

Jesus' Mission Statement

This is one of those passages in which there is simply too much good stuff to deal with in just one sermon. In fact, what I just read is really only half the story. Next week's lectionary contains the second half of the story, what it was that Jesus said to the home folks in reflection on the passage from Isaiah and how they reacted to his message. But the scholars who devised the Common Lectionary have, wisely I think, divided the story because there is so much here. I'll make some reference to the second half of the story in talking about the first, but a fuller discussion of that passage will have to wait at least a week. But for today, I want to focus especially on verses 18, 19 and 21 and in particular I want to talk about something that's *not* there, some of what *is* there, and what it meant for Jesus and for us.

First of all, what's not there. On the first Sunday of this month, as I was talking about Jesus' baptism and its meaning for us, I spoke of the ethic of the baptized and I referenced the passage in Isaiah that Jesus reads in the synagogue at Nazareth. As I was reading it aloud, I found myself stumbling. Something about the rhythm of the passage seemed off, something somehow didn't seem right. There was part of the passage that made me uncomfortable, that didn't seem to fit, somehow. As I was studying the passage more carefully and with the aid of many commentaries this week, the problem resolved itself for me. What Luke relates Jesus saying at Nazareth and what is recorded in the prophecies of Isaiah are not exactly the same. Either Luke's sources were faulty or Jesus did some on the spot editing as he read from the scroll. For one thing, Jesus adds the call to proclaim "sight for the blind" to Isaiah's list and, in some ancient manuscripts, omits "binding up the brokenhearted." Well, that could have been Jesus' own take on Isaiah or it could have been somebody's bad memory in telling the story to Luke, or it could have been Luke himself thinking about the miracles that Jesus did in healing blind people. I'm not sure it matters. Jesus also adds a phrase, "to let the oppressed go free," which seems more significant to me and I'll come back to that in a minute. But most significantly for me, he breaks off his quotation of Isaiah in the middle of a sentence. That's the phrase, I realized this week, that really took me aback when I read the verses from Isaiah two weeks ago.

Isaiah 61:1-2 says, in part, "he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the brokenhearted, 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..." It's that last phrase that Jesus left out and that I stumbled over as I read from Isaiah. It's a phrase that embodies a very human expectation that one can find at various points in the Bible and in the devotional or theological literature of many faiths. As Fred Niedner expressed it in his remarks on this passage for *Christian Century* a few years ago, "further on, Isaiah would repeat the claim that Israel shall have for itself the wealth of the nations, while all those others end up with nothing but God's vengeance heaped upon them. Such was -- and is -- the conventional messianic dream of oppressed people. When we take over, we will be on top. The creeps who have oppressed us will be on the first track out." But Jesus, Niedner remarks, wants no part of such an expectation. His good news is for all humankind, for Jesus knows that all of us, oppressed and oppressor alike, are broken in some way and in need of grace. Indeed, he goes on in his sermon after the reading, to remind the good people of Nazareth of the stories of the prophets of God who were called to heal or bless Gentiles while children of Israel continued to suffer. For this universality in his message, Jesus' childhood neighbors rose up and threw him out of the synagogue and meant to stone him.

The wideness of God's mercy as expressed in Jesus' message is good for us to remember, especially during this week that is set aside by Christians all over the world as the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity. I am excited by the prospect of participating on Wednesday in a fellowship, learning and worship event being held at a Lutheran church with representatives from local Catholic, Episcopalian and Presbyterian congregations and clergy. Some of us undoubtedly remember when it was considered a great sin for Catholics to visit Protestant churches and vice versa. I can certainly remember when churches in close geographic proximity would not cooperate in anything because "*they weren't the right kind of Baptists,*" let alone any contact between God's Chosen People (that is, Baptists) and Methodists, Presbyterians, Lutherans or anybody else. I am glad to live in a place and time when ecumenism is the rule rather than the exception, when Christians are encouraged to focus on what brings us together rather than on what differences we have, when we can worship together and learn from each other. I thank God for the work of the World Council of Churches in creating and promoting this Week of Prayer for Christian Unity. We should also remember, though, that we still have a long way to go. There are still individuals and organizations within the Body of Christ who have forgotten the teaching of Paul to the Corinthians which is this morning's Lectionary epistle passage: "For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. ¹³For in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and we were all made to drink of one Spirit. ¹⁴Indeed, the body does not consist of one member but of many... God has so arranged the body, that there may be no dissension within the body, but the members may have the same care for one another. ²⁶If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it." There's an old joke that I imagine everyone has heard about the section of heaven that is walled off so that the group within (and the group changes depending on the teller) doesn't know that they aren't the only ones who made it. I look forward to the day when that joke will no longer be told because it will have no meaning. How long, O Lord, how long?

