

Sermon, January 30, 2022

Luke 4:16-22

“Anointed to Bring Good News”

Following his time in the wilderness, Jesus begins his ministry in Galilee starting with a visit to his hometown of Nazareth, and, as was his custom, he enters the synagogue on the Sabbath. Unrolling a scroll from the Book of Isaiah, he reads, “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 the release of the captives. And recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.” This is actually a composite of verses from Isaiah, beginning with chapter 61, where we hear, “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me; because the Lord has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the broken hearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor, and the day of vengeance of our God, to comfort all who mourn...”

Notice that Jesus does not make this proclamation on his own. He is doing so in the power of the Holy Spirit and has been anointed by the Lord. In the Greek the title ‘Christ’ literally means, ‘anointed one’. He is God sent and proclaims the will of God. Also notice that Isaiah says, “to bring good news to the oppressed”, rather than to the poor. But isn’t it the case that the oppressed and the poor are often the same thing?

Just what he does he mean by the poor? In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus says, “Blessed are the poor in spirit”, while in the Sermon on the Plain, in Luke, he says simply “Blessed are the poor...”. I think we can assume that both are included in the will of God, expressed through Jesus. And I believe that the “broken-hearted, in Isaiah, is a part of those who are poor in spirit. But in today’s reading he is certainly speaking of those who are poor, economically speaking. Having been raised in a poor family himself, Jesus had grave concern for those who lack in the basic needs in life. This is expressed throughout the gospels in various ways, beginning with the symbolism of his solidarity with the poor expressed by his birth in a stable, and his first visitation by shepherds- being among the poorest of the poor. Another example would be the Song of Mary, in which she says, “He has brought down the powerful from their thrones and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things and sent the rich away empty”. Prophetic words!

There is a trend throughout the Bible referred to as God’s “preferential option for the poor”. Of course, God’s love extends to all people, but the Bible tells us that there is a particular place in the heart of God for the poor and oppressed.

The problem of poverty was certainly not exclusive to the time of Jesus’ ministry. Sadly, we live in a world where a huge portion of its population live in abject poverty, with the outcome often being death through malnutrition and starvation. Among the United Nation’s Sustainable Development Goals, the first two are to end poverty in all its forms everywhere, and, to end hunger, achieve food security and improved nutrition, and promote sustainable agriculture. Since the year 2000 this program has succeeded in reducing the number of those suffering in poverty, but there is still a long way to go with millions still living in deplorable conditions. A large part of the problem is due to political and economic systems in which 20 percent of the world’s people control 80 percent of its wealth. A tremendous existential imbalance.

Of course, the situation of poverty is not exclusive to Third World countries. In his classic work, “The Other America”, Michael Harrington wrote, “To be sure, the other America is not impoverished in the same sense as those poor nations where millions cling to hunger as a

defense against starvation. This country has escaped such extremes. This does not change the fact that tens of millions of Americans are, at this very moment, maimed in body and spirit, existing at levels beneath those necessary for human decency. If these people are not starving, they are hungry, and sometimes fat with hunger, for that is what cheap foods do. They are without adequate housing and education and medical care.” We all know that this is not just a national problem, but local as well, especially with the sizable number of the homeless in Volusia County. And there also many called the working poor, i.e., those with jobs that don’t pay a livable wage.

So, what does Jesus mean when he said he was bringing “good news” for the poor? Unfortunately, down through the history of the church it was often preached from Christian pulpits that it meant that the poor should accept the way things are - that their reward would come in heaven. I don’t think that is at all what Jesus had in mind! When he said in the synagogue, “today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing”, he didn’t mean that he himself would eradicate poverty and oppression. I believe he was saying that through his words and actions the consciences of his followers would be awakened to engage in ministry to the poor. In other words, the Church must be the embodiment of the “good news”.

One way in which Jesus did intend to make a difference was when he proclaimed, “the year of the Lord’s favor”. That actually refers to an ancient Hebrew custom found in the Book of Leviticus, also known as the ‘sabbatical year’, or ‘the year of Jubilee’, which was to take place every fifty years, and entailed things such as the restoration of land, and the canceling of debts. It was understood as an economic action designed to relieve the plight of the poor.

We are a small congregation and can’t be expected to solve all the world’s problems, but we are called upon to pray for those who are suffering in the world. And if Christians throughout the world responded to that calling, as well as come to a better understanding of the causes of poverty, and acts in helpful ways, we could relieve much of that suffering. Gustavo Gutiérrez, founder of liberation theology, writes, “If we approach human suffering, poverty, and injustice in solidarity with those who experience it, it is because the word about God is always a word about life and happiness, it is language about the One whom the Bible calls “you who love the living.” (Wisd. 11:26) It is true that God’s love for the living is deep and abiding, especially for those who suffer, but the world can only know of that love when the church speaks and acts in ways that help create life, happiness, and hope. Amen.

**Let us pray:** Compassionate and merciful God, author of life, and creator of all that sustains life, we offer our thanksgiving for this day, and for all the possibilities within it. Open our hearts and minds that we may know of your holy presence and of your will for us. May the spirit of Christ be our guide as we face all that life sets before us. Let us face difficult challenges strengthened by our faith in you. Bless us as a congregation of followers, granting us a vision of how you would have us respond to your love in and through our service to others. We live in a world, O God, where there is much needless pain; those without the basic necessities for life, lacking food, clean water, and shelter; those who face injustice and oppression; those who live in war torn places, where violence is a part of their daily lives; those who are discriminated against because of their race, ethnicity, religion, gender, and sexual orientation; for those who struggle with loneliness, depression, addiction, or mental instability. Help and guide your church both here and abroad to be your hands, your feet, and your voice, to embody your compassion, mercy, and forgiveness, to advocate for the justice you desire on this planet, and express your love for it, and all that exists upon it. Amen.