I have to fill lives with the power of God's love.** **Above all, I will be committed to lifting up the next generation.** This was two years before I learned there would be a next generation in my own family, so this purpose was greater than my family. But it's why when there was an opportunity to read to 3<sup>rd</sup> graders at Oakwood, I raised my hand. And when my grandson was born, I committed to his care one day a week. It's why I said yes to serving on Imara's board. It's why I said yes to serving on the board of Interfaith Outreach. It's why I serve on our Bloom board and why I continue to serve on the board of Hamline University. It's this commitment to the next generation. What would it mean to devote the rest of my life and whatever time and energy that I have to the next generation?

Recently, I had a conversation with someone about legacy. She asked, "Who decides what a person's legacy will be?" In this series, I've suggested: **Legacies are pathways that guide the people who follow.** John Wesley was not focused on making a name for himself so that he would be revered 300 years later. He found a purpose, lived into that purpose in such a way that the people who followed him wanted to live into that same pathway. It's what I was doing two and half years ago, and what I am hoping every person here would be able to articulate. Do you have a purpose greater than yourself? It's also what I'm hoping for Messiah Church. Do we have a purpose greater than ourselves?

For the past year, we've had two different groups discerning that answer. It began a year ago with a survey of our congregation and well over 100 of you responded with your hopes and dreams for this church and the gaps you were seeing. Then we had a group of 25 people go through your responses to refine and define and prayerfully consider what our emphases should be. And then for the past 7 months, a group of 14 established focus areas, goals, and in the next few weeks will complete the strategies and the metrics so we will know when we have succeeded in the plan. What I want to suggest to you this morning is that over the next three years we become the place where your life and purpose connect.

Over the past year, I've returned again and again to this story that we find in the 19<sup>th</sup> chapter of Luke's gospel. **Jesus entered Jericho and was passing through town.** Jesus was not planning to stop in Jericho. He was passing through. After three years in and around Galilee, it was time to enter Jerusalem and what would be his final showdown with everyone who was against him. Jesus was on the move. Jericho was not his destination, but wherever Jesus went there were needs and even when he's passing through the needs of people became his focus. What about us? We have a beautiful building in a prime location. We have a lighted sign on the

street to invite people inside. We have people waiting at the doors ready to welcome and respond to everyone who enters, but are we moving?

St. Augustine said, "The church is a hospital for sinners." I've had recent experience with a hospital. This one even had Methodist on the building. I was welcomed at the door, directed to a waiting area, ushered into a room where a nurse attended to me. All sorts of medical persons gathered around my bed, and I placed my life in their hands – literally. The care that I was given was phenomenal, but even though it was great care, I don't ever want to be in a situation where I have to go back there. In many ways, we are like a hospital, but I would rather we be more like what we see in the parking lot across the street. (an ambulance) No one goes to an ambulance to seek care. It's the ambulance moves. Recently, I spoke with Megan Daniels who just completed her training and certification to be a first responder. She's now part of the Minnetonka Fire Department. I asked her why? Why do this? She said, "It was something I knew I was supposed to do. I can't really even put it into words. It's like I found my purpose in life." It's like this light. Find your purpose and you come to life. And then I asked, "What keeps you going even in the face of risk?" And she said, "**Risk is high. But in the moment you don't think about the risks... when you are on the scene you just keep moving.**" The real work of the church is not what we do here. We are just passing through. The real work is what happens when we leave this room and respond to the needs in the community. If we are to be like Jesus, we must keep moving into the community, but let's look at what Jesus does while he is passing through.

Do you know the song? *Zacchaeus was a wee little man and a wee little man was he. He climbed up in the sycamore tree for the Lord he wanted to see.* Zacchaeus was drawn to Jesus, but the only safe way that he could see Jesus was to climb the tree – and not simply because he was short and could not see over the shoulders of those in front of him. Nobody wanted Zacchaeus to be part of the crowd. Zacchaeus was the chief of the tax collectors. He worked for the Roman government. He was a Jew that other Jews saw as a traitor. He and his staff could stop a person in Jericho and assess a duty on nearly everything. A cart could be taxed for each wheel, for the animal that pulled it, and the merchandise that it carried. A portion of what he collected was sent to Rome, but anything collected over that amount, he was free to keep. He kept a lot for himself. He was wealthy. He was part of the oppressive system of Roman domination, and he was hated for it. And even if he found a way to stand within the crowd, it was not safe for him. I think he was hiding within the branches of the tree.

