

“Good news to the poor”
Luke 4:16-30

First Menno
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This morning's text from Luke 4 (vs. 18 & 19) is a favorite of millions of believers around the world ... particularly those who are poor. These words of Jesus, read from the Isaiah scroll when he visited his home synagogue, have provided hope down to this very day for those who have little clout or ability to change their circumstances. But I wonder if there is any hope that these words might also be good news for those of us who are not poor. I mean the gospel writer Luke has a reputation of advocating for the poor. He does it more than any of the other gospel writers.

Luke's version of the Beatitudes, for example, in chapter 6 follows this preference for the poor interpretation of Jesus' words as though following a script. **Blessed are you who are poor ... and ... Blessed are you who are hungry now.** And when he gets to the woe part of that text, he is once more all too graphic ... **But woe to you who are rich; and woe to you who are full now.**

On the other hand, the gospel writer Matthew's interpretation of Jesus' words is much more palatable to our ears ... for he spiritualizes the words. His reading of Jesus' words are, **Blessed are the poor in spirit; blessed are you who hunger and thirst after righteousness** ... attributes that we as richer believers can more comfortably embrace or deal with, without too much sacrifice.

For nineteen hundred years there have been both strands of interpretation of Jesus' words preached and taught in the church ... with the spiritual take being the more popular and acceptable one, particularly in the West. Though that admission makes me a bit uncomfortable, I'm not sure I want to cancel out either of these interpretations. But today we're choosing to respect Luke's take on Jesus' words ... the more literal interpretation ... and say without qualification that Jesus' understanding of this part of the Isaiah scroll,

chapter 61, captured his vision and passion in terms of his call of God ... that he was to bring good news to the poor ... by advocating for their just and fair treatment, among other things.

Such an interpretation is verified by how Jesus answered John the Baptist's disciples' queries about whether or not he really was the Messiah. He told them to tell John what they saw him doing and saying ... i.e., whether he was living what he claimed as his mission from the Isaiah scroll.

Last weekend J. Denny Weaver noted that Jesus' resurrection inaugurated or signaled a fuller expression of the coming reign of God. If we follow Luke's interpretation of the gospel being especially good news for the poor, we must assume some literal cases where this was true. The poor were especially drawn to Jesus and his message, which implies they were seeing it as relevant to them. Captives of many kinds now had hope for release, while the blind were seeing as they had never seen before, and the oppressed were being set free ... even as Jesus lifted up that ancient mandate of Yahweh ... ideally God's Jubilee or 50 year reversal of all injustices ... or at least debt forgiveness every 7 years for all debtors and others who were imprisoned for not being able to pay their debts to the rich, and/or other kinds of release from oppression.

The narrative of Jesus, what he said and did, as told by Luke, thus becomes the church's mandate to keep working at what Jesus started ... even into the 21st century, or for as long as the Lord tarries. We have to be honest in the telling of this narrative though; though there are numerous examples of the poor who did experience what Jesus was about, not all did. In his three years of ministry, the seeds were sown ... but the full expression of God's reign had not arrived by the time of Jesus death and resurrection. Now 1900 years later the seeds are still germinating, growing here and there, but it still is not here in all its fullness ... not by any stretch of our religious imagination or optimism.

That said, the vision and the example we have in Jesus won't go away ... and when it does resurface, we intuitively know that in some way this is truly the will of God ... across the spectrum of human history and contemporary life. And it will not be over until it is over!

There is not much point in trying to name or identify all the factors that joined forces against the vision of God's reign on earth that Jesus lifted up for us. But I will identify at least two: the principalities and powers were/are certainly against the project ... and lack of individual cooperation on our part. But thanks to the hard-hitting literalism of Luke's version of Jesus' words, quoting Isaiah the prophet, this vision and passion for the poor tumbles down through history with Jesus' words still echoing in our ears as they did in Nazareth centuries ago. **Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.** That is ... Jesus did and does embody it, and we as the church, the body of Christ, are to continue that embodiment. But, having said that, we here this morning can't take on every ill of society ... even of the poor and oppressed, but we can do some things, making our contribution to what was and is the passion or core of Jesus' life and ministry.

Jesus was operating out of his own Jewish context ... with Isaiah 61 best expressing what it means to be God's people when God's will is being done on earth. But like our spiritual ancestors ... we seem prone to wander far from the One in whose image we were made. If you think that too negative, try comparing your life with Isaiah 61 and Luke's take on Jesus' words. If that doesn't highlight for us how much we need to be counting on God's mercy and grace, not humanly achieved perfect scores ... I don't know what else can be said. This is exactly why I don't want to discount a more spiritual interpretation of this text, if we, as some of the non-poor of the world, want the gospel to also be good news for us. Call it an escape clause if you must ... but I for one need it, while not letting myself off the hook in anyway in dealing with the more literal aspects of this text.

One quick look at Jesus' illustrations, which follow his quote of Isaiah 61, as he uses Elijah and Elisha as two of God's prophets who spread God's net farther than was commonly done in their day. They interacted with non-Israelites. The reason for his use of these, says Robert McAfee Brown, was that his hometown assumed that Jesus ought to be doing his good deeds exclusively within his own community, not sharing God's work with outsiders. After all, their social code demanded that you care for your own first and foremost. But Jesus' point was that God's world of concern was/is much larger than that ... and in fact the most unlikely persons of neighboring cities and non-Jewish groups were exactly those God wanted to hear and experience the good news ... as they too exhibited a responsiveness to God's call. Elijah and Elisha provide historical precedence for what Jesus was doing and saying.

At this point, the racism and prejudice of Nazareth surged through the crowd to the point that they tried to kill the hometown boy who at first they thought was doing real well ... both in his talk in the synagogue and his doing such wonderful deeds throughout Galilee.

Back to today ... what we do with this Jesus and his message is our call, is it not? We can join those who want to stone or get rid of Jesus, using more sophisticated and nonviolent ways ... perhaps intellectual challenges of various kinds, **or** we can be transformed by the Spirit of God to continue the work that Jesus has called the church to be about.

We will shortly be hearing one way of doing something that relates to one aspect of Jesus' mission statement; namely to be a voice for those captives who are being tortured in our name, America's name or God forbid ... in God's name. Randy will address that in a few minutes.