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The Rev. Deborah Woolsey.

What Is a Car For?
Church of the Good Shepherd, Athens, OH

Author and motivational speaker Simon Sinek has a simple illustration to help companies and organizations learn to see what their purpose is. In a culture consumed with greed, it can be all too easy to assume the purpose of any business or organization is to make money. Mr. Sinek believes this assumption is what is harming our local and national economies, communities, and organizations. Money, he says, is simply one of the resources a business or organization needs to help it accomplish its purpose.

His simple illustration is a car. We don't buy cars to put gas in them (or charge their electric batteries if you drive an electric car) he says. We buy cars to go places. The gas (or electricity) are the resources that help fuel the car so it can take us where we want or need to go. The same is true for a business or organization: its purpose should be to make a positive impact on society, advance a greater cause, or accomplish something. When businesses and organizations can remember that, Mr. Sinek believes, then they will be successful in creating a healthy and productive place to work as well as creating a product or service.

The ability to stay focused on your purpose isn't just helpful advice for modern organizations, it's what Jesus did in today's Gospel reading. This reading is important because all followers of Jesus can sometimes forget what Jesus's purpose was and is. Too often we mistake Jesus' purpose - why he became incarnate and walked among us - as simply to perform miracles of healing the sick and feeding the poor. And we have many lovely accounts in the Gospels that might make us think that was the case, accounts like what we read in Mark's Gospel today where Jesus healed Peter's mother-in-law and many of the people who showed up after that.

As wonderful as these miracles are, however, what we might not notice in today's Gospel is Jesus did not heal all the people who were brought to him. This doesn't mean Jesus didn't care, or maybe didn't want to heal everyone. Instead it is an indicator his ability to heal wasn't the means to an end; no more than buying gas is why people buy cars.

Instead, Jesus not healing everyone brought to him in today's Gospel can be an invitation to look a little more closely at what did happen and what it says about why Jesus came to walk among humanity. In other words, to look to what his healing miracles point to. It starts with the very first account of healing in Mark's Gospel: the healing of Peter's mother-in-law. By healing a woman, Jesus is showing women have value. Peter's mother-in-law would not be discarded because she was sick and unable to participate in life as expected. In healing her, Jesus did more than restore her to health. He welcomed her to participate in his mission.

At first, we might not recognize this because the text says after she was restored to health Peter's mother-in-law "began serving them." It's unfortunate too many commentators have interpreted this line as Peter's mother-in-law rolled up her sleeves and cooked and served them a meal. It's an easy misinterpretation to make if we don't look at the word in the original Greek interpreted as "began to serve". The Greek word is diakoneo, which is a word the Gospel writers used to refer to designated leaders in the early church; today we call them deacons.

Mark's Gospel is the shortest of the four canonical Gospels, and the author of Mark was incredibly intentional about the words they used. Words for cooking and serving meals in Biblical Greek are not the same as diakoneo. Therefore, it could be interpreted that Peter's mother-in-law didn't just serve them dinner, she began being part of Jesus' ministry. That is why the text says "she began to serve" instead of being more specific about what she may have done that moment.

Which means Jesus didn't heal her so she could return to her life of running a household - not that it isn't good and necessary work, and the purpose of this sermon is not to demean it. The message here is Jesus didn't restore her to wellness for her to return to what life was like before, but to liberate her to be part of his mission and the new life his resurrection brings into the world.

And what was that mission? From the frenzied activity after Peter's mother-in-law was restored to health it looks like Jesus could have had a highly successful mission healing the sick and demon possessed. He was good at it. There was significant need for it. That's all it takes to be successful, right? Not if we remember the part about Mr. Sinek's illustration of the car. There must be more than need and resources. There must be purpose. Jesus didn't come to heal

people so they could make the same old economy chug along like it always had. Jesus didn't come to promote the same old system that kept people trapped in the same roles they had always been in. He called the fishermen to become catchers of people. Jesus called a tax collector to put down his books and stop making money for the oppressive Roman government. He called people to leave the life they knew, the life they had been dealt, or inherited, and follow him.