What's interesting is that 2000 years later, it is not the faces in the crowd that we remember but the one who stood apart from the crowd – the one the crowd couldn't or wouldn't see. And I wonder, who are we not seeing? Who have we assumed would not be welcomed by Jesus or is not ready to get close to Jesus because they are not here? To be like Jesus, we will look for who's missing. A recent study of worship attendance in the Twin Cities area found that 12% regularly attend a protestant church, 6% regularly attend a catholic church, 10% participate in a non-Christian religion. 25% identify as "nones" – having no interest in religion, and here's the surprise – 47% identify as Christian but do not attend a church. They love Jesus, but they are not looking for a church. They don't know what we do here. What if we became the church that would move into the community to build relationships with the 47%? I regularly come across people in the community that I've never met but know me – because they've been watching online. In fact, last week I received a card from someone I've never met who heard that I had surgery. To be like Jesus, we must be moving toward the needs in this community, ready to get close to people we don't know. That's why it is so important to connect with the people here that we don't know. This is where we learn how to do it.

But the most important message in this story is what happens when Jesus recognizes the man who was not part of the crowd but was hiding in the tree. **“Zacchaeus, come down at once. I must stay at your house today.”** Jesus is just passing through, when he stops to spend time with the one who seemed to have everything – wealth, influence, power. But Jesus knew there was a sickness of the heart for which he had the remedy. Notice Jesus does no condemn (everyone else does that). Jesus does not judge. Jesus offers grace, acceptance, and love. And that day something miraculous happened – after a lifetime of focusing on himself, Zacchaeus suddenly found a purpose greater than himself. **Look, Lord, I give half of my possessions to the poor. And if I have cheated anyone, I repay them four times as much.** My life is no longer about me. And as I look into the future, here’s the Messiah Church that I see: The place where your life and purpose connect. Because when it does, you come to life!

Let me provide a few examples. In January, thirty children gathered here for a day of service projects. They boarded a bus that would take them to Feed My Starving Children where they would package meals that would feed children in Haiti. When Steve F. heard there was a bus going to Feed My Starving Children, he called the church to see if he could ride the bus – not knowing we had a bus so we could transport the children. He was told that “sure, you can ride the bus.” That morning I saw him waiting in line to board the bus and with a big smile he said, “I’m a chaperone.” He sat in the middle of the children, worked alongside them at FMSC, and before they left, he purchased a tube of M&Ms for every child. The idea being that after eating the M&Ms the tube could be filled with enough quarters to feed 63 children. Without even knowing, Steve had just connected his life to a purpose greater than himself. That’s when we come to life!

Or I remember when Rick and Marilynne R. arrived here at Messiah. Rick was already retired. He had time. And someone invited him to be part of what was then Kid’s Care Connection. He had worked at Control Data and was a rancher from western South Dakota. What did he know about early childhood education? Early childhood education and child care was something new, but he got involved in strategic planning and coming alongside others, Kid’s Care Connection was rebranded as Bloom, an executive director was hired, the program expanded at this location to provide tuition assistance to 35 families and then launched a second location that will eventually provide another 23 families with tuition assistance. But through all of this what I observed was that Rick connected his life with a purpose greater than himself – and he came to life!

Or this week, I spoke with Ann B. two years ago she, her husband, daughter and granddaughters began attending this church and when we started a prayer partner ministry to connect every child with an adult to pray for them, Ann was assigned to Chloe and Ann did more than just pray for Chloe, she even showed up for some of Chloe’s basketball games. So this week I asked Ann what this meant to her. She said, “being a prayer partner has given me a chance to be another caring adult in the life of a young person at Messiah.” She’s gotten smiles, hugs, and high fives. As a new person to Messiah, she has been welcomed by Chloe’s family. And she’s gotten to know the prayer partner’s assigned to her grandchildren. And she feels connected to this church. When one’s life is connected to a purpose greater than oneself, that’s when you truly come to life.

One more: Recently Phil Z. told me about how his mother lived in a nursing care facility at the end of her life. It was not a happy place. She was not at a happy place in her life. So, Phil told his mother what she needed was a purpose. A purpose? She was too old and too sick to have a purpose. But Phil, said, you could be thankful. You could thank the people who care for you. You can respond to them with kindness. And so she did. And the attitude of the staff began to

change. They wanted to be in Phil's mother's room. And as the attitude of the staff began to change, the attitude throughout the care facility began to change. All because one person connected with a purpose greater than oneself – and she came to life.

The year 2023 is before us. Let's be the church that moves toward the needs, the gaps in this community, loving like Jesus loved so that those who know Jesus but not the church can see that Jesus shines through us. In the words of John Wesley: **Do all the good you can. By all the means you can. In all the ways you can. In all the places you can. At all the times you can. To all the people you can. As long as ever you can."**

Let's be the church where we connect to a purpose greater than ourselves. Not only will you come to life – but so will this church, in Jesus' name.

