

C Lectionary 3 1.27.19

Luke 4:14-21

Focus Statement: Jesus was sent to set you free.

After college, I did a year of volunteer service with an organization called the Lutheran Volunteer Corps. Now, fun fact I learned while in DC, there are a ton of service corps from all sorts of faith traditions, and the DC non-profit scene runs on this cheap labor. We'd have service corps parties on the weekends with Catholics, Mennonites, Jews, Presbyterians, Evangelicals, Quakers, you name it. Each of these service corps were slightly different, but all of them shared focuses in social justice and spirituality. So one day my co-worker Natalie, who was part of Avodah, the Jewish service corps, and I decided to hold a community conversation for our two services corps on the scriptural basis of social justice from Jewish and Christian perspectives. The idea was I would bring scripture passages from the Bible, she would bring some from the Torah, and we would read them together as Jews and Christians and talk about what they meant to us.

So we get there, and I open with the passage from Luke that we just heard this morning. Jesus entered the synagogue, was handed the scroll of the Prophet Isaiah, and read: "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, [and] to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." After I finished reading, I was all set to launch into the little piece I had prepared about how this passage marked the start of Jesus' ministry in Luke, and how the entire rest of the Gospel is about Jesus putting into practice what it meant to do those things, and how he taught his disciples to live in that way. But before I could begin, Natalie started laughing and said, "before you

share what this means to you as a Christian, let me read you the first scripture passage I prepared for today.” And she read from Isaiah chapter sixty-one, verses one and two, “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 broken-hearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners; to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.”

And as Natalie and I had hoped, a rich conversation followed, but it was not the conversation either of us had planned or researched for. What followed was a conversation about the nature of God. About how both of us chose these passages because for both of us what was important to us about our faith was that God is a God who brings good news to the oppressed, who binds up the broken-hearted, who sets free the captives and the prisoners, and who proclaims the year of the Lord’s favor. Both of us felt we were called to be about this work of justice making, because it was the nature of our God to be about justice.

Another thing I found particularly powerful about Natalie and I essentially choosing the same passage was for me it illustrated the persistence of God in bringing this message of liberation. Isaiah said it, and then the people still hadn’t gotten it, so Jesus said the exactly same thing eight-hundred years later. And all the other prophets said it in various ways and forms between. So if God hadn’t given up on this project in the eight-hundred years between Isaiah and Jesus, like hadn’t given up on it enough to become human, walk around the world, and die so that we would be liberated, God’s not giving up on this project now. This wasn’t a one-time thing. God is committed to this work of bringing good news, binding

up the broken-hearted, setting free the captives, and proclaiming God's favor. So when we do these things, when we bring good news, when we comfort the broken hearted, set free people who feel trapped, tell people about God's love for them, we are entering into a rich history. This stuff has staying power, friends. We are not in this alone; we have literal millennia of allies on our side.

This is all good news, but as the pastor of this hard-working and justice-loving little congregation, there is one more super important piece of good news that I need you to know. In our Gospel reading for today, after Jesus read this passage from Isaiah, after he read: "'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, [and] to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.'" He rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down... Then he began to say to them, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."

Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing. Friends, what that means is Jesus was sent to bring good news to us, to proclaim release to us, to free us, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor of us. That is what Jesus meant when he said "this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." He meant that all of the things the Spirit of the Lord had sent him to do, he had done them, in the synagogue, to those listening. And, by extension, to us, in this sanctuary, listening to these same words two-thousand plus years later. All so often we think about these promises being for other people. For those who are poorer than us, more imprisoned than us, more broken-hearted than us, more in need of favor than us.

And certainly there are always people more in need than ourselves, and Jesus wants us to be about the work of liberation of them. But Jesus also is about the work of liberating you, the work of loving you. You, who you are, what you need, where you need healing and wholeness and liberation, Jesus cares about that way more than he cares about what you do. That's not to say Jesus doesn't care about our actions, but our actions flow out of the love of Jesus, they are not the way we get Jesus to love us. God's love for us is cruciform, it comes down to each of us first, and then it flows from us to others.

Today during worship we are going to take some time to formally adopt our welcome statement and commit to be a congregation that is fully inclusive of people of all sexual orientations and gender identities. This is super important work dear people of God, it is life-changing work, it is life-saving work. But what I need you to know is that this welcome statement is about how we welcome those outside the community, but it is also about how we welcome each other, and how we welcome ourselves. Because each of us come into this space with things that make us feel like outsiders. For some of us it is a sexual orientation or gender identity that society has deemed unacceptable. For some it's a health condition, or our economic situation, our mental health status, our age, too old, too young, our background, our belief, or lack thereof. And what we're committing to this morning is not just that we will be welcoming of all of those other people, because they are beloved of God. We are also committing to the promise that all of us people are beloved of God. Take a look at the welcome statement printed right there on the back of your bulletin. Where it says "we believe God created all humanity in God's image," that means you too. You were created in the image of God. You are a part of God's family. You are welcome here. I think

it's important to say this because I don't know about you, but for me some days it can be way easier to believe that God loves some amorphous other than to believe that God loves me. Because I don't know everything about someone else, but I know a lot about myself, and there are a lots of parts of myself that I keep pretty well hidden that I'm pretty sure are pretty unlovable. So it's one thing to say, everyone is welcome and it's another thing to know that you, all of you, really is welcome. But that's what we're saying today.

And yes, we are going to screw this thing up. We are going to be mean to each other, and hurt each other's feelings, and make someone feel unwelcome or unloved. We're people, it happens. That's why we're committing to being a Reconciling in Christ congregation, not a Reconciled in Christ congregation. That -ing reminds us that it's a journey, that we're still on the road, that we're not all the way there yet. So give yourselves, and each other, some grace. But know this. Jesus came, Jesus comes, today and everyday, "to bring good news to the poor, to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.' Today, to you, this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing. Thanks be to God. Amen.