

Emmanuel Ev. Lutheran Church—Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod
The Fourth Sunday of Epiphany
January 30, 2022
Sermon by Pastor Gary A. Pufahl

I must preach the good news of the kingdom of God.

“When it was day, [Jesus] went out to a deserted place. The crowds were looking for him. They went up to him and were trying to prevent him from leaving them. But he told them, “I must preach the good news of the kingdom of God to the other towns too, because that is why I was sent.” And he continued to preach in the synagogues in the land of the Jews.

—Luke 4:42-44

This morning you have the opportunity to pick up two documents regarding our ministries at Emmanuel. I would encourage you to take both of them home with you today. The first is our 2021 annual report. In it you will find a wealth of information regarding our ministries from last year. It’s fun to look back on a year and celebrate the blessings that the Lord has poured to us and through us. So please take an annual report home with you today.

The second document is a two-page paper that outlines our congregation’s mission statement, core values, and vision of ministry. In many ways this document looks ahead. It looks to the future.

Many of you may remember last year in April we had a weekend event where we created a Vision/Traction Organizer, or a VTO for our ministries. Approximately sixty people from our congregation met on April 16 and 17 of last year to create this VTO tool as a way to guide us in our ministry planning. During the past nine months we have been modifying and adopting these plans as we carry out ministry. I believe it is an important tool to help guide us as we strategize ways of fulfilling our ministry plans.

You will notice on the back of this second document that I created a visual diagram of a strategic planning process for ministry. There are different components for us to think about as we make plans for ministry. Of course, everything we do must flow from Scripture. We do things as a congregation because Jesus wants us to do them. So, from Scripture is where we get our mission.

Many of you know our congregation’s mission statement. A mission statement essentially answers the question: Why do we exist? It articulates our reason to be. On May 16 of last year, we had a Bible study on the mission of our church.

Well, our mission statement is this. ***Emmanuel Lutheran Church shares the love of Jesus and the truth of his saving Word with the people in our church, our community, and the world.***

We also had a Bible study on our core values on July 21. In some ways, core values are an extension of our mission statement. Our core values are the things our church believes are the most important things for us to be doing at this time. We have identified and articulated seven core values of our congregation. Certainly, there could be more. But these are core values that drive our ministries:

- 1. Proclaim the Word of God to all people**
- 2. Share Jesus with people who don’t know him**
- 3. Conduct Christ-centered worship**
- 4. Invest in Christian education for all ages**
- 5. Equip the saints for works of service**
- 6. Strive for excellence in all facets of ministry**
- 7. Develop loving relationships with one another.**

On the diagram I also show that a philosophy of ministry flows from the mission and core values. I’m not going to go into that too much right now. Suffice it to say that a philosophy of ministry answers the question: How are things done in our church as we carry out our mission?

I do want to highlight some things for you regarding vision. A vision of ministry helps us see. It answers the question: What does our future look like? If I gave you a piece of paper and said, “Paint,” you might ask, “Paint what?” But if I said, “Paint a banana,” then you have a picture in your mind of what to execute on paper. A vision helps us see. A vision is not the ministries or the strategies to accomplish our ministries. A church’s vision statement declares what that church hopes to be and do in the long term.

Now, here’s the challenge with creating a vision of ministry. None of us knows the future. We don’t. In 2018, did any of you see a global pandemic hitting our world in 2020? Nobody had the coronavirus as part of their six-year ministry plan. Right? So that is always the challenge with creating a vision of ministry. We can’t see the future. We can use our sanctified reasoning to put together our hopes of where we see our ministry, but the future is always in God’s hands. So, as we carry out ministry, we need to have the flexibility to change as God leads us.

The other challenge with a vision of ministry is that there are unlimited things we could be doing as we fulfill our God-given mission. But we have limitations. We are limited by time, and space, and energy, and resources. *God* isn’t, but we are.

Therefore, as we paint a picture of where we see God leading us, we always want to evaluate and pray about what needs to be priorities.

Now what does all this have to do with the text that is before us today? I assure you that there is a connection. You see, while Jesus was in this world, he had a mission given to him by his Father. He also had a vision of how to carry out that ministry. Let me paint the scenario for you. It was the evening of the Sabbath day. It was Saturday night. Earlier that day Jesus had healed Peter's mother-in-law from a very high fever in Capernaum. The fever completely left her. In fact, she jumped out of bed and began serving them. The illness left her immediately and fully. Well, as the sun was going down, word got out in the town. People were coming to the house looking for Jesus. They brought to him their sick and those who were demon possessed. And Jesus healed them all.

