

**Sermon:** I have learned, over my five decades of pastoral ministry, that when people gather to have fun, the local church pastor will seldom be invited. When there are baptismal celebrations, wedding receptions, and graduation parties - the minister is most welcome, and almost always invited. But when people want to just hang out, have some drinks and a few laughs, the local church pastor will seldom be there. I've learned not to feel badly about this, for that kind of 'popularity' is not a very good measure of faithfulness in doing one's job. Pastors have a different kind of calling, and a different kind of popularity.

During Epiphany, we are journeying with Christ in the Gospel of Luke. In our reading this morning from the fourth chapter, we find Jesus enjoying a time of widespread popularity: "All spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his mouth," reports Luke. Jesus had just emerged successful from a period of intense struggle with evil, in which he had become more fully aware of the power of God's Spirit dwelling within him. Leaving the wilderness, Jesus begins traveling through his native Galilee, moving from village to village, teaching and preaching in the synagogues and wherever people gather. His style of teaching was fresh, powerful, and authoritative, and people flocked to hear him.

Thus, there may have been 'standing room only' when the news spread that Jesus would be preaching in his hometown synagogue in Nazareth. As was their custom, whenever a visiting Rabbi joined the local congregation in worship, the host Rabbi would invite their guest to choose the second reading. So Jesus is invited to read, and asks for the scroll of the prophet Isaiah. Jesus carefully opens the scroll to one of Isaiah's "servant poems," and begins reading: "*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.*" After reading these words, Jesus sat down to teach, saying: "*Today, this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.*"

What did he mean? With these few words, Jesus has declared for all to hear that his mission is the mission of Isaiah's suffering servant. His ministry will be centered in the needs of the 'poor, the blind, the imprisoned, and the oppressed.' Rejecting the 'all too frequent' words that blame the poor for their poverty, the diseased for their diseases, and the prisoners for their imprisonment; Jesus will proclaim "Good News" to them - proclaim God's love for them, embodied in a spirit of respect, affirmation, and hope. And, to be clear - as author Verity Jones writes, "the people of Nazareth are themselves the poor, the captives, the blind, and the oppressed. They are under the rule of a foreign power; they are starved, controlled, and enslaved." And so they hear his word 'today this is fulfilled' and are astonished! 'Can it be that our liberation is at hand?' they wonder. Is this our long-awaited Messiah, come to save us from Rome's awful

tyranny?' 2000 years later, living in New Hampshire and enjoying a very different kind of life experience, we will not hear the good news in the way that this ancient congregation heard it. Our situation is so very different! What might his words mean for us?

For some 35 years, in addition to being a local church pastor, I served as a call firefighter. The mission of the firefighter is quite simple. When firefighters hear of a fire, they immediately respond with their equipment, and put their skills and training to work extinguishing the fire, and, when necessary, saving human lives. When someone's home is on fire, the sound of sirens and the sight of bright flashing lights are signs of hope. Help is on the way. Like the firefighter, Jesus knows that he has a singular mission: ". . . 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 Jesus understands that he cannot do this alone. He will need disciples who are willing to work with him, who are willing to undertake this mission as their own.

The invitation to be part of Jesus' mission is similar in spirit to the challenge President John F. Kennedy made to the American people in his Inaugural speech. Many of you will remember his words: "Ask not what your country can do for you, but what you can do for your country." To be a citizen, President Kennedy believed, is to serve. As a young person, I found his words made sense and inspired me to be a better citizen. The Gospel writers will argue similarly that to be a Christian is to serve the people Jesus cared about, the people most often neglected or even abused by their social and governing institutions. And, to be clear, the circle of those suffering abuse in this moment is growing wider and including more and more of those who, in the words of Howard Thurman, are living 'with their backs against the wall.'

Bishop Mariann Edgar Budde's homily at the Interfaith Prayer Service that was part of the Inauguration's festivities has brought her an abundance of criticism from a number of those on the theological and political right. They have accused her of bringing politics into the sanctity of the church, of corrupting sacred space with her talk of mercy and compassion for people in harm's way. But looking out for the least of earth's peoples, the poor, oppressed, and imprisoned; and attending to the needs of the people most often endangered by those in power, is precisely the message of Isaiah, Jesus, Paul, and James! Indeed, if we take Luke 4 seriously, it is the very heart of the Christian Gospel; the compelling vision that drives Jesus' mission; the most sacred of obligations! Like Jesus, Budde was preaching the gospel in a manner designed to make the comfortable uncomfortable, the self-satisfied just a bit dissatisfied. Her critics are now pouncing upon her, demanding an apology. Sometimes, as Jesus certainly knew, that's the price one pays for sticking one's neck out on behalf of earth's neglected and mistreated people.

One of the most stimulating Christian pastors I ever met and listened to - and someone who pushed me to think differently - is the Rev. Gordon Crosby. Returning to the states after World War II, he felt God's call to ministry. Disappointed with his experience in the mainline church of that time, he decided to begin his own church. He determined that he would establish a church with a singular vision; it would be an ecumenical church of no particular denomination but belonging to the National Council of Churches; it would be a church of high expectations, requiring of every member very specific involvement in the church's mission; and, it would be a church with Jesus' self-proclaimed mission to the poor at its heart. He founded the church in downtown Washington D.C. and devoted his life to fulfilling the vision. Crosby recently passed away at the age of 95, having served as pastor of the church for some 60 years. Some years ago, a parishioner was leaving for a trip to Washington and wanted some suggestions about where to worship. I suggested Crosby's Church of the Savior. She had a hard time finding the church, for neither she or I understood that it was housed in a nondescript two-family brownstone dwelling situated in an inner-city residential neighborhood. It didn't look like a church, but when she went in she discovered that it sure felt like a church. She found herself in a church of excited and involved people; people committed to being the church in the world, a people excited about their ministries to the illiterate, to people with AIDS, their summer camping program for inner-city youth, counseling to those who are abused, legal aid to those unjustly imprisoned, etc. She couldn't wait to tell me all about it when she returned home.

Not every church can be Washington's Church of the Savior, but every church exists to offer ministry in Christ's name to others. I'm probably not the first minister that has challenged you to care for God's people, for I've learned in my short time among you of your concern for affordable housing and support of Habitat for Humanity. You have heard of the needs of hungry children, and responded with your 'got lunch' program as well as your support of a local food pantry. The January Belfry tells of your recent work with your partner congregation in Zimbabwe, lending a hand as they seek to serve Christ in their own oppressive setting. As Archbishop Oscar Romero said, "This is the mission of Christ: to bring good news to the poor, to those who receive only bad news, to those who receive only abuse from the powerful, to those who can only watch the riches that delight others pass them by. It is for these that the Lord comes." (3<sup>rd</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time (C), 1980)

The Apostle Paul wrote to the people in Corinth, 'you are a part of the body of Christ.' You are a part of a world-wide movement of people seeking to 'do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with your God.' And so I will close this sermon with the prayer that God will bless us, and that the Holy Spirit will lead us, as we seek to follow faithfully in the path of Jesus Christ. Amen.