

Epiphany 3, Yr. C

January 27, 2019

Nehemiah, 1 Cor. 12: 12-31a, Luke 4:14-21

Luke is sometimes called the writer of the Gospel of the Holy Spirit and today's section of his Gospel is a good example of that. It comes after two sections which also dealt with the role of Holy Spirit in Jesus' life. The first such section was the Baptism of Jesus, in which the spirit descends upon him. The second, which isn't read in this lectionary cycle, tells that after Jesus' baptism, the Spirit drove him out into the wilderness, where he faced temptations – you'll remember the devil tempted him to change stones into bread, to throw himself off the temple to prove that God would surely rescue him and finally, to worship the devil and in exchange Jesus would receive power over all the kingdoms of the world. In this third section, Luke, reminding us once again of the power of the spirit in Jesus' life, says that Jesus, "filled with the power of the Holy Spirit," returned to Galilee. So here we have this man, Jesus, who was told at his Baptism that he was the Beloved Son, who then went into the desert to fast and pray and who resisted the temptation to take that idea of

being the Beloved and use it for special favors for himself, or to test God, or to accumulate power. He understood that to be chosen wasn't to take his gifts and make them "all about ME," but instead to use them to the benefit of God's people. And now Luke tells us that Jesus has begun to teach. What does a person like this, with these experiences, say?

Look at how he begins. The SPIRIT OF LORD IS UPON ME, HE SAYS. And BECAUSE of that, this is what my ministry is going to be about. He starts, not with himself, but with God. It's God's spirit. It's God who has anointed him. It's God's power. And that power is to be used for God's purposes: not to turn stones into bread, not to have power over the whole world, but 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 a year of the Lord's favor. Two interjections here. The first is that Jesus is quoting Isaiah but it's interesting that he doesn't quote the entire passage which ends by saying "and the day of vengeance of our God." Isaiah is talking about restoration and vengeance has nothing to do with the restoration God has in mind, so Jesus modifies

the text. A second note about Epiphany, the season which sheds light on who Christ and God really are. It's worth noting that in this first public proclamation Jesus shows us that at the center of the whole thing is a God of mercy, who loves us and who wills our wellbeing.

Luke presents this as Jesus' inaugural sermon, the sermon that sets out his agenda, his understanding of his identity and the mission God has given him. And why is this important? Because we're his disciples and, because of that, it's OUR agenda, our mission, also. It's what we use to understand who WE are and what OUR lives are about. It's been suggested that individuals or churches could take their mission statements, or annual reports, or budgets and hold them up against this mission statement of Jesus to see how we're doing as his followers. So, since this is the core of Jesus' life and ministry, we need to understand what it's all about.

First, he says, he's bringing good news to the poor. Luke probably means just that, the economic poor, and that is tied to Jesus' statement that he's proclaiming the year of the Lord's favor. Jewish law

required that every 50 years would be a Jubilee year, known as the year of the Lord's favor. It meant that all land which had been sold or lost during the preceding 50 years would revert to its original owners. The theology behind this was twofold – that the land was God's property and was for the use of God's people, not to be accumulated and hoarded by a few to the detriment of others. It was also a year in which anyone who had been sold into slavery was to be set free. And all debts were to be canceled. The law was designed to prevent the development of a powerless, landless underclass and to periodically eliminate poverty and wealth inequality.

Letting the oppressed go free would have had this very practical meaning as well. In Jesus' time, under the Roman occupation, Jewish peasants were being taxed, some of them out of existence. The Romans imposed a land tax and a crop tax and, if they weren't paid, you lost the land. So there were many landless day laborers, to say nothing of robbers and beggars, around. In addition, there was also a temple tax which amount to about 20% of earnings. If you couldn't pay that tax, you were considered a

“non-observant” Jew and, although you couldn’t be forced to pay, you were religiously and socially ostracized. You couldn’t sit on local councils, you were considered to have lost the privilege of being a child of Abraham in the next world, and you lost the table fellowship that was so central to inclusion in Middle Eastern society. You were simply OUT.

