

Sermon on Luke 4:14-21
Third Sunday after the Epiphany, January 24, 2016
Lutheran Church of the Redeemer
By James Erlandson

Today we have heard another “epiphany” of our Lord Jesus in his reading of scripture in the synagogue of his hometown in Nazareth, when Jesus said “*the Spirit of God has anointed me to bring good news to the poor, release to the captives, recovery of sight to the blind, and to let the oppressed go free – to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.*” (Luke 4:18-19) It reminds us today how the person of Jesus, and the love of God are revealed to us in the reading of scripture and the proclamation of God’s Word.

For the purpose of a sermon preached today is for the good news of God’s love for us – revealed in the holy scriptures – to be proclaimed in words that you can understand. And that you can then apply this Word of God to your daily life, not just this morning as we gather in worship, but tomorrow, and throughout the week and the rest of your life of faith. So you and I are part of that great and holy task of listening for and proclaiming the Word of God, which is revealed through the reading and preaching of the Word, so that you and I and all who hear it may know God’s presence among us in Christ Jesus - and so have life!

Today, you and I are witnesses to the first appearance in Luke’s gospel of Jesus as an adult, after his baptism, and testing in the wilderness. Filled with the power of the Spirit, Jesus returned to Galilee and came to Nazareth, his hometown, where he went to the synagogue on the sabbath, as was his custom. He stood up to read, Luke says, and a scroll from the prophet Isaiah was handed to him. Jesus started reading from where the last week’s reader had left off, in Isaiah, chapter 61. He read the passage from Isaiah where the prophet said that the Spirit of the Lord was upon him, “*to bring good news to the poor, proclaim release to the captives, recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, and proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.*” (Isaiah 61) Then Jesus rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down. Everyone’s eyes were fixed on him, and Jesus said, “*Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.*” Luke said that everyone spoke well of him, and were amazed at his gracious words. So far, so good. (Stay tuned next Sunday, when we will hear what Jesus said after they asked him “aren’t you Joseph’s son”, and got everyone riled up in Nazareth!) But at first, everyone was impressed. Homeboy’s first sermon in Nazareth was a rousing success – until he preached, and challenged his listeners. But let’s leave that for next week.

Because the important thing about Jesus’ first reading and sermon in Nazareth was *what* he chose to read – this passage from Isaiah – and that he was so bold as to proclaim that *today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.*

Was this another “epiphany” – the revealing of Jesus as God’s prophet? We say that it is – that here, and in passages to follow in Luke and the other gospels, Jesus revealed himself as God’s Son, the Messiah, in his preaching and teaching of God’s Word, with an authority that so few rabbis, preachers or teachers have had.

So if Jesus had come to bring good news to the poor, release to the captives, sight to the blind, freedom for the oppressed, and the time of God’s favor, what should WE proclaim, as the Church, the followers of Jesus? Shouldn’t these things be what we preach as well? This seems to be Jesus’ “mission statement” according to Luke, so maybe this is our mission also! So, having heard the word of God in Christ Jesus today, how shall you and I apply it in our lives today?

The first thing that comes to my mind is that making this passage our mission statement requires a refocusing of our thinking, a transformation of our accustomed way of “being Christians”, or “being the Church”. For centuries it seems to most people that the main focus for Christians is to learn more about Jesus, be faithful members of the Church in worship, and to pray – for healing and the salvation of our souls. Many would add to this the command to “follow Jesus”, to try to imitate Jesus’ actions, and to be compassionate and kind to others. This includes visiting those who are sick or in prison, and feeding the hungry – in other words, providing service to those who are unfortunate. These are all good, worthy things – faithful to scripture and our Christian calling. But too often this is where it stops. We focus our thoughts on ourselves, our salvation, the Church, and those who are within it – or those whom we can entice into becoming part of it!

Jesus, in his words, speaks of those who are poor, who are captives, who are blind or oppressed – regardless of who they are, within the Church or outside it, who are suffering. They are the focus of Jesus’ words, to bring freedom, and the good news of God’s favor to *them*, and all who suffer.

Unfortunately, most of us who have grown up in the Church minimize the call to follow Jesus by seeing it as a “call to membership” in a volunteer organization (that’s very American, of course!). We may look at baptism as a ritual of membership in the Church, and not as a sign of our transformation (our baptismal rite calls it a drowning, being “joined to the death and resurrection of our Lord”). Most of us come to Church to see others in our church family, praise God, maybe learn something from God’s Word, pray for ourselves and others, and secretly, in our heart of hearts, be affirmed – to feel that we have done something good in the sight of God. These are not bad things, in and of themselves, but Jesus invites us to so much more!