So in leaving out the phrase "the day of vengeance of our God," Jesus has practiced what sportswriters and general managers have long called "addition by subtraction." But what of the things he did say? What, for example, of the phrase that he apparently inserted into his reading of Isaiah 61, "to let the oppressed go free," a phrase which actually appears in Isaiah 58? Commentators have found this transposition significant primarily because it repeats the Greek word translated alternatively as release, deliverance, or liberty. It is the word $\alpha\phi\epsilon\sigma\iota\sigma$ and it appears as a noun three other times in Luke's Gospel. In those places, it is translated, depending on your version, either as remission or as forgiveness and in all three it is linked with the words "of sin;" the remission or forgiveness of sin. It's an interesting word with a very particular, technical meaning in its usage in Greek literature outside our New Testament. It was used to refer specifically to the forgiveness of financial debt and, in fact, the verb form is used in Luke's version of the Lord's Prayer both in that technical way and in reference to forgiveness from sin. Luke's literal rendering of the prayer is, "And forgive us our sins; for we also forgive every one that is indebted to us." It is a powerful reminder that while those of us in the comfortable middle class may focus quite legitimately on the Good News of Jesus as being of release from the bondage of bad habits, bad choices and other points of brokenness and sin in our lives, Jesus' Good News was literally to the poor, those struggling under the burden of unfair debt, rapacious taxation, and grinding poverty.

This economic component of Isaiah and Jesus' message may also help us to better understand a rather obscure phrase that Jesus has purposefully left in his quotation. What does it mean, "to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor" or "the acceptable year of the Lord?" Most commentators believe that this is a reference to the Old Testament concept of the Sabbath Year or the Year of Jubilee. Just in case you're not up on your Levitical or Deuteronomic laws this morning, let me elaborate. In Exodus and Deuteronomy, God instructs the people through Moses that they are to observe a Sabbath of years as well as a Sabbath of days. Every seventh year is to be for a special kind of rest. The land is to lie fallow, all debts are to be forgiven, those who have sold themselves into slavery are to be freed. Deuteronomy 15:1 says, "*Every seventh year you shall grant a remission of debts...*" There's that word, again. Even more radically, to our capitalist ears, there is to be a Sabbath of Sabbaths – at seven times seven years, the 50th year after 49 years, there is to be a Year of Jubilee, in which not only are the Sabbath Year provisions to be observed but any land purchased in the course of the previous 49 years is to be returned to the family which originally owned it. As Richard Donovan remarks in his commentary, "These provisions were designed to reduce the disadvantage of the poor—to insure that the wealthy could not accumulate all the land, the most valuable commodity in that economy." It was God's limiting governor on the engine of capitalism. Incidentally, should you be tempted to think that this is just modern commentators with socialist sensibilities making this link between the Good News of Jesus and this rather idealist and possibly never followed aspect of Torah, research on the Dead Sea Scrolls shows that Isaiah 61 was often linked to the Sabbath Year and Jubilee passages in Deuteronomy and Leviticus by Jewish writers contemporary with Jesus.

Just as this Sunday is part of the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity being celebrated in churches around the world, so it has also been designated as Jubilee Sunday in many churches. Some of you will no doubt remember Jubilee 2000, a movement which had its genesis in the Catholic Church and proposed to eliminate the debt of the world's poorest nations. It attracted many celebrity supporters and, more importantly, the affirmation of economists and political leaders from the G8, the largest creditor nations. Ultimately, over \$40 billion in debt cancellation for impoverished nations was achieved. Poverty was demonstrably reduced in many of those countries, as indebted governments were able to turn more of their scant resources to services for their people and less to paying astronomical interest payments on debts that stretched back to the 1970s. Many countries, however, still struggle under their debt load and so, in this Sabbath Year, 75 denominations and faith communities in the U.S. have joined together in the Jubilee USA Network. There is a similar organization in Great Britain. According to material from Jubilee USA Network, "Today on this Jubilee Sunday, congregations are coming together across the country to learn and pray, and then encourage our national leaders and the international development banks to cancel the debts of impoverished countries and institute more fair international trade and finance policies." Unfortunately, I learned of this program too late to get the educational materials shipped here but I will be ordering them and look forward to a time when we can discuss this issue as a congregation and, I hope, add our voices to those calling for Good News for the poor. As Jack Good wrote in his commentary on this passage: "a Christian faith without a social dimension is a wimpish impostor. The individualism that runs unrestrained through many churches today is a late and tragic corruption of a communal tradition. Paul knew this. He dismissed individualism with a few incisive phrases: 'When one member suffers, all suffer.' 'When one member is honored, all rejoice.'" Being aware and active in the fight to

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reduce poverty is just a small part of what we can do to help proclaim “the acceptable year of the Lord.” In the words of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.:

“The acceptable year of the Lord is any year we decide to do what is right...