So when it looked like that mission might be sidetracked by his ability to heal the sick, Jesus took a break and went away to pray. This isn't just Jesus feeling exhausted or overwhelmed by the demands of the world, it was Jesus doing a check in, stepping out of the frenzied activity to realign his purpose with God's purpose. Jesus wasn't meant to open a successful spa and health clinic. Jesus said himself his purpose was to proclaim the message, the good news that God's Kingdom has come near. It is a purpose Jesus will hold on to all the way to the Cross and Resurrection.

This doesn't mean Jesus does not care about those who are sick or suffering or doesn't want people to be well. Quite the contrary, that is why God calls people to do the work of healing like doctors who can diagnose disease or health problems, surgeons who can remove diseased tissues and joints like my hips that have severe end term osteoarthritis, nurses and physical therapists who can help people recover from surgery or illness and be restored to health. That's why there are people called to work in fields like epidemiology to study things like viruses and how they spread to help us through pandemics or help us avoid them. That is why there are medical professionals called to do the tedious and vital work of researching and developing vaccines. That is why God calls other people to become psychologists or marriage or family therapists to help us with our mental and emotional health and help us heal from trauma. Just because Jesus didn't drop everything and heal everyone doesn't mean God doesn't want us all to be well. God does want us to be well, or God wouldn't equip people with passions, care for each other, skills, and people called to health care.

What today's Gospel challenges us to consider is how we as followers of Jesus are participating in his purpose. Are we mistaking the purpose of following Jesus to figure out how to obtain, by any means necessary, as many people as we can to sit in the pews of churches and give as much money as they can so to make ourselves feel good about the numbers of members and dollars we have, thinking

of those members and dollars will keep our comfortable liturgies and ministries going? Are we mistaking the purpose of following Jesus as doing charity work without considering how the people served by charity are complex human beings beloved by God and exist for far more than our programs?

As followers of Jesus our purpose is the same as his: to proclaim by word and example the Good News of Jesus Christ. This doesn't mean we don't welcome new members or not ask for funds to support our staff and ministries. It means we need to think about our ministries through the lens of proclaiming the Good News.

We are experiencing what this looks like right now. One of the opportunities the COVID-19 pandemic offers us is to adjust our ministries and worship. If we understand our purpose, we can make the changes necessary to continue to be the presence of Christ in this place to reduce the risk of spreading the virus. While COVID guidelines say we can't offer an hour every Wednesday for anyone to come inside and experience a safe place to rest, eat a meal, and maybe talk with others, we are offering what we can by giving away sack lunches or nonperishable food to show we do care about the immediate need for many to eat. While we can't offer our in person indoor worship services like we've always done them we are still proclaiming the Good News in these prerecorded sermons and helping people pray or connect with prerecorded organ music. When the weather was warmer and the number of daily new COVID-19 cases were much less than they are today, we offered in person worship services outside that drew strangers to our yard and sidewalk. When it became clear wearing masks helps reduce the spread of the virus we didn't lecture, we began giving away free cotton cloth reusable masks because they are a sign of our shared vulnerability, mortality, and love for each other - just another way to proclaim God's love. We moved our coffee shop ministry outside and made it to go. We created a space in our church yard for passersby to pray when we could no longer keep our chapel open to the public. Because we remembered our purpose during the many disruptions of this pandemic, we have been able to adapt so that we can continue to be present to our neighbors and each other in ways that show the Love of God on earth. And we will continue to make changes as the pandemic continues.

By the way, that is what author and organizational speaker Simon Sinek describes as successful. But -with all due respect for his work - we don't need him to tell us this. What we need is to continue to follow Jesus through this pandemic and to listen to the Holy Spirit who won't ever let us forget our purpose to shine the Love of Christ to the world no matter what the world brings us.