



SERMONS THAT WORK

Epiphany 3

Jesus' Mission Statement

[RCL] Nehemiah 8:1-3, 5-6, 8-10; Psalm 19; 1 Corinthians 12:12-31a; Luke 4:14-21

Today's gospel presents us with Jesus' first act of public ministry, described for us in Luke's gospel. Following his river baptism and his long wilderness fast and temptation, Jesus returns to his home country, Galilee. Reports about him have been spreading through the population, probably the result of his healing miracles and his synagogue teaching.

So when he comes back home, it's quite a big day in the synagogue. Everybody's there, eager to hear the local boy who's making such a name for himself.

Jesus enters the synagogue on that Sabbath morning. It seems smaller than it looked when he was a child, but otherwise nothing about this familiar place has changed.

Joseph and Mary prepared him well for life. They raised him faithfully in their ancestral religion. He regularly attended Sabbath school and youth group; they brought him to the synagogue every week – as a baby, a child, a teenager.

It wasn't always easy, especially when he was a baby. And so Joseph and Mary must be patron saints for all the parents now who bring their babies to worship, who make sure their children get to church school, who see their sons and daughters belong to youth group. It's not easy. But these parents know that the child who participates regularly in the community of God's people is likely to have a strong faith in adulthood and a firm foundation during every crisis of life.

So Jesus returns to the Nazareth synagogue, thankful for the upbringing he received there. He is asked to read the lesson from the prophets. There is no lectionary to consult to determine this reading; the choice is up to him. Nor is there a book to flip through. Instead, a bulky scroll is brought to him and placed upon the lectern. Jesus, searching for a familiar text, unrolls it to a place near the end of the scroll. In a voice strong with anticipation, he reads aloud 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 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.”

Finished with this brief passage, Jesus rolls up the scroll, returns it to the attendant, and takes his seat.

It is the custom for teachers to sit, rather than to stand, so when Jesus sits, everyone looks at him, expecting some commentary, some explication of this text, a text well known to many of them.

There are no professional clergy. The synagogue president can invite any appropriate person to comment on the text. Often these remarks are less than inspiring. While the people are biblically literate, commentary on scripture by such speakers is often no more than rote recitation of lessons all of them learned at an early age. So the congregation usually knows what will be said before it is said, and the only question is whether it will be said correctly or not.

Not so today when Jesus sits down. The people are all looking at him. He looks around at them, those familiar faces from his early years, older in appearance than before: his childhood friends, now present with their children; the parents of his friends, now senior citizens.

He begins with a zinger, and something much more than a zinger – a sentence that remains fresh and provocative down to our own time. Jesus sets free the scripture passage he has just read; he lets the lion out of its cage; he overthrows the ho-hum expectations of the people around him. Here is what he says: Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.

Jesus does the unexpected, the unimaginable, on that memorable Sabbath morning in Nazareth. In today’s jargon, he claims those ancient prophetic words as his own personal mission statement. The reason God’s Spirit came crashing down on him at his baptism was to empower him to do precisely this: bring good news to the poor, release to the captives, and recovery of sight to the blind; let all the oppressed go free; announce the sweet Jubilee Year when God’s justice will reshape society.

Jesus takes all this as his mission statement, and he is not content to leave it as only a string of high-sounding words. Everything that follows in his life, as presented to us in the gospel, amounts to the living out of the prophecy he claims for himself that Sabbath morning in Nazareth.

He keeps doing these things every chance he gets, every time he turns around, until finally it kills him. Some people welcome what Jesus does, but others do not because it upsets their unfair advantage, questions their complacency, and pushes them to recognize their habitual infidelity to God. They find their discomfort increasingly intolerable and think that his judicial murder will bring an end to the matter. They are wrong, of course. Jesus rises alive from the dead and continues today to do what he talked about that Sabbath morning long ago.

Now the way he works is through his mystical body, the church. Through each of us and all who are baptized into his body, Jesus strives still to live out his mission statement, bringing good news to those who don't have any, setting free those chained in captivity, opening blind eyes, helping the oppressed and exploited find a life, and unrolling the floor plan that sets out God's reign where justice and peace prevail.

Jesus still does these things, because his church does them. The poor gain hope, whether it's their souls or their bodies that are starved. The captives experience freedom, whether they are prisoners in a jail or prisoners in a mansion. The blind receive sight, whether it's cataract surgery at the church hospital or the scales of prejudice falling off the eyes of a bigot. The oppressed are set free, whether oppression is a political regime or a chemical dependence. When Jesus reads that passage in the Nazareth synagogue, he announces a mission statement for himself and for his body, the church.

Today's reading from First Corinthians is another important passage about how the Body of Christ, the church, is to live out the mission statement of Jesus. As we strive to keep faithful to those words Jesus read aloud and lived out, we can pay attention to three points that St. Paul insists on in that passage.

Number One: All members of the church have gifts for ministry.

Number Two. The members of the church have different gifts for ministry; we are not clones of each other.

Number Three. The different gifts come to life in the context of the whole.

Jesus read the old words from Isaiah and claimed them for his own. We can do the same. Please stand and repeat after me, sentence by sentence:

The Spirit of the Lord is upon us.

The Spirit of the Lord has anointed us to bring good news to the poor.

The Spirit of the Lord has sent us to proclaim release to the captives.

The Spirit of the Lord has sent us to help the blind recover their sight.

The Spirit of the Lord has sent us to free the oppressed.

The Spirit of the Lord has sent us to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.

Today, this scripture has been fulfilled in our hearing. Amen.

*This sermon was written by **the Rev. Charles Hoffacker** for Epiphany 3 (C) in 2013.*