

Scriptures:

1 Corinthians 12:12-31a

Luke 4: 14-21

Today's Kingdom

In a world that can sometimes seem so random, this 3rd week of Epiphany gives us vision and purpose. The guiding force in Jesus' life and ministry has been announced. In our gospel today Jesus claimed the prophecy of Isaiah as his mandate. He proclaimed himself to be a part of God's saving and liberating purpose. And then in 1 Corinthians Paul tells us that we too are called, individually and together, to fulfil Christ's purpose, in our world. To do this, God has gifted each of us, and called us to work together as one Body becoming a community of unity is our purpose.

Working together and sharing our gifts and purpose is critical for the wellbeing of all. I have always been a believer in connectedness. As I began my theological education this was the deepest transforming relief for me. Having been raised to be very self-reliant and dependant I knew how to make it on my own but there was a deep part of me that longed for connection with others. The more I studied scripture, the more I heard the teachings of Jesus and Paul and John the more I realized we were not created to be alone, we were created to be in community. We are created to lift one another up to partner with one another in this thing we call life.

As I read this very familiar passage on Tuesday I had a bit of an epiphany. Last week was a rough week with sickness running through the house. I had several moments of feeling very alone in my exhaustion and struggle to be resilient. And yet after I had come out the other side I realized something I had done. Something that I would never recommend in fact I might condemn someone else for doing.

In that week I had an offer of help, a very clear one, one that I definitely needed and you know what I said to that offer of help? I didn't say 'no' nope I couldn't even spit that out. The reality was I needed it so bad I didn't even answer the question I diverted and told the person about someone else who needed help and sent them in that direction. It was later in the week when I was feeling still sick, tired, frustrated and alone that I realized some of those feeling were my own fault. See some of us don't need so much to hear the message help others, offer to others, some of us need to hear the message let others help you. That is what a body does. That is what a community does, we pull together, we allow one another to be there for us when we can't do it on our own and visa versa.

Now, I'm no Doctor but I do know is that when one part of the body isn't functioning well often other parts step it up. You know what I mean usually when you go to get a massage for one soar spot you realize that spot is soar because of a problem in an entirely different part of the body.

Right? When I have a neck ache, I have a head ache, and my vision gets blurred and.... The list goes on. If one of us is hurting, the rest of us is hurting. We know that feeling right? When someone you love hurts, you hurt too. It's even better if someone we love is full of joy and we can be full of joy for them too. (that one our society is as good at).

That brings us to our gospel text this morning. To be honest at a first glance it's a rather boring text. A rather everyday event is taking place. On the Sabbath a speaker reads from the scrolls and then that reader interprets the scrolls to their understanding. It's not all that different from what I expect a sermon to be today. Preaching involved making an ancient story, and the wisdom of the prophets, alive for the day. On this day Jesus was to be the reader and reflector in his hometown. "A synagogue leader handed him the scroll, and Jesus finds the place where the reading left off the week before and reads from the prophet Isaiah:

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 favour.

Jesus then rolled up the scroll and handed it back to the attendant. All eyes fixed on him. The congregation awaited his comment--his interpretation of these ancient words, a Messianic promise for them. Would he address the occupation, the oppression of the empire, or perhaps his own ministry that is gaining attention throughout the region? No one breathed, the community alert with expectation. Diana Butler Bass reflects Jesus might have preached on the wisdom of the old prophet: ... Or he might have elaborated on the world to come: stating something like "We, along with Isaiah, await the fulfillment of this glorious promise! One day, the poor will be lifted up, captives set free, and the blind will see! Oh, how we long for that! How we pray for that! But it seems so slow in coming."

Jesus could have appealed to his friends' sense of theological nostalgia--How great Isaiah was!--or their fragile theological hope for a better future. The kingdom of God will come! But he did neither.

Instead, Jesus actually said, something quite shocking. He said "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." And he sat down.

They were shocked and began to question immediately his words.. What do you mean that the Spirit of the Lord is HERE? Now? Today? That the poor hear good news, that prisoners are being released, the blind see, and the oppressed receive justice? This is the year of Lord's favour? They likely wondered if Jesus had lost his senses and was blind to how horrible things were in their world. The reality was that there was more inequality than ever, more people in prison unjustly, more illness of all sorts, more violence and terrorism than our ancestors ever knew. How could he say "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing?" Well truth is Jesus' message infuriated the people so much they tried to throw him off a cliff.

