

“Immeasurably Beyond”

Ephesians 3:20-21 Luke 4:16-21 – Rev. Rebecca Littlejohn
Vista La Mesa Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), La Mesa, California – July 6, 2025

Holy God, bless the speaking and the hearing of these words, that our expectations of what you can do through Christ's church here might better match your glorious vision for our world.

In Jesus' name we pray, Amen.

What is church for? That is the provocative question that Disciples Bible scholar and theologian Eric Smith opens with in his reflection on this passage from Luke 4 that is part of the sermon series materials the denomination provided for us in the run-up to next weekend's General Assembly. He goes on to confess that a lot of people – mostly people within the church – are asking this question, and nobody is quite sure of the answer anymore. I would venture to add that you could take the last word off that question, and it would still be a relevant question for the present moment: What is church? Do we know? Can we explain? If we knew what it is, would we know what it's for? If we know what it's for, would we know what it is?

These questions are particularly interesting when we apply them to the context we're centering today: the notion that we, as a congregation, are just one small part of a larger whole, the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in the United States & Canada. This church – whatever it actually is – will be gathering next weekend in Memphis, Tennessee, for four days of worship, learning, and fellowship. Three of us

from VLM will be attending – the Bridwells and me. I can imagine that it feels mostly irrelevant to the rest of you, but this is your church gathering too. As technology improves, we are finding new ways to involve those who are not physically present. This year, you can watch not just the worship services on the free livestream, but also the keynote lectures from the four workshop tracks. And I hope that some of you will! It just might help you clarify what church is and what church is for.

Eric Smith goes on in his reflection to explore how this passage from Luke answers the question. There is the obvious answer, of course, which is that Jesus literally gives us a to-do list in these verses: bring good news to the poor, release to the captives, freedom to the oppressed; proclaim the year of the God's favor. This is what the church is for – joy and liberation! That is a solid purpose and a tall order.

But Dr. Smith also points out the structural answer that this text provides for those of us trying to figure out what church – whether local, regional, or global – is for. Jesus doesn't just stand up in the synagogue and spout off this list of things he's going to start doing. He didn't make that up himself. He read it from the scroll of the prophet Isaiah. (Now, to be clear here, the gospel writer is taking some literary license, because the quote is a bit of a mash-up from two different chapters of Isaiah, but it gets the point across!) Eric's point is that Jesus was formed by his tradition; he was a product of the institution that shaped his spiritual, social, and emotional life. And that church is such an institution.

It's an important point in these days when many people are raring to go on that liberation for the oppressed thing, but express disdain for the structures that have sustained such movements over the decades. Now, there is no doubt that institutions deserve much of the suspicion they evince in wide swaths of the population. The church as an institution has carried out and covered up sins for centuries, from residential schools digging mass graves for indigenous children to decades of sexual abuse swept under the rug to slavery. But the church as an institution is also why we're able to read these revolutionary words of liberation Jesus read so long ago. Institutions are made up of people. The church is people. And people contain multitudes, good and bad. Sometimes we act, grounded in faithfulness, and sometimes we react, out of fear. Sometimes we respond with compassion, and sometimes we reject out of pride and prejudice.

But there is another part of this passage that makes the difference. It tells us not just what the church is for, but what the church is. It's in that first line Jesus reads: the Spirit of the Lord is upon me. Because we are not just an institution made up of weak and sinful people. We are the Body of Christ, activated by the Spirit of God! And I think that's what Rev. Terri Hord Owens is trying to get us to see, when she calls us together at an Assembly resting on one word: "Beyond." Our General Minister & President has been drawing our attention to the central truth of these two verses from Ephesians for years now. It started with a focus on the word "Imagine."

She asked us to “imagine God’s limitless love.” And now, she wants us to go beyond even that. The main theme isn’t using the same NRSV translation we are, for some good reasons, but I do think NRSV offers us some useful phrases. The awkward hyperbole of the phrase “abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine” tells on itself. I can’t even explain to you in words that will flow well how much more God wants for us and wants to do with us.

Terri is daring us to imagine that the church could be more than we’ve been willing to hope. She’s trying to convince us to set our sights higher. And not just a little higher. Not just more than you might dare to imagine, but “abundantly far more.” How would that be possible? “By the power at work within us,” which is, of course, that same Spirit that fell upon the shoulders of Jesus as he read the scroll in the synagogue in Nazareth. Now, that may feel hard to aspire to, situated here in a cozy sanctuary with 30 of your friends, most of whom are just as worn out as you are. But that is why this Assembly we’re preparing for is so important. We are not in this alone. Earlier this year, as we were trying to ask and imagine what God might accomplish here, we had the opportunity to listen to stories of other congregations who had gone through processes of transformation, churches from Oakland, Alabama, Texas, and Michigan. We will not, of course, follow any one of those paths exactly the way they did, but hearing how they navigated their challenges and uncertainties helped us gain new perspective on our own situation.

As we sit here in Southern California, on a beautiful day, part of our hearts are also breaking open with the pain of the families impacted by the flooding in central Texas. We know that the Disciples are there. We know that our siblings in the Southwest Region of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) are stepping up to be the helpers in the midst of that trauma. We hope and pray and trust that grace and compassion will flow abundantly far more than we can ask or imagine for everyone going through that tragedy. They are not going through that alone.

What is the captivity that we need to claim release from? For many of us, it's loneliness and alienation, this idea that our life must be harder than other people's since they seem to be doing great, so we'll do what we can to avoid drawing attention to our issues because people might notice that we're failing. For others, it's actual captivity, as enforced by the school-to-prison pipeline that impacts so many young people of color. What is church for? To remind us that we're not alone. To draw us together to work for mutual liberation. To stand up and speak out when our neighbors are unjustly detained and due process is denied. To remind us that what happens to one of us happens to all of us, that what is done to the weakest among us is done to Christ Jesus himself.

It is not an easy path that Jesus asks us to walk. But nobody is asking us to walk it alone. Not as individuals and not as a congregation. We can imagine immeasurably more because God is calling us into this work together, as Christians, as

Disciples, as followers of Jesus from California and Texas and Florida and Ohio and Michigan and Montana and Hawaii and Quebec and Puerto Rico. Jesus has given us clear standards by which to recognize and shape the work. And the Spirit is giving us the wherewithal. Eric is reminding us to lean on what we have been taught about what God desires for the flourishing of our world. And Terri is daring us to believe it could be even better than we hoped.

I am grateful to be on this journey with you. I am grateful we are on it together with all the friends and not-yet friends who will gather in Memphis next weekend. I am grateful to be on it together with Jesus shows us how to proclaim and live God's compassion. And I'm grateful to be on it together with the Spirit, the power at work within us, by which God is accomplishing abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine. Hallelujah and Amen!