

Really Good News

Luke 4: 16-21

Jesus was going to homecoming at Nazareth. He had made something of a name for himself as a traveling teacher of wisdom who had a successful healing ministry. He was, in many ways, a local celebrity. So, when he went to church – to synagogue on the Sabbath – they invited him to read the scripture.

Jesus stood up, unrolled the scroll of Isaiah, and read:

The spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me; he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners; to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor (Luke 4, 16-18)

Jesus rolled the scroll back up, handed it to the attendant, and sat down to teach. And he delivered one of the shortest sermons on record. Jesus knew that this portion of Isaiah's scroll was a message to Israel at the end of their Babylonian exile. It was to clarify that Israel's mission from God after the exile, at their homecoming, was not to go home, close the door, and be isolated and cut off, but to be a blessing to all people.

And more, it was to let the people know that God knew their inner exile, their places of poverty, and their desperation to hear good news. God knows that we are imprisoned by our fears and by our appetites, and that we long for release. God knows that we are blind to so much truth and beauty in life. We need to see that God, who is the energy of the universe and the breath of life itself, sees and knows and cares. And we who are freed and enriched and sighted are anointed and challenged and sent by that God to let the oppressed go free and to proclaim the year of jubilee, of God's favor.

So what was Jesus saying by his words: "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing?" He was telling the people that he too was called as an "anointed one," called to embody the calling of ancient Israel to bring release to all captives, sight to all who were without it, and freedom to those suffering from oppression. Not only that, but all of us who follow Jesus are likewise called and anointed to take the inner journey of self-discovery and discernment, and the outer journey of building relationship, working for justice, and making peace in the world. In short, we are recipients of really good news. We are called to be living in the economy of God and sharing the life of heaven.

I have heard the good news of the Gospel quite often in my life and have gradually taken it in so that it touches my soul. But this really good news has come to me in two parts. Thirty years ago, I was first ordained to be a "minister of the Gospel," one whose profession it would be to proclaim good news to many people. And I have worked at the profession of being a minister, a pastor, for an even longer time than that.

Now I've come to realize that the reasons I became a minister -- pretty much all of them -- have turned out to be, if not all wrong then, at least, all inadequate. I decided to be ordained, in all honesty, to enjoy a certain status and the power that comes with the role of being a minister. It seemed very special to help people feel good, to feel happy about being involved at church. I sought ordination because it was a way of feeling that I was a good person, so good that no one could say my life wasn't lived well enough. I wanted to show people how they should live and

because I really did kind of think that's what God wanted me to do. Nothing else seemed as clear or convenient.

I've found and continue to find that the real and meaningful reasons for my choice have become much clearer. They include: to challenge, support, and accompany people on their own journeys, and to challenge and change the nature of what church is and how we practice it. I want to have the opportunity to share my deep commitment to justice and peacemaking. I am grateful to have a front row seat to see life springing forth and be able celebrate it, and grateful to have a front row seat as life transitions through death – to celebrate that life and proclaim that new life is still springing forth.

I am still here, embracing my ordination. I am here to tell you that the really good news is this: we can change and we can change the world because we're doing it in sync with God. Each of us can take charge of our journey: your journey and my journey. We can take charge and take action to re-shape the world in the image we see of compassion and inclusion. We can trust the image of love, not fear and of plenty, not of want.

Liberation theologians tell us that God is preferentially predisposed toward the poor. Many New Testament passages tell us how blessed are the poor, the dispossessed, and the oppressed. But is the good news for the poor at the expense of the rich. Surely God's good news is not that God likes poor people more than rich people or that God's affection for us is directly in inverse proportion to our net worth. The New Testament tell us that the economy of God very different than the economics by which most of us measure our worth. Many of us fail to appreciate how different God's economy really is. Being church and following Jesus means living in the world according to God's economy.

Lawndale Community Church in inner-city Chicago is hard to see. You can get there easily by public transit or by car. Once there, you'll see Lawndale Dental clinic, Lawndale Health Center (free medical clinic) or and Lawndale Pizza Restaurant (providing jobs for those in recovery programs). But you may not see the church building until you see people coming out or going in on Sunday mornings. That's because, "instead of growing a big church, Lawndale has grown Church Big." (*Jim & Casper Go to Church*, Jim Henderson and Matt Casper, 64) This church brings God's good news in very practical ways by meeting needs in their community while also building the church.

Lawndale is a congregation of some 500 members but with the budget of a church of 5000. Much of their income from comes from grants, subsidized loans, and sales of properties they've developed in the neighborhood, designated for low-income families. The proceeds are then put back into Lawndale Development Corporation for future ministries. In many ways, the Lawndale Community Church lives in God's economy. They have all they need to engage fully in the ministry about which they are so passionate.

What will it mean for Crossroads Church to live in God's economy? It will not mean trying to copy what Lawndale Church has done, but rather to claim our own abundance. That means not just thinking about being abundant or wishing we had abundance but taking the next step and living abundantly. It means finding creative ways to generate all the money we need to do the ministry we feel called to do. It also means we have a need to confess our ambivalence about a radical calling to be church and to confess our need to control and limit what we do and our fear of abandoning ourselves to the work of being church.

Jesus said that, today, Isaiah's words had come true in him. He was announcing his own radical sense of calling to bring freedom and sight and change, and very good news to all who waited desperately to hear it. He began with the disciplines of prayer and self-discovery. So must we. He found ways to live his life each day doing what was most important to him. So must we. He found the resources he needed to do that work. So must we find ways, and not only financial ones, to support the involvement of this congregation in the work of freeing those in life's prisons, of comforting the broken and afflicted, and of changing the systems and institutions of oppression in our community.

Some specific ways of changing those systems right around us are to get involved in the school board elections for KCMO, to deepen relationships with churches of color in our community, to cry out strongly for peace in our world, to advocate for a greater share of public money to be used for public transit, and to work to improve access to healthy food, healthy environments, and sustainable lifestyles with opportunities for children to grow up and realize their dreams. Crossroads is already involved in some of this work and we can step it up and do more.

Sometimes we see clearly who we are and what we need to be doing, but mostly we have to live by faith that true abundance comes from being true to our journey. No one else can tell you what you're all about. Really, no one else can even show you God. God waits for you in the silence of your own soul. But when we meet the poor, the blind, the oppressed, and the imprisoned -- just as when we meet the poverty, blindness, and prisoner within ourselves -- then we look into a mirror. There we'll see the face of God. There we'll feel the fire of the Spirit that kindles our lives and we will be home. We are one with God who is in us and in whose life we find our own lives.