You can picture what takes place. You can see the joy on Jesus' face as he holds a blind boy's face in his hands and opens the boy's eyes to see for the first time. The boy has felt his mother's face with his hands many times, and now he sees it for the first time. He cries, she cries, they all cry and even Jesus has tears of joy welling up in his eyes.

And what a joy it was to cast out evil spirits and not even allow them to speak as they are being thrown out of the people they had afflicted. Jesus set so many people free from their illnesses and diseases and ailments and infirmities and captivities. Just marvel at what Jesus can do. Here is Jesus, the God-Man, the great Physician, the great healer, working the late shift, working to the point of exhaustion, loving every minute of the time that was given him to bring healing and help to so many people. And he absolutely loved doing it.

But something very intriguing takes place the next day. Luke writes, "**When it was day** (so that's the next day), **[Jesus] went out to a deserted place.** (Matthew informs us in his Gospel that Jesus went to the deserted place to pray.) **The crowds were looking for him. They went up to him and were trying to prevent him from leaving them. But he told them, "I must preach the good news of the kingdom of God to the other towns too, because that is why I was sent." And he continued to preach in the synagogues in the land of the Jews.**

We can picture this. Jesus was healing people all day and into the evening. And he enjoyed it. He loved helping people. He loved healing people. But could that have been a deterrent for Jesus to stay focused on why he came? Jesus knew what was coming the next day. There would be more people, more sicknesses, and more demon possession. The numbers would rise. There would be more people who needed healing. If today was busy, the next day would be even busier. Jesus knew that there was plenty of ministry to do. He knew he could spend his entire day being the emergency room and the hospital for people.

And what could be the result? There would be no time left to do what the Father had sent him to do, **to proclaim the good news of the kingdom of God.** Jesus had multiple ministry opportunities before him. So, he goes to his Father in prayer and is constantly keeping in mind what his Father wanted him to do. Jesus knew what was necessary. Even though he loved helping people with their diseases and sicknesses, he had a greater mission. He had a focus of freeing people from the root cause of every sickness and disease. He had a focus of freeing people from sin. He continued on his mission of saving souls. And that's why he said, **"I must preach the good news about the kingdom of God to the other towns too."**

My friends, that is always the main focus of our Savior God. Oh, certainly he cares about our physical wellbeing. Of course, he does. But his primary goal is always the salvation of souls. And Jesus always got it right. His priorities were always correct. He always knew what was most important, and he stayed focused on that. And here's the real crux of why he did that. He was conducting his ministry like that for us.

You see, you and I know that we don't always get it right. Even though we may have our mission statement before us keeping us focused on what God wants us to do, we fail in fulfilling it perfectly. I can think about multiply times just this past week where I have failed to share the love of Jesus and the truth of his saving Word with people in my life. And I'm sure you could say the same thing. But Jesus never missed those opportunities. He always had the right focus. He was doing that in your place, as your Substitute.

You see, when it comes to seeing the opportunities that God places before us, when it comes to creating a vision of ministry, we don't always get that right either, do we? Perhaps we get so focused on one thing that we lose sight of something else Jesus is placing before us. Jesus never lost sight of the main thing. And he was living his ministry in our place. He knew what he needed to do. **I must preach the good news of the kingdom of God.** For me, that is so comforting. The God who walked this earth and perfectly conducted ministry as my Substitute is the same God who still walks with us as we conduct our ministries. And he won't leave us. He will guide us. He will direct us. He will bless us.

And, my friends, that then frees us to be bold as we walk into the future. We can do ministry that may at times seem impossible. Just look at some of the vision statements on that second hand out. Read through and think about them when you go home today. Some people may say, "That's not possible." And maybe they are right. I don't know the future. But I do know my God. And so do you. He always got it right. With humility and with confidence, we follow him. We boldly walk into the future with the same focus. **"We must preach the good news of the kingdom of God."** And as we do that, let's enjoy the partnership we share at Emmanuel. May God bless us now and always, all for his glory. "Bless us, Lord Jesus, for your name's sake." Amen.