

“Love Christ, Keep His Commandments, Receive the Spirit”

John 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 his 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 like the mission statements that are so popular today? Something such as “to inspire and nurture the human spirit – one person, one cup, and one neighborhood at a time”. Does anyone know whose mission statement that is? Starbucks!

As followers of Christ, we ought to be able to do better than Starbucks. We’re told by the experts that an effective mission statement has eight words or less. Start with a strong action verb, name the target of the work and describe the outcome. Verb, target, outcome. Eight word mission statements following this format are less likely to be forgotten or ignored.

Last Sunday a Starbucks "eco2go" cup was left on my desk as a gift from our education co-directors – Rachel and Cheryl. I noticed on the side of the cup, they have shortened their mission statement to 8 words – "save the earth – one cup at a time." "Save" is the verb. "The earth" is the target. And the hoped for outcome is that we will purchase "one cup at a time."

So what should be included in a mission statement for us followers of Jesus, based on the words from our gospel text that Jesus spoke the night before his death?

“If you love me,” he says to his disciples, “you will keep my commandments.” That’s a good 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.”

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 translates it as “Advocate”; another will say “Comforter”, and another will say “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.” (Verse 17)

This is a good start to a Christian mission statement. Love Christ, do the right thing, keep the commandments, and receive the Advocate, Comforter, Counselor, and Spirit of Truth.

But wait, there’s more. “I will not leave you orphaned,” promises Jesus, “I am coming to you.”

In verses 18-20, Jesus 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.

Then Jesus circles back to where he began, making another link between loving him and keeping his commandments.

Verse 21 – “They who have my commandments and keep them 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.”

Jesus connects “living right” with loving right.” Jesus connects “commandment keeping” with “loving him and one another.” For many people, loving and commandment keeping are very different approaches to the Christian faith. For Jesus, they’re one in the same.

Basing our mission statement on this gospel passage is difficult because there’s much to say and the temptation is to try to say it all. But remember the characteristics of an effective statement: verb, target, outcome in 8 words.

Fortunately, Jesus includes several strong action words in this passage from John: love, keep, know, abide, see, live. And he offers a clear target; 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’s the outcome? To receive the Holy Spirit – receive the one who is an Advocate, Comforter, and Counselor. And to receive the continuing presence and power Jesus Christ himself.

Verb, target, outcome. Eight words. Based on this gospel text, I think we can boil it down to this: “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 and seeing these actions as complementary.

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.

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 in John 13:34-35: “Just

as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.”

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 down-trodden, 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, than to lay down one's life for one's friends.” On this Memorial Day weekend, we pause to give thanks for all the men and women, throughout our nation's history, who have given their lives for others.

A story of sacrifice from W.W. II as remembered and written by our own Dick Wittig . . .

THE LINE

I set my bow in the cloud, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and the earth.

Genesis 9:13

It was mid-March 1945. We were approaching the German Siegfried Line, the formidable fortification above and below ground on the western border of Germany.

We were making our way through the darkened woods towards our rendezvous with the infantry just before dawn. I was carrying a pole charge - a six foot long 1 by 2 wooden pole with 25 pounds of TNT fastened to one end.

Our squad made contact with the infantry officer in charge. He explained our duties in this way. "I have never done this before but they tell me this is the way it works." At that moment an enemy machine gun blast just over our heads caused everyone to hit the ground.

The officer continued, "We move out at day light. Make our way up to the dragon's teeth (which are large concrete blocks enmeshed in barbed wire)." "As the infantry fires at the pill

boxes causing the enemy to button up, Bangalore torpedoes are shoved between the dragon's teeth under the wire."

"When the torpedoes are blown, destroying the barbed wire, then you run through the opening up to the pill box. Then push the charge into the firing port, jam the other end of the pole into the ground so it can't be pushed away from the inside. Then pull the fuse lighter and run for cover."

"When the charge goes off, the infantry will move (verb) through the dragon's teeth (target) and we will have breeched the Siegfried line (outcome).

This was Dick Wittig's mission statement on this spring day in March near the end of W. W. II in 1945.

The day was beginning to dawn as we moved out of the woods onto a large open field towards another woods about 100 yards away.

The warming rays of the morning sun gave every indication of a beautiful early spring day.

Hundreds of men were coming out of the woods onto the field.

Yet, each one feels very much alone. The herd instinct takes over and the officers are calling out, "spread out, don't bunch up, and spread out."

We arrive at the next woods and move through it for our first look at the line. About 100 yards before us are the concrete dragon's teeth and the pill boxes with the enemy waiting within.

The sound of battle picks up as we approach. My squad corporal and I run behind a tank as it moves forward. Just at the teeth it turns right and we peel off to the left with the rest of the squad and hit the ground

We are now pinned down by enemy artillery and small arms fire, with the ZIP, ZIP, ZIP of bullets flying just over our heads.

The tanks are lined up and firing point blank at the pill boxes. Their shells ricochet off, scarring the concrete surface with pock marks. The enemy continues to fire their weapons.

The best we could do from our prone positions was to dig a slit trench with our entrenching tools which afforded a few more inches of protection. And there we stayed pretty much for the day before finally moving back to the protection of the woods.

We eventually moved back into a small town close by. The next day we were again back in the woods waiting to move up to THAT LINE. That evening I prayed. I'm sure I wasn't the only one praying that somehow we might be spared having to face that ordeal again. When I opened my eyes a rainbow was spanning the battlefield.

Still it was a pretty restless and sleepless night as we waited for dawn. As it began to break a fellow soldier came running through our bivouac area with the news that the 3rd Army had broken through the line to our north and that the enemy, fearing being cut off, had pulled out during the night.

When I bring clouds over the earth and the bow is seen in the clouds, I will remember my covenant . . . Genesis 9:14-15a

Richard M. Wittig

Epilogue

After finally moving through the dragon teeth we went around to the entrance of the bunker. There were concrete walls on both sides of the walk leading to the doorway. Leaning against one of those sides was a German Mauser, the standard army rifle for the Wehrmacht.

It was brand new. I don't believe it had been fired. The wooden stock was bare wood. The Germans probably wanted to get them to the front as soon as possible without taking time to apply a finish. I picked it up because of its mint condition; later put it in our truck. After the war I sent it home and it now belongs to our grandson who uses it for target shooting.

We moved into the bunker built several floors down into the ground. It was built like the decks of a ship. Bunks for sleeping area, a cafeteria style dining room. It would have provided an excellent place to live for at least a company of men.

We then made our way through the tunnel which led to the pill box where one German soldier had held off a company of men with tank support for days. He was lying on the floor dead. Perhaps a concussion shell had done the work.

I looked through the sight of his machine gun which was fitted with a shoulder stock. The lens on the scope was cracked. The only thing that had saved us was the fact that the gun port on the pill box prevented the gunner from tilting the weapon low enough to fire at anyone lying prone directly in front of the dragon teeth.

May the peace of God . . .

Sermon - #612 - Healer of Our Every Ill

Recessional - #888 – O Beautiful for Spacious Skies.