### **Grow, Pray, Study for the Week of February 23, 2020**

**Weekly Prayer (based on a prayer by John Wesley):** We are no longer our own but yours, O God. Let us be full, let us be empty. Let us have all things, let us have nothing. We freely and heartily yield all things to your pleasure and disposal. And now, O glorious and blessed God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. We are yours, and you are our God. So be it. May this covenant which we have made with you on earth, be ratified in heaven. Amen.

#### **Monday, February 24**

##### **Scripture: Luke 4:16-21**

Jesus went to Nazareth, where he had been raised. On the Sabbath he went to the synagogue as he normally did and stood up to read. The synagogue assistant gave him the scroll from the prophet Isaiah. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written: *The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me. He has sent me to preach good news to the poor, to proclaim release to the prisoners and recovery of sight to the blind, to liberate the oppressed, and to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.* He rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the synagogue assistant, and sat down. Every eye in the synagogue was fixed on him. He began to explain to them, "Today, this scripture has been fulfilled just as you heard it."

**Observation:** Luke recorded a key moment in Jesus' early public ministry. Confidently he read this section of Scripture from centuries earlier. Then he stunned his hometown audience by boldly saying, in effect, "This text about God's anointed one is about me." He claimed to be the one and only Messiah. Jesus' choice of "platform" (which frustrated and angered his hearers—see Luke 4:28-30) said his mission was to radically change the world's priorities, to bring spiritual and social good news, healing and liberation.

**Application:** As Jesus defined his mission, so must we as a congregation and as individuals. For the past year, our staff and leadership has been asking "where God will lead our church over the next three years." Last Sunday, we began sharing our goals as we apply the principles of Jesus' ministry to our specific time and place. How is God calling you to connect your life with a purpose greater than yourself? How are you making yourself available now for God to change your life—and through you, the lives of others?

**Prayer:** Lord Jesus, I want to discern your calling and direction for my church, and for me as a faithful citizen of your kingdom. Keep my mind and heart open to your calling. Amen.

## Tuesday, February 25

### **Scripture: 2 Peter 3:17-18**

Therefore, dear friends, since you have been warned in advance, be on guard so that you aren't led off course into the error of sinful people, and lose your own safe position. Instead, grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and savior Jesus Christ. To him belongs glory now and forever. Amen.

**Observation:** We have chosen a set of values: inclusive, intergenerational, growing as disciples of Jesus Christ, welcoming, serving others. These values not only reflect how we see ourselves but also how we present ourselves to the people around us. We are living into God's wonderful, life-changing gift of grace not as a "once and done" experience but a daily process of growing closer and closer to our gracious God.

**Application:** In his commentary on today's scripture, William Barclay wrote, "The Christian must daily experience the wonder of grace, and daily grow in the gifts which grace can bring; and he must daily enter more and more deeply into the wonder which is in Jesus Christ." That's a lot of "daily's"! But what nutrition program tells you that eating once a week will make you strong? What exercise program says working out once a week is plenty? How can you choose to "grow in grace" every day? (We hope and pray this GPS helps.)

**Prayer:** Lord Jesus, give me the gift of honesty with myself, so that I can recognize where I need to change. Show me the places where you call me to grow in your amazing grace. Amen.

## Wednesday, February 26

### **Scripture: Matthew 5:13-16**

You are the salt of the earth. But if salt loses its saltiness, how will it become salty again? It's good for nothing except to be thrown away and trampled under people's feet. You are the light of the world. A city on top of a hill can't be hidden. Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a basket. Instead, they put it on top of a lampstand, and it shines on all who are in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before people, so they can see the good things you do and praise your Father who is in heaven.

**Observation:** Jesus called us to be "the light of the world" through whom God's light illuminates the lives of people around us. We respond as we live lives led by the Holy Spirit through which God's light reaches beyond the walls of our church. We want the way we live to draw the people who see and know us to our Father in heaven, not just us. Jesus said, "A city on top of a hill can't be hidden." He intended for his followers' actions to be visible and attractive. He added that we let our light shine for a specific reason—so that people who see what we do will praise God.

**Application:** Have you ever flown over a city at night? Or driven along a highway from the dark countryside into a well-lighted area? What was it like spiritually when your life went from darkness to light? Where are the dark places of your neighborhood, city and world that need God's light? In what ways can you help shine God's light into these dark areas?

**Prayer:** Loving God, fill me to overflowing with your light, so that it shines out to everyone with whom I come in contact. Help me to live as your salt and light, your physical presence, right here, right now. Amen.

