

Translating the Good News

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 the 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.”

Imagine the scene. A famished Jesus returns after a forty-night long fasting trip in the wilderness. He returns after contemplating what it means to belong to God, and wrestling with the Voice of the Tempter. When he returns, the first thing he does is climb into the pulpit at his home church. There his faith life was nurtured. In these seats he learned Torah. Here he sang psalms. After a life transforming experience in the desert, he unfurls the scroll of Isaiah and reads off a list: “The Holy Spirit is upon me to preach good news to the poor. Release to the captives. Recovery of sight to the blind. Freedom for the oppressed. The year of the Lord’s favor.” Do you hear it? The first thing Jesus does is announce his mission statement. “Today it begins,” he says. “This is what I’m here to do.” It makes me wonder: What are we here to do?

Begin with a radical thought. What if the list that Jesus rattles off here is our list too?

Preaching good news to the poor.

Release to the captives.

Recovery of sight to the blind.

Freedom for the oppressed.

The year of the Lord’s favor.

What if the mission of the church is to be like a banner in the world announcing good news like Jesus did? A couple of weeks ago the Homeless Council of Winston Salem met in our Fellowship Hall. It was a diverse group of people who gathered to dream of a city where homelessness was extinct. The council flew in a consultant from Atlanta to help facilitate the vision. After the conference was over, he said to me that when he walked through our door and saw our Black Lives Matter banner, he knew we were a church that cared about the poor. It was a banner

announcing good news, for him. Take a look at the list of the gospel's values. Some are vague: preaching good news to the poor and freedom for the oppressed. Others are specific: healing for the blind, announcing the year of the Lord's favor: where mortgage loans are forgiven, credit card debt is cancelled, and a day that shocks Wall Street with love, mercy and justice. It's a radical list. So what if the list that Jesus rattles off is our list too?

Of course, there's a caveat: the good news we share must translate into actual good news. If the good news doesn't somehow transform a life or impact a community for the better, then what good is it? We sent missionaries to Africa, Latin America, India to spread the gospel among the poor. We smuggled in bibles, offering them a spiritualized Jesus who just saved souls. And then we colonized, leaving them more oppressed than they were to begin with. It's not good news! If the good news doesn't somehow translate into poor people being able to work for a livable wage, then it isn't really good news. If those whose lives are held down because society tells them they are less-than, if the gospel doesn't translate into God's people helping to release the burden, then how can we call it good? We've all heard a truncated version of the gospel which is so heavenly bound it's of no earthy use! But, if the good news doesn't translate into doing something about the bad news, then it really isn't that good of news to begin with.

So now go back to the question: What are we here to do? Maybe we confess we have a hard time figuring that out. We tend to spread ourselves out too thin. Doing ministry, as they say, a mile wide, but only an inch deep. Perhaps we need some boundaries or qualifiers to help us narrow the options down. Maybe we start by opening our bibles to the Old Testament reading the verse from the prophet that says we are to "Do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with God." If what we are doing doesn't line up with those values, then we say, "No!" Or maybe we flip to the New Testament where Jesus conflates all 613 laws into Loving God and loving our neighbor. If what we are doing does not embody God's love or care for our neighbor then we say, "No!" Maybe we get even narrower. We look to our mission statement to guide us. Tonight, session votes on a new mission statement: "TPC is committed to being an open and affirming intergenerational church who, through the gospel of Christ and with the Spirit, embodies God's love, builds community, and works toward justice." If what we are doing doesn't line up with those values, we don't it. Still, we need to ask the question: What are we here to do?

Well here's the challenge: whatever part of the good news we choose to make ours, it needs to be far enough outside our comfort zone that we will need God to do God's part too. Too often the church, in its anxiety, lives into its means. And while living into our means is sound advice for our spending habits, in the church it can squeeze the Holy Spirit right out of the picture. The truth is, if we had all the resources we needed than we would never have a need to trust God to do God's part. In a book about being in relationship with the poor, the author tells a story about when she and a bunch of homeless people in Philadelphia took over an old abandoned Catholic church. They busted the lock and invited themselves in. As the word spread the number of people doubled and tripled. They quickly discovered they needed more supplies. Suddenly neighbor began showing up with food, toys, space heaters. They turned the altar into

a cornucopia of toilet paper, diapers, blankets. They ended up with so many supplies that the homeless started sharing with others in the neighborhood who didn't have enough because they were poor too. The Catholic church heard about this and tried to tell them to go somewhere else, but they said, "We talked to God too, and God doesn't want any more homeless families." Friends, there is nothing stopping us from dreaming just as big. Maybe we set our sights on eradicating hunger by starting a bakery, hiring Trans folk who can't get jobs. Maybe we open a non-for-profit brew pub called "The Good News Brewery" and we keep going until there is equity in our city. Maybe we turn classrooms into bedrooms for people seeking sanctuary. Whatever our session discerns that God is calling us to do, the good news we are asked to proclaim is going to stretch us toward trusting God—needing God—to do God's part.

Today is the day it begins, says Jesus. Today is the day the good news is preached to the poor. Today is the day God's Spirit is upon our new elders and deacons, and all of us, to translate the gospel into actually being good news. Today.