

“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,
¹⁹ to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.”

That sounds just about too good to be true. Even in our day (some 2500 years after these words were originally recorded in the book of Isaiah) this kind of claim sounds ridiculous, to be honest. That a man could so embody a message of transformation that the poor can rejoice, captives will be released, the blind will see, and those who have been beaten down will be lifted up ...

I’ll admit that when you’re the poor one who needs to hear good news, when you are captive and long for release, when you are the one debilitated by physical or social limitations ... this is a message that would bring profound hope. As implausible as it might sound, I can see how one would be desperate enough to believe.

The people of Israel, a people who had long been the underdog, had been persecuted for centuries and ultimately exiled, and so these words from the prophet Isaiah were words of promise and hope. As crazy as these promises are, the people of Israel understood this passage as pointing toward a messiah would come among them and rescue them from their hardships and restore the world to its proper order. These very words were God’s promise to them that they were seen and valued and loved, and that their story as God’s chosen people had only just begun.

But Jesus stands before his friends and relatives and reads from the prophet Isaiah as though he's reading not some future messiah's job description, but his own. "In reading this portion of Hebrew Scripture, Jesus is saying that his life's work will be to accomplish four things: (1) heal the brokenhearted; (2) announce the release of prisoners of war; (3) recover sight to the blind; and (4) announce the acceptable year of the Lord." Jesus' announcement says that they can no longer see him simply as a village carpenter or as Mary and Joseph's boy: **he** is the one that they have been waiting to come all of their lives, and their grandparents' lives, and the generations before them."¹

Are you familiar with the game "Two Truths and a Lie?" It's an icebreaker that I've played at conferences, staff retreats, and so on. Each person takes a turn telling two things about themselves that are true and one thing that is fabricated ~ as the game progresses, the players make increasingly outlandish claims as players succumb to 'one-upmanship.' For instance, I might tell you that I once ate dinner with Al Gore and talked with him at length about original sin; that I briefly worked for a charismatic Pentecostal church in the South Bronx; and that I windsurfed on the shoulders of a guy who was training for an international windsurfing competition. Two of those things are true. I'll leave it to you to figure out which isn't.

For Jesus' friends and neighbors gathered with him that day at the synagogue, they were pretty certain they'd just heard four truths and a lie, but for them, *this was no game*. Jesus' proclamation was an outrageous and dangerous lie. As far as the people of Nazareth are concerned (according to how Luke is telling the story) Jesus has just been baptized, partied like it was 32 at the wedding feast in Cana, and now he's back home, reading Scriptures on the Sabbath and basically saying, "Hey, guys. Messiah in the house!"

¹ Linda McKinnish Bridges in *Feasting on the Word: Year C, Volume 1*. Third Sunday after the Epiphany, Exegetical Perspective; p287.

“Jesus’ speech, while it comes from the tradition of those who were listening, must have clashed with the social world of Jesus, the culture and the holiness code that surrounded him, the social and religious understandings that said those poor people, those blind people, those debtors, and a host of other folks *just didn’t measure up* to the purity that marked the insiders and kept the outsiders, well, outside.”²

It doesn’t go well for him. In the verses that follow, Jesus is chased out of town and nearly thrown off a cliff. But we’ll hear more about that in next week’s Gospel reading.

In Jesus’ day, not unlike now, there was a pervasive, somewhat infectious popular theology that God’s kingdom is a meritocracy. There was a belief that there was a cosmic system of reward and punishment – that God’s grace and favor rested with those who behaved a certain way, who prayed the ‘right’ way, who adhered to specific dogma.

Let me be clear that that kind of thinking is a lie. Jesus lived and died for one simple reason: to point us to the truth that God’s grace and favor rests upon all whom God creates and loves. There is nothing we can do that will earn God’s favor and there is nothing we can do that can separate us from the love of God. To believe or behave otherwise is to deny the Truth of God in Christ.

This declaration of Jubilee, the even-ing out of the playing field that Jesus reads, is a powerful message, and is threatening to those who hoard resources and seek to wield power – then, as now. Jesus’ message of release and redemption doesn’t go over too well in many communities that call themselves Christian, as we too find ourselves increasingly “trapped in a system that, more and more, seems to be producing wealth for a few and poverty for too many... In an age of excessive individualism, we would rather talk about a ‘thousand points of light,’ each one of us doing our thing to better the world, rather than the idea of

² Kathryn Matthews at Weekly Seeds

the community re-shaping itself, re-ordering its priorities, changing the system, transforming our relationships, and whatever else it takes, to meet the needs of all of God's children and to extend a compassionate response to the suffering of the world.”³

“Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.” According to Jesus, it's already been done. Good news has reached the poor. The captive has been released. Sight has been restored to the blind. And the oppressed have been set free. It's already done. And none of us had to do a single thing to earn it.

Jesus has already done the hard part. Our job in the here in now is to help others recognize the grace of God – to speak Truth in word and deed that the captive, the oppressed, the poor and the blind are all beloved of God. Our job is to model the reality that when we stop hoarding our resources, there will be enough to go around. Our job is to demonstrate how we all need one another – with our differing opinions and beliefs and attitudes – because we all reflect God in our own unique way ... and by being in relationship with one another, we are more fully aware of God's activity in and through ourselves and each other. That is how we embody Isaiah's words. That is how we heed Paul's advice to the Corinthians and live as the Body of Christ ~ not because we earn God's favor by doing so, but because once we understand the abundance of God's grace, we can't help but share that grace with others.

I'm not sure if you've heard about Amnesty Day in Asheville this past week. For the fifth time in as many years, the District Attorney arranged the event to see if alternative solutions could be found for those with outstanding charges that would be mutually beneficial for them as well as the community. The Asheville Citizen Times reported that more than 500 people who had been charged with misdemeanors and other minor crimes were offered a fresh start on Friday. DA Williams said, (I love this!) “we want to strengthen the weakest links of our community so that

³ Kathryn Matthews in Weekly Seeds

we can all move forward together.”⁴ Impressive words (and deeds!) from a District Attorney.

That’s a great example of what it’s all about. That is Truth in the face of the lie that God’s justice and mercy is only for those who walk the straight and narrow. Living the Truth of the Gospel results in us using what resources we have at our disposal to be agents of grace in the world. Not because we’ll earn God’s favor – we already have that. But because that’s who we are and that’s what Christians do.

⁴ <https://www.citizen-times.com/story/news/local/2019/01/25/hundreds-head-buncombe-amnesty-day-fresh-start-asheville/2678159002/?fbclid=IwAR3TRrws8EaQAps5T7-tIM4zaUPvPUWx635KgLskGq24k8mXHVhZh1EQEnQ>