## **Thursday, February 27**

### **Scripture: Micah 6:6-8**

With what should I approach the LORD and bow down before God on high? Should I come before him with entirely burned offerings, with year-old calves? Will the LORD be pleased with thousands of rams, with many torrents of oil? Should I give my oldest child for my crime; the fruit of my body for the sin of my spirit? He has told you, human one, what is good and what the LORD requires from you: to do justice, embrace faithful love, and walk humbly with your God.

**Observation:** The prophet Micah lived in times when Israel practiced ceremonial religion and “conspicuous consumption” side-by-side. On God’s behalf, he urged a change of course: “Do justice, embrace faithful love, and walk humbly with your God.” In that spirit, a Messiah goal for the next three years is to identify needs that exist in our community and fill those gaps by coming alongside partners in this community.

**Application:** Like Micah, we know that pious rituals are no substitute for simply treating people justly. Using irony, Micah kept making the proposed sacrifices that God didn’t want in verses 6-7 bigger. He ended with child sacrifice, a ghastly practice among some of Israel’s neighbors. What do the three divine requirements Micah listed tell you about what God is like? “To walk” was the Hebrew way of identifying a person’s lifestyle. In what ways does your lifestyle reflect your choice to “walk humbly” with your God?

**Prayer:** Lord God, you created the life processes that gave me birth. It makes sense that you know what is best for me, and for all of us. Guide me into a life that shows the goodness of your ways. Amen.

## **Friday, February 28**

### **Scripture: Luke 9:46-48**

An argument arose among the disciples about which of them was the greatest. Aware of their deepest thoughts, Jesus took a little child and had the child stand beside him. Jesus said to his disciples, “Whoever welcomes this child in my name welcomes me. Whoever welcomes me, welcomes the one who sent me. Whoever is least among you all is the greatest.”

**Observation:** One of our focus areas for the next three years will be young children and their families. We will build on our commitment and relationship with Bloom, responding to the unmet need in our community for quality early childhood learning. The culture in which Jesus lived was dismissive of children. Status was a preeminent concern in ancient society, and children had none. Today, we speak more positively about children, but (especially if they are not our own offspring) we are too often blind to their lack of opportunity in life. Jesus did not specifically mention children in Matthew 25:37-40, but he clearly signaled the importance of caring for all who are hungry, thirsty, naked, a stranger, sick and in prison. And he added that whatever we do to help “one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine,” we do for him. Now as then, children are often “the least of these.”

**Application:** Jesus’ message about children was more than just “Be innocent and sweet.” His disciples argued about who was greatest (who had the most status). Jesus told them not to focus on status, but on who needs you most. In what ways does that principle point to serving children?

**Prayer:** Lord, I'm excited, yet fearful that you would call me to serve your people in a way that takes me outside of my comfort zone. Please help me remember that all people are you in disguise. Amen.

## Saturday, February 29

### Scripture: Luke 19:1-10

Jesus entered Jericho and was passing through town. A man there named Zacchaeus, a ruler among tax collectors, was rich. He was trying to see who Jesus was, but, being a short man, he couldn't because of the crowd. So he ran ahead and climbed up a sycamore tree so he could see Jesus, who was about to pass that way. When Jesus came to that spot, he looked up and said, "Zacchaeus, come down at once. I must stay in your home today." So Zacchaeus came down at once, happy to welcome Jesus. Everyone who saw this grumbled, saying, "He has gone to be the guest of a sinner." Zacchaeus stopped and said to the Lord, "Look, Lord, I give half of my possessions to the poor. And if I have cheated anyone, I repay them four times as much." Jesus said to him, "Today, salvation has come to this household because he too is a son of Abraham. The Human One came to seek and save the lost."

**Observation:** Zacchaeus was so eager to learn more about Jesus that, wealthy adult though he was, he climbed a tree to offset his short stature. If anything, Jesus was more eager to reach Zacchaeus. He ignored people's grumbling by very publicly inviting himself to a meal at the house of one of the town's most despised "sinners." He told the grumbling crowd (many of whom Zacchaeus had probably cheated) that he "came to seek and save the lost." That was his central, guiding mission—not one that limited his focus just to one type of activity, but rather moved him to restore and set right all the brokenness evil creates in our hurting world.

**Application:** Jesus said he "came to seek and save the lost." In his commentary, William Barclay wrote, "In the New Testament 'lost' does not mean damned or doomed. It just means in the wrong place.... A man is lost when he has wandered away from God; and he is found when once again he takes his rightful place as an obedient child in the...family of his Father." In what ways has God "found" you, and moved you to your rightful place in God's family? As we allow God's power to work through us toward our vision for 2023, how will we move the world closer to being the world as it should be? How will you help?

**Prayer:** Lord Jesus, thank you for coming "to seek and save the lost," including me. Help me to join you in doing that great, world-changing work. Amen.