

“Inauguration of Justice”

January 26, 2025

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

“If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it.” What do you suppose was happening in the church in Corinth that compelled Paul to make that statement? To us, I hope, it sounds fitting and appropriate. It may be aspirational at times, but we can all understand it as an ideal. Sometimes, though, in a community the level of conflict becomes so toxic that the members can no longer identify with each other. So, one person’s suffering becomes another’s source of glee. Or when one person is honored, all the others are resentful. It’s possible things were reaching a boiling point in that community, so Paul felt it necessary to be very explicit.

We need one another, he tells them in no uncertain terms. We’re all in this together and must learn to value one another. That kind of radical inclusion that refused to make distinctions based on class or religion or ethnicity was a feature of all the communities Paul founded. He truly believed that in Christ every barrier between people was broken down. No person was intrinsically rejected. His analogy of the community as a body, with all its different, yet essential, parts was a way to help these folks understand their interdependence.

I suspect for Paul that connection was meant to apply only to the small community of Christians. He had his hands full with them and didn’t really think universally. Jesus, on the other hand, seems to have a broader perspective. This scene in Nazareth in his childhood synagogue reveals someone who is convinced a turning point has been reached that will have an impact on the entire world.

There are so many other passages of scripture he could have read. The prophets are full of powerful statements calling the people to repent. Why not Micah: “He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?” Or Amos: “Take away from me the noise of your songs; I will not listen to the melody of your harps. But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an everflowing stream.” There are even other readings from Isaiah that would be more punitive, more demanding.

But Jesus chooses this reading, and very selectively, to announce his mission in the world. This is Jesus’ inaugural address in Luke’s gospel, the first time he says something publicly that we hear about. We’re told he’s been teaching in synagogues throughout the region of Galilee, so it’s possible he read these words everywhere he visited. But for us it’s the first time Jesus speaks out. It’s easy, I think, to sort of gloss over these words and miss their impact. We’ve heard this story so many times that we don’t often reflect on what it means.

Jesus says he is anointed by God to bring good news to the poor, proclaim release to the captives, recovery of sight to the blind, let the oppressed go free, and proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor. Those are very broad categories. What does good news to the poor look like? How are captives released and sight recovered? Who are the oppressed to be set free? And what,

exactly, is the year of the Lord's favor? I have to admit I'm a little torn between wanting to take these words literally and applying them more metaphorically or spiritually. In the gospels, of course, Jesus is portrayed as healing blind people and setting people free of the oppression of demons. But those actions are meant, I think, to point us to a changed reality, to a world where God is fully present and we are invited to walk in that presence and reveal it through our actions.

What Jesus is describing as his mission is summed up in the last phrase, "to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." That's a reference to something from Leviticus called "the Jubilee year." Every 50 years in Israel all the economic and social relationships that have gone awry were to be restored. What's described is a resetting of all the financial arrangements that people have had to enter, like debts and indentured servitude. So, for instance, if someone has had to sell their property to pay a debt, on the 50th year, the Jubilee, that property is returned to the family. Or if someone is working off a debt as a servant, they're set free and can return to their homes. Essentially, Jubilee is "ground zero" for society. Everything goes back to the beginning.

This is a type of restorative justice that is found throughout the Bible. Contrary to what many of us have been taught, the God of the Jewish scriptures, or the Old Testament, calls for restoration more than punishment. We like to see people get what's coming to them, or at least what we think they should get. God wants to see people brought back from their bad behavior and restored to wholeness; God wants to reclaim us and not reject us.

So, that's what Jesus is announcing. The inauguration of justice he proclaims is to bring us back to relationship with God and one another, not to punish or condemn us. The question is, is that solely Jesus' job or do we have any role to play? I think Jesus intends his followers to be involved in this mission. Later in Luke's gospel we'll learn about the disciples going out to spread Jesus' teachings on their own. In John's gospel, during their last night together, Jesus talks about their carrying on his teachings and becoming his presence in the world. And in this reading from First Corinthians we find Paul saying, "Now you are the body of Christ, and individually members of it." If we're the body of Christ, then aren't we meant to do the work of Christ?

There's a beautiful quote that's often attributed to the mystic Teresa of Avila: "Christ has no body now but yours. No hands, no feet on earth but yours. Yours are the eyes through which he looks compassion on this world. Yours are the feet with which he walks to do good. Yours are the hands through which he blesses the world." If that's true, then how do we allow Christ to work through us? What are we called to do in a world where there is blindness and captivity and oppression? How do we bring good news to the poor in our time and place?

For the poor around Jesus, good news was learning that they were not forgotten by God, that their condition was not hidden. Bringing good news to the poor in our time could mean advocating on behalf of people around us who are vulnerable. Whenever we reach out to people in need, to refugees and immigrants, to people targeted for their gender identity, to people struggling to put food on the table or pay their rent or get access to proper healthcare, we are bringing the good news that they are not forgotten, that their struggles matter and they're not alone. Even though our actions may not be able to restore people to wholeness, we can at least be a voice for them and stand with them.

And in doing that, we become more aware of the interdependence Paul is describing to the Corinthian Christians. If we extend his analogy to the wider society, we can begin to see how important diversity is for our well-being. We come from so many different backgrounds and cultures, religions and ethnicities, sometimes it can be overwhelming to see so many differences. But the strength of our country has always been our ability to learn from our differences and rely on one another for the common good. We need each other not just to reveal Christ in the world more clearly but to grow toward a restored community where economic and social relationships are healed, where those who are captive to fear and hatred can be released, where those who are oppressed by intimidation and threats are set free. That's what the body of Christ can do in the world; what God can do through us.

In that tiny synagogue in Nazareth, Jesus launches a movement that will sweep across an empire and in time find its way to us. He invites us to join him in bringing justice, in restoring wholeness, in setting prisoners, ourselves included, free. We are his hands, his feet, his eyes in the world to bring compassion, justice, and healing. It all begins today, every day, and it begins with us.

Amen