

SERMON
“Good News? No Way”
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St. John’s Chapel UCC

I Corinthians 12: 12-31a

Luke 4: 14-21

Then Jesus filled with the power of the Spirit, returned to Galilee, and a report about him spread through all the surrounding country. He began to teach in their synagogues and was praised by everyone.

When he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, he went to the synagogue on the Sabbath day, as was his custom. He stood up to read, and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written:

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

And he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down. The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. Then he began to say to them, “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.”

Hear ends the readings of Holy Scripture!

SERMON

We are in Series C of the lectionary which puts us basically in the gospel of Luke. To do any given gospel real justice, we need to become saturated in the uniqueness of each gospel's theology. As I have said before, this requires some building blocks of learning. It is important to build on what we learned last Sunday, and the Sunday before...which is hard when your students vary weekly—but I am going to try. Who knows? Maybe I'll give you a test someday to see who's paying attention—but I doubt it. I have a feeling my days here would be numbered for sure. You might even try to throw me off a cliff, as they did the first and last day Jesus preached in Nazareth.

One thing we have learned thus far is that in Luke's struggle with the point at which Jesus was infused with divinity, he settles on conception. Jesus was conceived of the Holy Spirit according to Luke. Yet it also seems important to Luke that his divinity was not full blown at conception or birth. Luke tells us, he filled with wisdom. He was not full of it. He filled...with wisdom. (Luke 2:40)

Just yesterday, that changed. The day Jesus wandered into the wilderness we are told, "Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, turned from the Jordan (the place of his baptism) and was led by the Spirit into the wilderness where for forty day he was tempted by the devil." (Luke 4: 1-2a). Now here today, we are told that Jesus filled with the power of the Spirit and returned to Galilee. Many would argue that the point of his full infusion occurred at his baptism. But according to Luke, it happens here today as he walks out of the wasteland of temptation, full of not just the Holy Spirit, but the power of the Spirit.

From there he announces what the Spirit has anointed him to do. He enters the synagogue in his home town of Nazareth, as was his custom. He stands up to read. Someone

hands him the scroll of the book of Isaiah. He unrolls the scroll to the section he wants to read. He reads. He rolls the scroll back up and hands it to the attendant. Then he sits down—which is what one did back yonder when. After reading from scripture they sat down to preach. Jesus, after reading the scripture, does not return to his seat in the congregation. He sits down to pontificate about what he has just read. Every eye in the synagogue is on him. Waiting to see what the man, for whom a reputation is starting to build, will say to them. What he says may well be one of the shortest sermons on record, but the few words he utters are packed full of the power from which he is now filled.

“Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.”

He didn't have to say what he meant by this utterance. They'd heard him read the words of Isaiah. They knew in that brief statement that he was the anointed one, the messiah. For what he read from Isaiah says, “The Spirit of God has **anointed me** to bring good news to the poor, to proclaim release to the captives, to recover the sight of the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of God's favor.”

“Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.” Wow! Can you imagine being there that day? Being one of the ones to hear first hand that the Messiah has arrived. Well, you are. Every time these words are spoken salvation history brings them forth, into the present. The good news is proclaimed to you this day, as it was the first day ever spoken. It was good news then, as long as they hear it as something to be done for them, instead of something Jesus wanted to teach them to do for others.

Immediately after he spoke these words, they were amazed and spoke well of him. But the minute he tells them that he was not going to be doing any of this for them, they want to hurl him down a cliff.

Is this the way it is for us? As long as Jesus is ministering to us, visiting us when we are sick, proclaiming good news to our deficiencies, releasing us from what holds us captive, restoring our sight, getting us out from under those who wish to control us and remake us in their image. This is good news, exceedingly good. Then we discover that what he lays before us is the original pattern from which all Christians are to be cut. **Good news? No way!**