The synagog like most faith communities was consumed with memories of the past and hopes for the future. Speaking of the past takes its form in the maintaining of buildings and structures, teaching ancient texts, and passing on patterns of life and values from ancestors. Speaking of the future is often wrapped up in hopes for salvation and eternal life, desires for answered prayers, for the children to hold onto faith or "come back to church." Both past and future are important to vibrant communities; healthy and life-giving practices of honoring our ancestors and embracing a hopeful future derive from the witness of the whole biblical tradition.

But both "past" and "future" as the primary location of faith have their shadow sides.

Overemphasizing the past results in nostalgia--the belief that the past is better than either the present or the future--a disposition that is steeped in grief and fear. Overemphasizing the future--the belief that all that matters is that which is to come--often results in thwarted hope, doubt, and anxiety.

“A recent survey from Public Religion Research discovered that the majority of churchgoers in the United States express high levels of both nostalgia and anxiety. By strong majorities, religious Americans--particularly white Protestants, and without any significant difference between theological conservatives and liberals--believe that "our best days are behind us" and that the future of society is bleak. In particular, mainline congregations are caught between valorizing the good old days and a deepening sense of desolation that some promised future will never arrive. Evidently, most Protestants would rather look back with sadness than trust that a more just and beautiful future beckons. As a result, today is lost. Today is merely a stage upon which we mourn the loss of past and fear what we cannot imagine.

But "today" is a deeply dangerous spiritual reality--because today insists that we lay aside both our memories and our dreams to embrace fully the moment of now. The past romanticizes the work of our ancestors; the future scans the horizons of our descendants and depends upon them to fix everything. But "today" places us in the midst of the sacred drama, reminding us that we are actors and agents in God's desire for the world.”¹ Bass argues "Today" is the most radical thing Jesus ever said.

Jesus essentially told his friends, "Look around. See the Spirit of God at work, right here. Right now. God is with us. The ever active, ever loving, ever liberating, always present God is here with us. Now." People are frustrated because Jesus is challenging them or us to open their eyes and see God present and at work here and now. Jesus called them and calls us to see more deeply. To see past the immediate injustice and evils of the world and look for love and compassion in every crevasse. If we can see, experience, and grasp that the active force of love is at work in the world now, our fear will recede, our hatred melt, our willingness to seek revenge will dissipate, and we can recognize that in the midst of all things--even in the worst oppression--God is with us.

The presence of the Spirit was not just upon Jesus but upon all who gathered. Jesus used the word today so that they might see the ancient prophecy of Isaiah was for them. Jesus offered a powerful invitation for the whole community to act on behalf of God's justice. The text might have been read:

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me (and therefore also with you),

¹ http://day1.org/7044-the_power_of_today

We have been anointed to bring good news to the poor. God has sent us 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. Living in God's promise is not about yesterday. Nor is it about awaiting some distant Messiah and eternal life in the Kingdom of God. It is about NOW. This can be a hard truth to hear and receive. Jesus' friends refused the message. They chose to stay mired in nostalgia and complain about the future. How great the prophets were! If only a saviour would appear and get us out of this mess!

Jesus' sermon remains as clear and poignant and important and urgent as ever: Today this promise has been fulfilled in your hearing--what we need is here. Today. As he began his work, he proclaimed as his mandate the words of Isaiah's prophecy, God's saving and liberating purpose. And now, we are called, individually and together, to fulfil Christ's purpose, in our world and in our time. To do this, God has gifted each of us, and called us to work together as one Body. The purpose of Christ, revealed in the Isaiah prophecy, is one in which God calls us all to participate. This liberating, compassionate, transforming vision is one that impacts everything we do.

In every community including our own there are those who need liberation, the poor who need good news; the physically, psychologically or spiritually blind who need sight; the prisoners who need to be freed. The purpose of Christ is both an invitation to life for all the broken and lost ones (including us), but also a challenge to participate in the work of liberation for all. This means that each of us needs to find and fulfil our place and purpose in the Body of Christ, as we work together toward Jesus' dream of a liberated world. It also means that we need to listen to Jesus' teachings and allow them to challenge our own injustice and direct our quest to bring life and wholeness to all creation. Today and always. Amen.