

6th Sunday of Easter – 2020A

Acts: 8:5-8, 14-17

1 Peter 3:15-18

Jn 14:15-21

Jesus was a man on a mission. He healed the sick, fed the 5,000, gave sight to the blind, raised the dead, washed the feet of the disciples, commanded them to love one another and showed them the way to God. His mission was clear. But did he have a "mission statement"? A pithy expression of purpose? Something such as "To inspire and nurture the human spirit"?

No, wait - that's the mission statement of Starbucks. This international coffee company is on a mission "to inspire and nurture the human spirit - one person, one cup and one neighborhood at a time."

Sounds awfully spiritual, doesn't it? In the inspiration business, we Christians have some serious competition.

Mission statements have become big business, with a wide range of organizations crafting them in an attempt to capture their core values, purposes and goals. The problem with most of them is they wind up sounding complex and boring, such as the one that reads: "Our challenge is to assertively network economically sound methods of empowerment so that we may continually negotiate performance-based infrastructures." Blah, blah, blah. Jesus would never want his mission to be so complex and boring. As followers of Christ, we can do better.

Experts in the field say that mission statements must express their mission in no more than eight words. That's the max: an eight-word mission statement. It must also contain a verb – a target – an outcome. Here are some good examples: "Save endangered species from extinction." "Improve African children's health." Clear and compelling mission statements, using eight words or fewer, aren't likely to be forgotten, misremembered or ignored.

So what should be included in a mission statement for the followers of Jesus, based on the words he spoke the night before his death? "If you

love me," he says to his disciples, "you will keep my commandments" (John 14:15). That's a punchy start, but this first verse alone exceeds the eight-word limit.

"I will ask the Father," promises Jesus, "and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you forever" (v. 16). Advocate comes from the Greek word *parakletos* - one who exhorts, comforts, helps and makes an appeal on another person's behalf. More than one acceptable English translation exists for *parakletos*, which is why one Bible will render the word "Advocate," another will say "Comforter" and, still another, "Counselor." All these English words describe the "Spirit of truth" that God will send to the disciples, and Jesus predicts that "you know him, because he abides with you, and he will be in you" (v. 17).

This is a good start to an authentic Christian mission statement: Love Christ, do the right thing, receive the Advocate, Comforter, Counselor, Spirit of truth. But wait, there's more - "I will not leave you orphaned," promises Jesus; "I am coming to you." Jesus assures his disciples they will see him after his death and resurrection, and he predicts that the future will be marked by an amazing intimacy between God, Jesus and all his followers. "I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you," he says, describing in this tumbling jumble of pronouns a beautiful blend of divine and human elements (vv. 18-20).

Then Jesus circles back to where he began, making another link between loving him and keeping his commandments (instead of commandments, we might say, "Do the right thing," or "Do the God-thing" - Google's informal ethical ethos is expressed in its "Don't Be Evil" philosophy): "They who observe my Don't Be Evil rule are those who love me; and those who love me will be loved by my Father, and I will love them and reveal myself to them" (vv. 18-21). You might understand the concept of "commandment" differently; the point is that Jesus connects **living** right with **loving** right. For many people, loving and commandment-keeping are very different approaches to the Christian faith. For Jesus, they're one and the same.

After reading this passage, one easily sees how mission statements can become awash in jargon and marble-mouthed pronouncements. There's so much to say, and the temptation is to try to say it all. But remember the

marks of an effective statement: eight words, no more. A verb, a target, an outcome.

Fortunately, Jesus includes several strong action words in this passage from John: love, keep, know, abide, see, live. And he offers a clear target as well: the creation of a community of people who love Christ, keep his commandments and experience a truly amazing intimacy with Jesus and God. And what will be the outcome of this effort? To receive the Holy Spirit - receive the one who is an Advocate, Comforter and Counselor, as well as the continuing presence and power of Jesus Christ himself.

Verbs, target, outcome. A mission statement is slowly emerging, and it seems to be boiling down to eight essential words: **Love Christ, keep his commandments, receive the Spirit.**

This is our mission: to be a community of people who love Christ and keep his commandments - seeing these actions as complementary, not contradictory. Loving and commandment-keeping are two sides of the same spiritual coin, revealing both ardor and order, affection and obedience. If we can hold them together, then we'll be in a position to receive the Holy Spirit.

So how do we do it? First, we **love Christ**. The writer Anne Lamott was a 30-year-old single, hip, intellectual agnostic who didn't think she wanted to have anything to do with Jesus. In her book **Traveling Mercies**, she tells of how she became pregnant by a married man. She had an abortion and was sadder than she'd been since her father died. She drank and took pills to dull the pain. Then, one night, lying in the darkness, she became aware of someone with her, hunkered down in the corner. She knew it was Jesus. "I felt him just sitting there on his haunches in the corner of my sleeping loft," she writes, "watching me with patience and love."

For the next few days, Lamott sensed Jesus following her everywhere, like "a little cat." Finally, she took a long, deep breath and said out loud, "All right. You can come in." Looking back on the experience, Lamott says, "I was dying, and I got a second chance. I do believe I was saved." We love Jesus because he first loved us. He comes to us with patience and love, and he saves us.

Then we do the right thing: **We keep his commandments.** This doesn't mean we suddenly achieve a state of moral perfection, with an ability to check off all the ethical imperatives in the Sermon on the Mount. But it does mean we respond to Christ's love with a desire to live an orderly and obedient life - one that's organized around the new commandment of Jesus to "love one another." Loving and commandment-keeping come together when Jesus says to his disciples, "Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another" (John 13:34-35).

Such love isn't so much an emotion as it is a deep desire to order our lives around the example Jesus set. It means championing the cause of the underdog, reaching out to the downtrodden, working to build up God's kingdom on earth and being willing to sacrifice for others. "No one has greater love than this," says Jesus, "to lay down one's life for one's friends. You are my friends if you do what I command you" (John 15:13-14). Loving sacrifice is how we keep Christ's commandments. In a concrete way, it shows the world that we are friends of Jesus Christ.

Finally, our mission comes to its conclusion when **we receive the Spirit.** This is the final phrase in our mission statement, the outcome of our loving Christ and our commandment-keeping. It's usually experienced in a community of faith.

This is our purpose: **Love Christ, keep his commandments,** receive the Spirit. No jargon. No gobbledygook. Just eight words of authentic Christian mission.

Deacon Gerry