The acceptable year of the Lord is any year when we will learn to live together as brothers [and sisters]...

The acceptable year of the Lord is any year in which we discover that – out of one blood – God made all the peoples of the earth...

The acceptable year of the Lord is any year in which we send to Congress men [and women] who will do justly, love mercy, and walk humbly with their God...

The acceptable year of the Lord is the year that men will beat their swords into ploughshares and their spears into pruning hooks; and nations will not rise up against nations; neither will they study war any more...

The acceptable year of the Lord is the year we allow justice to roll down like the waters and righteousness like a mighty stream.”

Of course, the ongoing struggle to bring economic and social justice to all of God's children begs the question: What did Jesus mean when he said that “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing”? Clearly, Jesus didn't mean that poverty had been eliminated, that all those suffering from blindness or other debilitating diseases had been cured, that all prisoners had been set free, either those in literal prisons or those enchained by sin. At least, he didn't mean it in a way that we understand “today.” But God stands outside time and, even in his humanity, Jesus understood that the gracious will of God both is accomplished and is being accomplished. I think the kind of fulfillment that Jesus is talking about is the fulfillment of beginning. That day, he came with the news that the Spirit of God was upon him and that the Kingdom of God, the Party of God, if you remember last week, was begun. That day began the fulfillment of the promises that the Jewish people had been clinging to since God first spoke to Abram.

It's the fulfillment of establishment, of inauguration. Now, it starts. Some commentators have called this passage, “Jesus' inaugural address.” Others call it his mission statement. I rather like that idea. I've been in non-profit management for a few years and I've participated in and led many strategic planning sessions and retreats, even taught classes on strategic planning. I like to think I know a little bit about mission statements. A mission statement, in the approach to strategic planning that I've favored, and as Brother Melby has occasionally reminded us, must be clear, concise and compelling. I think Jesus' restatement of Isaiah fits all of those categories. A mission statement must also set the bar high. A mission statement is what guides any organization (or individual) in their decision-making across a lifetime. If your mission statement is completely fulfilled then you must say, like the Lone Ranger to Tonto, “Our work here is done.” Or, you must determine a new mission. The classic example of this second possibility is that wonderful old agency, The March of Dimes. How many, I wonder, remember that it's original mission was “Uniting a nation to defeat polio”? Well, in 1955, thanks to the Salk vaccine, polio was defeated. The organization had to either fold up its tent or find something else to do. Now, their mission is “to improve the health of babies by preventing birth defects, premature birth, and infant mortality.” Equally admirable, far less likely to be completely fulfilled. Jesus' mission statement will find its fulfillment in the eyes of finite humanity only in the end of all things.

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It is, nevertheless, our mission statement, for we are the Body of Christ, as Paul's letter to the Corinthians reminds us, and it falls to us to continue the work of Christ. Now we are the messengers of the Good News, the εὐαγγέλιον. Now there's a good Greek word that can strike fear into hearts. I know the term evangelism makes some of you twitch. Makes me twitch, too. But it's up to us to remember that there is Good News and that people need to hear it. Evangelism doesn't have to be about tracts and Bible verses and steps to salvation. For some people, the Good News may be the simple reminder or life-changing news that there is a God who is loving and who loves them, that they are invited to the party. For some, the Good News may be a \$10 grocery card, or a night under a roof. For some, the Good News may be that God's people are on the move to address the systemic evils that lead to poverty and addiction and violence. We can't all bear all of this news to all who need it, but we are called to do our part. I have invited the Evergreen Association Evangelism Training Taskforce to provide our program at "Soup, Salad and Soul" the last two Wednesdays in February and I hope that many of you will join us. I promise it's not nearly as scary as it sounds.

But we do have Good News for the world, for our nation and for our community. The news that there is freedom from bondage, forgiveness of the debts we owe to God and to each other, remission from sin, that is news that all of us need to hear and to rejoice in and to spread to others. "We've a story to tell to the nations," the old hymn says, "a story of truth and mercy, a story of peace and light." Just as Isaiah foretold and Luke and John and the rest confirmed, in Christ Jesus the darkness has turned to dawning and now it is our mission, as the Body of Christ to proclaim that the dawning shall turn to noonday bright. Hear the Good News in this season of Epiphany: Christ's great kingdom shall come on earth, the kingdom of love and light. Thanks be to God.