Jesus invites you and me to join him in a life of transformation and change – of ourselves, of the Church, and of the world. God has invited us to be changed, to be transformed, and God promises to use you and me to transform one another – and even change the whole world! Yet, we hardly ever look at this as a promise –

usually we see it as an impossible challenge, maybe even an unwelcome demand! Transformation, having our life changed, and doing the work that Jesus calls for in bringing real good news to the poor and freedom to those who are captive, is really “outside of the box” of our expectations as Christians and Church.

Proclaiming release to the prisoner and letting the oppressed go free has a lot of meaning today, in a world where so many are refugees from civil war, who suffer under economic and political oppression, and in a nation where there has been a growing number of people in prison and undocumented detainees. It is becoming more troubling to us that a disproportionate number of those imprisoned are Black, Latino or Native American. In fact, more African Americans are in prison today than were slaves at the time of the Civil War. The disturbing part is that too many are sentenced to long jail terms for minor, non-violent drug offences, which has led to the growth of a “for-profit” prison industry, as the need for more jail cells increases, and too many young men and women live as felons, without hope for the future, or a vote.

Why should Christians and people of faith be concerned about this? Well, Jesus said he came to proclaim release to the captives. We also promise, in our rite of Affirmation of Baptism, “to proclaim the good news of God in word and deed, and to strive for justice and peace in all the earth.” It has long been the work of Christians to seek justice for the oppressed – to welcome refugees and immigrants, change unjust, discriminatory laws, and expose the sin of racism in our nation and world - to dismantle all systems that oppress. Many people think that such issues are peripheral to the work of the Church (which is more traditionally the goal of “saving souls”). But if we understand Jesus correctly, he proclaimed God’s priority in releasing the captives and justice for the oppressed. Disenfranchising a large, growing number of the population – uneducated and unemployed – does not bode well for our nation’s future. So working to end the mass incarceration of African American men in our nation’s prisons is the work of the gospel. Doing this would truly change many peoples’ lives for the good, and transform society.

Actually, there is work that you and I can do right now. There is legislation proposed in Minnesota to reduce sentencing for non-violent, minor offenses, to create new approaches that address drug addiction and mental illness, and to stop the proposed building of for-profit prisons. I have been to prayer vigils and hearings at the State Capitol myself, and with more support from churches, I think we can make it happen. To me, praying and testifying at the Capitol for the common good is God’s work, just as it is to pray and testify here, in the church.

Transformation also happens for individuals, when Christians and churches support them in their search for life outside of prison. My friend Terrance Jacob, now assistant to the bishop the Ohio Synod, was a pastor at Jordan New Life Church in North Minneapolis. They had an outreach ministry where they offered a

free cup of coffee to persons in the community. A man named Larry tried it out. He got to know Pastor Jacob, who didn't act shocked, or condemn Larry when he told him about his addiction to drugs, and his troubles with the law. He had been in prison, and was out on parole. Over time, Larry became a very active presence in Jordan New Life, and found purpose in helping other people. But one day he learned that he had a parole violation – he had neglected to inform his parole officer that he had moved. So he would have to spend 85 days in jail. Pastor Jacob not only offered to pray for Larry, but the church staff held a banquet for him! Then, on the day before Larry went back to jail, Pastor Jacob led a liturgy of blessing for him in Sunday worship! Young people laid hands on him in prayer. While he was incarcerated, Larry found strength in his new-found faith, and remembered how the Church had supported him. When his time was up, he returned to the community, and to the church, where he was welcomed with another banquet, and songs of joy! Now, the congregation hadn't intended to start an outreach ministry with felons – it just happened, because of their welcome to the community, a free cup of coffee, and a relationship built with this young man. Such a small beginning, but it led to the transformation of a man's life – and a complete change in the thinking of this congregation about the people in their community, whom they had previously considered “just felons”.

Such changes can happen here, as well, with us – with you and me, our church, and the community around us, when we follow the path and example of Jesus. When we listen to his words, and take them to heart. It won't be like North Minneapolis – we are in a different neighborhood and city. But we have a ministry possibility less than a mile away – *Ujamaa Place* residence on Selby Avenue – for non-violent men getting out of jail, starting a new life, who just need support. And we have lots of opportunities to help change the way our state deals with people struggling with addiction or mental illness – not with incarceration, but with support, restoration and rehabilitation. But the change has to start within us.

This is the work of the Church, and our Christian calling. Just as worship, prayer, and Bible study are the Church's work. There are countless ways for us to proclaim good news to people in the world around us, and reach out to our neighbors – what I have described are only ideas and possibilities. You probably have better ones. But the point is to realize that we are called to a ministry of transformation and change, so that all people will hear good news – which is release for captives, sight for the blind, freedom for those oppressed.

Jesus promises that the year of the Lord's favor is coming. You and I aren't Jesus, so we can't speak with such authority. But with faith, we can proclaim our certain hope, that *one day this scripture shall be fulfilled in our hearing. Today is the day for you and me to answer God's call. Thanks be to God!*