

*Space: the final frontier.*

*These are the voyages of the starship Enterprise. Its continuing mission: to explore strange new worlds, to seek out new life and new civilizations, to boldly go where no one has gone before.*

## **“Faith: The Final Frontier” ~ To Explore Strange New Worlds**

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How many “Trekkies” are here? How many of you could recite that opening monologue from memory?

Today I’m beginning a series of sermons entitled, “Faith: The Final Frontier”. The church has been in decline since the late 1950s; and nothing has slowed that trend. Some say the church is dying; if it is, it’s seven last words will be, “We never did it that way before!”

I don’t believe the church is dying. I believe the church is standing at the borders of a great frontier—full of potential and promise. And I believe God is calling us “To Explore Strange New Worlds.”

When Jesus stepped into the synagogue in Nazareth and was handed a scroll of Isaiah, he opened it and read, *“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor”* (LUKE 4:18-19; ISAIAH 61:1-2A). And then he declared, “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.”

At first, the people were pleased with what they heard. *“All spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his mouth.”* (vs. 22). They thought Jesus was reinforcing their sense of privilege before God.

They saw the passage as a statement about themselves. They were the poor who were to receive good news, the captives to be released, the oppressed to be freed, the ones to experience the Jubilee of God. And so, they were pleased with Jesus’ selection of scripture. ...until he clarified his intention.

He pointed to two stories in the Hebrew scriptures. The prophet Elijah was sent during a famine to a non-Jewish widow at Zarephath who helped the prophet and in turn was wondrously blessed by God, while others in Israel were not.

The second story was about a Syrian soldier who was healed by the prophet Elisha though other lepers in Israel were not being healed.

So, when Jesus declared, “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing,” he was claiming the words of Isaiah as his mission statement: a mission Jesus described as a strange new world in which God’s plan was not to fulfill the hopes and dreams of one people to the exclusion of others. God’s plan was to include the excluded; to bring healing and hope to those who were regarded as unworthy by the general culture and the religious establishment; to reach out to

those who were not among the privileged.

Now, if you want to get some people worked up today, just bring up the subject of "White Privilege."

And, while Jesus' mission statement represents a strange new world to those who heard him, it was not at all a new concept. The text is one of seven "Servant Poems" in Isaiah, and one interpretation in the Jewish commentaries is that the Servant is all of Israel. In that understanding, "The spirit of the Lord is upon Israel, because He has anointed Israel to bring good news to the poor, etc."

It is fairly clear, and generally accepted among biblical scholarship, that Jesus understood his mission in relation to those Servant Poems. As such, it was a total reversal of the mainline teachings in Israel—a complete reconfiguration of human culture—a strange new world where justice, mercy and faithfulness would be given priority over position and privilege (Luke 11:42; Matthew 23:23). Jesus would proclaim that theme throughout his ministry, calling those who were wealthy to divest and distribute their riches to the poor (Luke 12:33-34; 18:22-25; 19:1-10).

If you want to get some people worked up today, just start talking about the "redistribution of wealth."

There are those, even today, who rationalize: well, Jesus was talking about spiritual poverty; spiritual blindness. Yes, Jesus spoke of those who were "poor in spirit;" he healed the spiritually blind, and freed the spiritually imprisoned. But to spiritualize and interiorize the whole mission of Jesus—and, by extension, the mission of the church—we have to ignore large portions of the New Testament.

The good news Jesus brought to the poor was more than a promise of after-life salvation, although salvation and eternal life were central in his message. But God's people have never really had difficulty with that part of the message. Virtually every Christian body throughout history has focused on eternal salvation; but, too often it's been to the exclusion of the "strange new world" into which Jesus leads his followers.

Some of the strongest Christian bodies actually have rationalized ways to avoid feeding the poor and clothing the naked. And there are those today who are so up-tight about "welfare fraud" that they would withhold food and medical care from 99 in order to avoid feeding one undeserving person.

Remember Jesus' parable about the weeds growing in the wheat. He said, "Leave the weeds alone; otherwise, if you pull them up, you'll also pull up some of the wheat. Leave the weeds alone; they will be separated out at the harvest."

It's not our job to judge whether people are worthy before we feed or clothe them; that's the Lord's job. Our job as the Body of Christ is to "*bring good news to the poor. ...to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let*

*the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."*

You know, the strangeness of this new world is not in the content of our beliefs. Our beliefs haven't changed; but, the way we go about putting those beliefs into action needs to be reevaluated regularly.

Our board will meet today and will consider reports from two *ad hoc* committees, whose purpose was to explore ways to reorganize our church so that we can be more effective in our efforts to follow Jesus—to be more effective without burning people out. I've said before: we're a church that averages 40 in worship, organized like a church that averages 200!

Since the early 1950s, most churches have organized their work using a system that emerged out of the corporate world. It was an effective model that took America—including the church—to unprecedented levels of accomplishment. But during the last quarter of the 20<sup>th</sup> century it became less and less effective.

But, a new generation of business leaders, with new entrepreneurial vision and energy guided business into a strange new world of organizational structure. Some of the older, established corporations refused to change, and have survived, primarily on inertia (although some have had a little help from the government). But, most businesses have faced the choice of adapting or dying.

As usual, the church is the last institution to change. Most older, established mainline churches still operate out of a business model that no longer is effective, even in business. It was a model that emphasized "doing things right."

But a new generation of church leaders, with new entrepreneurial vision and energy is leaving most of the established, mainline churches behind. They organize, not using a business model; but, rather, a biblical model.

What a concept! Instead of doing things right, these new millennial church leaders are focused on doing the right thing. Their primary organizational concern is not recruiting people to serve on committees, but, rather, helping people identify their gifts and equipping them and sending them out to follow Jesus.

At FCCC, our concern is not a lack of quality ministry. We have good people doing good work. They just need a break. They need to spread some of the work around a bit, without overburdening anybody.

If accepted, the proposed new model is simpler and smaller. Its focus is doing fewer things—hopefully the right things—so we can do them even better.

Most of all, the new model, with its focus on doing fewer things, will allow us to focus less on busy work and more on following Jesus. Just remember, Jesus sometimes leads where we don't want to go; so, be prepared to explore strange, new worlds.