

“A Liberating God”

Luke 4:14-21

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From the earliest pages of Scripture, we see God working in history to set people free. God accomplishes the work of liberation by working through the lives of women and men and also through the dynamics of faith communities such as ours. Pick up the book of Exodus or Esther or Ruth or the Psalms and what we find is God hearing the cry of the poor and the lame and the imprisoned and the under-valued and rallying support where there had been none before.

Jesus was born into that theology of a liberating God. One Sabbath Day Jesus walked into the synagogue, volunteered to be the lay reader, turned in the Torah to the Prophet Isaiah’s description of the Messiah, and read aloud those words that name God’s passion for freedom.

Bring good news to the poor.

Proclaim release to the captives.

Recovery of sight to the blind.

Let the oppressed go free.

Proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.

Then, in what I can only describe as a bold move, he announces his identity to the gathered community. “Today, this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.”

So, when a church finds itself struggling with its understanding of mission, unsure of where God is calling it to be, that church would do well to focus on the five ministries Jesus quotes from Isaiah's prophecy:

+Bring Good News to the poor

+Recovery of sight to the blind.

+Let the oppressed go free.

+Proclaim release to the captives

+Proclaim the year of the Lord's favor

Each one of these five is a sermon unto itself! But taken as a whole, it is a clear call for the churches to be involved in God's liberating work. We are to be the voice of Moses speaking to Pharaoh, "Let my people go!" Let my people have an experience of being truly free.

This liberating work begins with the work of discernment. Who are the poor? Who are those trapped behind the bars of addiction? Who are those held back by discrimination or prejudice? Who are the ones hungering for a new day to dawn? Each time I pull out the Minister's Discretionary Fund checkbook to write a check, I wrestle with these questions. Will this small gift enable someone to see what they had not seen before? Will this small gift open a door that had been closed before? Will this small gift bring hope where there had been despair? Will my use of church funds reflect Jesus' vision of a liberating God?

On our Annual Meeting Sunday, I reflect on the year 2018, and I celebrate so much evidence of our ministry and mission patterned after Jesus' pronouncement that day in the synagogue.

+We have begun an initiative to declare ourselves a WISE church, that is; a church that is committed to liberating people who still hang on to stereotypes of mental illness.

+We continue to be a church committed to liberating people who are weighed down by the burden of homophobia.

+We are committed to being a church whose building is a place of refuge for anyone held back by the power of additions.

+We are committed to educating the children of Malawi, now considered the poorest nation on the planet. Ask Linear Chimonjo what his education has meant to him. Ask Leah Kagona how her college education is preparing her to be an instrument of peace. Ask Mercy Kambatuah what it means to be able to attend high school. Ask them, and you will hear how education unlocks the chains of poverty.

+We are committed, this very weekend especially, to proclaiming good news to the poor who happen to be homeless, maybe needing a warm jacket, maybe a hot meal, maybe a warm shelter. Many of you stopped by the burn barrel this weekend and felt the enthusiasm of our youth wanting to make some difference in the lives of those who have fallen on tough times.

+We are committed to studying the Bible and to preaching from the Bible such that our eyes are opened to the deeper truths, such that we begin to see what we had not seen before, to understand what we had not understood before.

I sort of wish I had been there that day in the synagogue when that young man, Jesus, stood up in the pulpit, read from the Prophet Isaiah, and then declared that on this very day this prophecy has been fulfilled. I'd like to think I might have shouted an AMEN. What I do know is that his proclamation was a turning point from which there was no turning back, no turning back. And I also know that the churches of today that are truly alive are the ones that are embracing that ancient formula for mission:

Bring good news to the poor.

Bring sight to the blind.

Let the oppressed and the captives go free.

Announce the year of the Lord's favor.

I tell you it is a profound joy to be a pastor in a church that is so alive!

It is no secret that I remain in the greatest of hope. Amen.