



Auburn Presbyterian Church

Passionately loving the Lord Jesus Christ and radiating that love to every individual

13025 Bell Air Drive, Auburn, CA 95603 (530) 823-3916 apc@auburnpresbyterian.org

“Setting Our Face; Eyes on the Prize”

Luke 9:51-10:24

Healing Service

Many years ago, when my brother Dave and I were young, our mother would take us to visit our great-grandmother, in an old neighborhood in Detroit. I remember her lace curtains, the old, dark furniture, the smells of the place. I also remember her dog—a huge Great Dane that her housekeeper—a stout woman, as I recall—could hardly control. It was pretty intimidating to hear the roar of this beast as you waited at the front door, and then see this dog, straining at its leash, its big head eye-to-eye with you as you tried to walk in!

Anyway, one of these times, Dave and I were out in the car, which was a gray Chevy sedan with a stick shift, parked on her steep driveway. Dave and I got to wrestling in the front seat, and one of us—I still think it was Dave—hit the gear shift lever with his foot. Suddenly, the car started to roll downhill. It took a second before Dave and I realized what was happening, though we didn’t understand why, or how we could stop it. It was like a slow-motion movie where you see disaster approaching. Looking out the back window, the car parked across the street from the driveway got bigger and bigger, and then there was this sickening crunch.

Everything seemed to stop. Then my mom and the others came to the house’s front door, and mom burst through the screen door to see if we were OK. We were fine, but the police were called, a report was made. And of course, Mom was sore at us. I pointed to Dave, naturally. And he said, tearfully, “I didn’t do it on purpose!!”

Of course not. Even I knew that. But that’s what we all could say about a lot of our lives, don’t you think—“I didn’t do it on purpose!”

I have been in professional ministry for about 35 years, and studying churches for about 28 of those years. I am studying for a Doctor of Ministry degree in church leadership, so I have read a ton of books. I have been a member of three presbyteries, and acquainted with dozens of churches of other denominations. From all that background, a number of things about church life are clear to me about why churches stagnate and die: they lack a vision or purpose. It is never enough to simply “oil the machine” to keep it going.

For the last day and a half, our leaders gathered together to discern God’s purpose for our congregation. We engaged you in this crucial work about 3 years ago. But in our world of rapid change, every church needs to re-examine its purpose regularly, and hear from God to know if their group is still on course. Purpose, vision, is that important.

We have not made any big change to our vision for our future together, and we want to still tinker a bit with the words. In a few weeks, we will be displaying our vision visually in our church lobby, on a big banner over all those new frames that now hang on the walls. In the frames we will be putting displays about each of our ministry areas of the Session, and a display

of our Deacons and their work. We will be posting pictures of all the people leading these ministries. When this project is done, anyone walking into our lobby will get a pretty detailed idea of what God is calling us to be and to do, and whom to contact for more information. Purpose and vision are that important.

Jesus thought so, too. Open your Bibles with me to Luke's gospel, chapter 9. This truly is a pivotal passage in Jesus' ministry. Listen with me for God's Word TO US TODAY, as I read these words aloud. *[text: Luke 9:51-10:24]*

Whew! Did you hear the marker in Jesus' life, back in verse 51? "As the time approached for him to be taken up to heaven, Jesus resolutely set out for Jerusalem. Jesus was pursuing his purpose.

But the way Jesus was pursuing his purpose was different than most of us think. It was not just a matter of following principles, as best he could. That would be our way of pursuing purpose. Jesus, however, never put the principles of purpose ahead of the presence of his Father. Jesus was listening to God, moment by moment. He made dozens of decisions—not on his own best judgment (as we would), but as he heard God direct him. His overarching purpose was to please his heavenly Father, so that God's will would be done on earth as it is in heaven. Do you see the difference? Our ordinary way puts us in charge of interpreting and applying vision, or purpose. Jesus' way is to keep God in charge, and carry out God's view of how vision should be applied to the case at hand. Our purpose is the same as Jesus' purpose—to glorify and enjoy God. To achieve that requires that we also be in contact with God, dependent upon God, obedient to God. This is the treasure. This is the joy—to be in the presence of God, with awe and wonder that transforms everything! This is a huge difference. It is not enough just to get a vision statement right. Vision for Christians is valueless without the voltage that comes from child-like dependence, trust, joy in God, as Jesus showed us.

Jesus had always been living on purpose as God was directing him moment by moment. But with this text, there's a turn. Now he has set his face toward Jerusalem. Notice that circumstances change, too. Jesus had been well-received most everywhere he'd visited. He'd had powerful ministries among the Samaritans, for example, against whom the orthodox Jews held a centuries-old grudge. But now, with his face set toward Jerusalem, strangely, a Samaritan village does not receive him.

Notice that Jesus also seems more clipped in his responses to people who come up to him. There is a new urgency in his replies—even to people who would like to sign up with him. It's like he's saying to them all, "This train is pulling out of this station! Get aboard now!"

Then Jesus appoints "72 others" (some manuscripts have, "70"—I think that's a Semitic way of saying, "another bunch, chosen deliberately"). Look what he commissions them to do—even at this relatively early point in his ministry: heal people!

"Who, us? No, Jesus, you're the healer!"—at least, that's what I imagine they might say. But they have been with Jesus through many healings. He was not doing that to entertain them, but to train them to do the same. Now it's "show time"—the rubber is about to meet the road. They are going to have to go do something only God can do. I imagine they were pretty nervous, as they set out to obey Jesus. We feel that way—and excited with anticipation—when we move into our healing ministry here every second Sunday.

And when they return, in verse 17, I hear both delight and wonder in their words, “Lord, even the demons are subject to us in your Name!” But right away, Jesus wants to cement this in its proper place. “That is cool,” he says. “But more important than the “results” you got, or how special you might feel right now, it’s your relationship with God that is the prize. Your names are written in heaven.” Immediately, Jesus reminds them that it’s God working through them that brings the results. The connection with God is “key”. Like he said in John 15, “I am the vine, you are the branches. Cut off from me, you can do nothing.”—nothing of Kingdom value, nothing beyond your own capability.

We are a church that passionately loves the Lord Jesus Christ, radiates that love to every individual, and invites each to join us, as we are joined to Jesus. We are an outpost of the Kingdom of God Jesus talked about so often, with Jesus in our midst. Next week, we bring our financial faith promise cards and our pledges of service with our time and talent. We will dedicate those decisions, asking God to be our help as we go. And we will share in the Supper Jesus gives us, for he is the host at His Table. All these things we do to draw closer to the prize.

The prize is Jesus!

As the writer of Hebrews put it, “. . . Let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles, and let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us.² Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.” (Hebrews 12:1b-2, NIV)

Setting our faces toward the vision before us—eyes on the prize, and the prize is Jesus!

To God be the glory!

[This sermon preached to the congregation of Auburn Presbyterian Church, Auburn, California on June 8, 2008, by Rev. Kenneth B. Winter.]