

“We Are as We Do”

January 23, 2022

Scripture: I Corinthians 12:12-13, 26-31a; Luke 4:14-21

This is one of my favorite scenes from Jesus’ story. It’s such a powerful moment when he returns to his hometown and addresses a synagogue where he undoubtedly had been countless times over the years. But this time it’s different. This time he is different. I can imagine the electric hush that must have fallen over the people gathered there as he took his place as their teacher for that Sabbath. And then, to turn in the Isaiah scroll to those words...just explosive.

But while I love this story, I have to admit every time I read it or hear it, I feel incredibly inadequate. “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.” How many scores of times had they heard those words before? How many have you and I heard them? I’m sure it never occurred to the people gathered that day to take those words personally. The “me” in the prophet’s words is sort of rhetorical; surely it’s not literal.

Yet Jesus takes it literally. He’s not talking about some abstract, imaginary actor, who would bring an abstract, imaginary liberation. He’s talking about real change to the condition of real people in the real world. But how are those of us who follow him supposed to carry it out? That’s where my inadequacy sets in. I suppose I could use the excuse that Jesus is talking about himself and not his followers, so I’m off the hook. But everything about his ministry following this moment tells me it’s not that simple. It’s not enough for us to affirm that Isaiah’s words are fulfilled in Jesus and then sit back and do nothing.

Recently I’ve been reading a book about the Irish famine in the 1840’s called *The Great Famine*. It’s a thoroughly depressing book. Some of the descriptions are heart-wrenching. I became interested because one of my ancestors left Ireland in the middle of those years at a very young age, only 18, to come to the States. I’m curious to know what he left. Ireland at that time was essentially owned by England. Most of the good land was used to produce export crops and the Irish people who worked the land were left to grow mostly potatoes for their subsistence. England at that time, as it is today, was a nominally Christian country. But the response of the English government to the massive starvation across Ireland was abysmal. They wanted to treat it as an administrative problem and not a humanitarian crisis. The Home Secretary at the time, James Graham, also interpreted what was happening through a pre-millenarian evangelical lens that “believed the destruction of the potato harvest was a providential judgment on both countries, but especially Ireland, for a range of moral failings.”

Carrying out the mission Jesus described in the Nazareth synagogue nearly 2,000 years ago has always been a challenge. But when faced with the suffering of real people how can his followers do nothing? The inaction of the British government toward the starving masses in

Ireland revealed who they really were. In the same way our identity as disciples of Jesus, or as fallen, is revealed through our actions toward the poor and captive today; we are as we do.

Somehow the Church as it became more popular and more powerful replaced behavior with belief. So long as we held the right beliefs, affirmed the right claims about who Jesus is and what God is doing through Jesus in the world, we would find salvation. And of course salvation was defined as what becomes of us after we die, once we're no longer able to effect change in the world. For many this led to theological views like those held by the British Home Secretary that said whatever condition people suffer is the condition God wants for them. Our job is just to put up with it until the end-time when God will sort it all out.

Do you see how contradictory that is to what Jesus is saying in Nazareth? Of course we can rationalize that he's only speaking about himself, and his declaration of fulfilling the prophet's words is meant more to get our attention than to be an ongoing project. But his actions and his teachings reveal something intended to be more lasting. I don't think we can escape the call to emulate Jesus, the invitation to follow him. In fact, it's right after this scene in Nazareth that Jesus begins gathering his disciples, training them to carry out his mission.

If it's true that we are as we do, then I don't think we can be followers of Jesus if we aren't engaged in the work Jesus sets out to do. But none of us is called to do that work in isolation. None of us is Christ; but together, as Paul says, we are the body of Christ. Paul sort of belabors his metaphor in this passage from Corinthians. I didn't mean any disrespect to him by skipping over some of it. His concern is the church in Corinth has become too stratified; some were claiming higher status over others based on the sort of divisions they brought with them from society. When he uses the analogy that the foot is no less important than the hand or the eye no more important than the ear, it all makes sense. I don't think we have that kind of problem. I think we struggle with the need to be unified in our commitment and our identity.

"Together we are the body of Christ." When we affirm that identity we're also affirming our commitment to the work Jesus does in the world. To be the body of Christ means we are the presence of Christ. And Christ has a lot to say about the conditions people suffer. Christ has a lot to say about bringing good news to the poor and proclaiming the year of the Lord's favor. When we engage in that effort as a body, when our actions carry out Jesus' mission, who we are is revealed. We are as we do.

One of my favorite writers and someone a number of us here have studied is Fr. Richard Rohr. He often makes the distinction between orthodoxy and orthopraxy. Orthodoxy is "right belief." As I said, it's what the Church over its history came to value most. Orthopraxy, on the other hand, is "right action." The Church is beginning to re-value action over belief. What we're finding more and more is our actions in the world shape what we believe. Jesus doesn't issue a catechism everyone is told to memorize; he brings healing and compassion his followers are told to imitate.

The more we reach out with compassion and generosity to people who are hungry or neglected or persecuted, the more we are shaped in Christ's image. And we can only do that effectively together, as a body. If our hope is to bring the world good news, to lift others out of despair, to offer healing for those who have been damaged, then we all need to be engaged in that effort together. Jesus was convinced the world could change. Paul experienced that change within himself and through the communities he founded and nourished. And we can be part of that change, too. We can change the world through our actions; we can bring good news through acts of compassion, generosity and justice. In light of Jesus' words and Paul's instruction, I find myself going back over and over to the words of Teresa of Avila:

*"Christ has no body now on earth but yours, no hands, no feet but yours. Yours are the eyes with which Christ looks out his compassion to the world. Yours are the feet with which he is to go about doing good. Yours are the hands with which he is to bless us now."*

Amen