

1-26-25 – “Good News to the Poor” – Luke 4:14-21

Whenever I read this morning’s gospel reading, I hear the words of my New Testament Professor, Frances: “Whatever you’re preaching, remember this: it’s not the Gospel unless it’s good news for the poor.”

Jesus goes back home to Nazareth for the official “launch party” for his ministry. He stands up in the synagogue during worship, and all eyes are upon him. His mom, dad, and siblings are there – Grandma’s joining on Zoom – they wait with bated breath to hear what their hometown boy will say. So he opens the scroll of Isaiah and reads these words:

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 bring 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.

This is Jesus’ inaugural address. His purpose; the mission statement for his ministry. Jesus has come to proclaim the gospel. And it’s not the Gospel unless it’s good news for the poor.

From the outset of his ministry, Jesus gives us this plumb line, the litmus test against which his ministry and all subsequent ministry will be measured. Does it bring good news for the poor? Does our worship, our prayer, our study, our mission, our property, our fellowship – does it improve the lives and tend to the needs of those who are suffering? Does it bring good news to those who are most vulnerable among us?

You all understand this, at a visceral level. I have watched you, First Presbyterian Church, set criteria for mission, make decisions of how to allocate time and resources, in terms of what makes life more bearable – and more *beautiful* for people who are poor.

Now, there is some nuance here, and it lies in what Jesus is *not* saying. Jesus is *not* saying is that the Gospel is *necessarily* bad news for the rich or the comfortable. In fact, there’s a story later in Luke’s Gospel in which Jesus meets a wee little man named Zacchaeus, you remember that one?

Zacchaeus was not only a wee little man, he was also a *rich* little man, and not a very nice one. Zacchaeus is a tax collector, and he confesses that he has defrauded people and taken more money than was his due. But Jesus goes to eat at Zacchaeus’ house, and Zacchaeus repents, he changes his ways. He says, “Look, half of my possessions, Lord, I will give to the poor. And if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I will pay back four times as much.”

The Gospel is good news for Zacchaeus, the wealthy, repentant sinner. But even in Zacchaeus’ own conversion story, the Gospel must *first* be good news for the poor.

Jesus begins his ministry with this plumb line, this standard, this priority. Perhaps because he knows that we Christians are liable to get distracted and focus on the wrong things. Perhaps because he knows there are competing ideas and ideologies out there trying to convince us that *they* are the gospel.

There’s a story about the late Baptist minister Tony Campolo that illustrates this beautifully. (And I apologize in advance; it uses some PG-13 language.)

As the story goes, Tony walked into a seminary classroom one day, looked at the students and said, “I have three things I’d like to say to you today.

“First, while you were sleeping last night, 30,000 kids died of starvation or preventable diseases related to malnutrition.

“Second, most of you don’t give a shit.

“And third, what’s worse is that you’re more upset about the fact I just said ‘shit’ than you are that 30,000 kids died last night.”

He's got a point, doesn't he? It is so easy get distracted and to focus on the wrong things. There is, after all, *so* much to fight about – to be right or wrong about – so many *easier*, more personally satisfying things to focus on than the well-being of the poor and most vulnerable in our society!

Which is why Jesus keeps calling us back to that plumb line. It's not the gospel unless it's good news for the poor.

There are some distractions that are...a little more sinister. People and institutions claiming their – or *our* – own ideas and opinions to be the gospel truth. And there's a word for this, actually – a bona fide theological term that we don't use so much these days: it's called heresy. Nineteenth-century German theologian Friedrich Schleiermacher defines heresy this way, he says: "It is that which preserves the *appearance* of Christianity, and yet contradicts its *essence*."

Recently we've heard a lot about a movement called Christian nationalism. And at first glance, that would seem to be quite relevant to us: We are, after all, American Christians.

But friends, I beg your caution on this one, because when we begin to interrogate the movement itself, what we find is a philosophy based on domination, on asserting power over others. We find values and tactics that don't square up very well with a Lord and Savior who says, "Blessed are the meek. Blessed are the poor in spirit. Blessed are the merciful."

Jesus gives us a plumbline. And if we take this text seriously, we find our answer: No, Christian nationalism is not the gospel, because it's *not good news for the poor*! If we can't find the part where we're feeding the hungry and housing the homeless and visiting the sick and welcoming the stranger, then friends, what we're looking at is probably not the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Jesus never had much patience for controversies and culture wars – in his time, or in ours. What he wants to know is, "Are you loving people?" and "Are you serving people?" And – spoilers – the answer he is seeking is always "yes," no matter who the people in question are.

When Jesus finishes reading, he sits down, and all eyes are upon him. And he says, "Today, this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."

Today.

Not someday. Not "when you die and get to heaven." Not "one great day in the future, after lots of hard work." Today. No, if it's the gospel we preach, it must be good news to the poor. And it must be good news to the poor, *today*.

"Today," Jesus says, "lift up the lowly. Today, proclaim release to the captives. Bind up the brokenhearted *today*; open the eyes of the blind *right now*; proclaim that the year of God's favor is *here* – and it is for everyone! No exceptions.

Today, this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing. Today, we all are called to be disciples of the Lord.

Today, we are called to be people of the Gospel. And it's not the gospel unless it's...[wait for answer] good news for the poor." The word of our Lord. Thanks be to God. Amen.