This all sounds quite remote, but how often do we read even today about African states or, closer to home, Haiti. I read an article giving its history as a state “built for predation and plunder” according to the author. It was first held by France and sent enough money back from the sugar plantations, which were worked by slaves, to float much of the French economy. But even after the slaves revolted and set up a republic, the cardinal principle was the brutal predatory extraction of the country’s wealth by those at the top. And, even though, after the revolution, Haiti was set up as a nation of small landowners, those at the top fought for control over the government so they could draw off the fruits of the land through taxation. “Ruling,” said the author of the article, “had to do not with developing the country, but with extracting its wealth.” Real poverty,

real oppression – all caused by the struggle for power and wealth.

In the same way, Jesus' statement that he intends to proclaim release to the captives can have a very real application in today's world. I remember reading the autobiography of Terry Waite, who was the ABC's emissary to Iran and who was imprisoned as a hostage there. He writes of his terrible isolation and loneliness and his fear that he had been forgotten. In his story, he says that one day a guard came in and put something in his hand. It felt like a piece of card. He was told it was a letter and his heart leapt with hope that, after the years that had gone by, he had finally heard something from his family. Instead, when the guard left and he could lift his blindfold, he found that it was a colored postcard, with a stained glass window and a picture of John Bunyan sitting at a table looking through the bars of a cell in England. The card said, "Dear Terry. You are not forgotten. People everywhere are praying for your release and that of the other hostages." He couldn't make out the signature, but it didn't matter. The card was a ray of light in his darkness, a glimmer of hope.

All the statements of Jesus could, and can, be read literally. But they can also all be broadened to include all those things that undercut the well-being of God's people. Surely we all understand what it means to be "poor in spirit" or to be held captive, not in some real prison, but in the prisons of fear, or anger or hopelessness or illness or meaninglessness, that squeeze the very life from us. We certainly know what it means to be blind to the truth of Christ, to be caught, captivated, oppressed by the falsehoods which the culture feeds us on a daily basis: that what matters is having stuff or status, that what counts is our color or identity, or nationality, or success or power. That what life is about is exactly what Satan told Jesus it was about in that desert: power, getting your own, satisfying your own desires, leaving everyone else behind.

In a very real way, that's what Paul was confronting with the Corinthians. Their blindness to the good news of Christ, that EVERYONE was loved by God and equally valued by God – that blindness was causing all kinds of difficulty. Paul addresses the value of diversity of gifts in his metaphor of the body – all the parts are necessary. I remember playing a

game with a group of middle schoolers on a day retreat. The idea was that everyone had a slip of paper on which a major body part was named. You were an arm or a leg or a head – and you have to run around and find all the other parts necessary to complete the whole in order to win. Much commotion, of course, and I hope they got the message. But it's a message that's counter-cultural. Since then, I've seen more than one news article about an injured athlete whose teammates or competitors have turned back to help the injured person. Once such article was about a race in which a runner fell; the other runners went back and got her and they all crossed the finish line in a lump.

Competition or cooperation? Power or compassion? Me first, last and always or we're all in this together? Last week I mentioned Martin Luther King. Here are some of his words that are relevant to today's readings:

“Everybody can be great, because anybody can serve. You don't have to have a college degree to serve. You don't have to make your subject and your verb agree to serve...You don't have to know

the second theory of thermodynamics in physics to serve. You only need a heart full of grace and a soul generated by love.”

One final thought: that same spirit of the Lord that was upon Jesus, that anointed him, is ours as well. And his mission is also ours as well. Perhaps here we can think back to the reading from Nehemiah – when the people heard the Torah, the text says that they wept. Did they weep because they realized how far they were from fulfilling what was being asked of them? Maybe, but re-read the words that Ezra spoke, telling them that their call was not to be met with weeping but with joy. Because just as Jesus was led and energized by the spirit, and so could fulfill his mission, so Ezra told the Israelites that “the joy of the Lord is your strength” – it’s ours as well. We aren’t doing this on our own but with the power of the Holy Spirit. Amen.