My confirmation class has reached that point in their studies where they begin to examine the Christian way of life. We have gotten through three chapters of this section. We still have one to go, and I'm already overwhelmed. I never know for certain whether anything I say to confirmands gets through, but it always does a number on me. Let's see. As a Christian, I am to put absolute trust in God, care for others which includes those six commandments in the Hebrew text of the Bible on how I am to treat others--like not "bearing false witness" or "coveting." Then we are to follow Jesus' example in not just caring for our own, but for the Samaritans (the foreigners and half-breeds), the tax collectors (those white collar workers who steal from us), the lepers (those with oozing sores from which we are bound to catch something), those with demons (the truly evil, even murderers). Now, as if this is not enough to keep us busy, the Christian way of life demands that we also care for ourselves. This is what *My Confirmation* (the book published and recommended by our denomination) says. This includes taking care of our bodies, getting the right amount of sleep, exercising, eating a balanced diet, and drinking enough water. You want to know the really disgusting thing. The two young men I'm teaching in confirmation tell me they do all these things, and I don't doubt them. Neither of them wants snacks for our half way breaks. I truly do not know what's becoming of our youth these days! Then there is the care of our money and time. And we haven't even gotten to the part about seeking the realm of God.

If we take Luke at his word, that Jesus is modeling for us the Christian way of life, then on top of everything I've just mentioned, we are to be proclaiming good news to the poor, releasing the captives and opening people's eyes to truth.

It's get baptized, cleaned up, struggle with your demons, get yourself together and determine what God has called you, anointed you, to do. Is this good news? Well, I don't know about you, but it's disconcerting and overwhelming to me.

Until I remember Paul and the troublesome First Church in Corinth, who leave us with the reality that our call to be the Body of Christ does not rest with one person. Even Jesus did not try to go it alone. He tried to train twelve disciples to assist him. Not that they were ever much help, but at least he was not alone.

The Christian way demands that we function together as the Body of Christ. According to Paul, it is God's nature to give a diversity of gifts and all these gifts together make up the Body of Christ. Each of us is just a piece of that Body. For me, it's a relief to know that I don't have to be the all encompassing model of Christ, just a piece joined with all of your pieces. Now granted, there are a more than a few things I, personally, have to accomplish. I have to let God clean me up, struggle with my demons, and determine what piece in this grand body I have been anointed to fulfill—but even this I do not have to do alone.

We do not have to walk through the wasteland of our struggles alone. We have each other—but walk through them we must. Until the day when we are ready to announce what the Spirit has anointed us to do. **In this discovery lies the good news of what we can do, little old me can do, to further God's reign on earth!**

It truly concerns me when I hear you say, we need to coerce someone to serve on Council, the Board of Christian Education, the Board of Service Ministries, or any of the

committees, or to work on any project or mission of the church. We are the Body of Church called to fine tune our ability to recognize, to honor, and to call forth the God-given gifts of each person in the congregation. Should we not be honored when God anoints us to do whatever?

One of the amazing things about Paul's letter to the troublesome First Church of Corinth, is that with all their problems, he says to them, "Now you are the body of Christ." (12:27) "It is amazing," say William Willimon, "that Paul would have made that sort of statement to this sort of church. For a number of chapters he has been hammering them for all of their woeful inadequacies to be the church. They ought to be ashamed calling themselves Christians, and acting the way that they have acted, with their fussing and feuding and doctrinal ignorance, petty divisions, and cowardly disloyalty to the way of Christ. But even after all of that, Paul blurts out, saying directly to them, "Now you are the body of Christ."¹

This is an amazing thing to say to a group of people, "You are the Body of Christ!" So amazing...it can reach out, grab you, and shake you up to become the good news needed to whirl you, like jewelry on a spinning wheel, leaving you with a glow scattering over a vastness. Wouldn't that be amazingly good news for a group like us to hear?

It always astounds me when I hear someone say they consider themselves Christian, but they do not believe in organized religion. I want to say, "Well you certainly ought to come to our church. We are about as disorganized as religion gets!" But I don't. What I say is, "How do you do it? How do you do all that is required of us Christians on your own? The Church, with all its faults, is the body of Christ—the body that will baptize you into that body of Christ and walk with you through your wasteland to discover how God wished to honor you and anoint you. For you see, the Church is the Body of Christ, the visible form the risen Christ takes in the world.

You and I together, we are the Body of Christ! Imagine that!

¹ William Willimon, *Pulpit Resources*, "You Are!" obtained on-line.