

Today

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This week we continue reading from the first letter to the Corinthians. The church was having trouble getting along with one another. Some folks were looking down on other folks. And basically, Paul writes that we need each other- and every gift for the Body of Christ. We are called to honor and love one another, to suffer with each other. This is how community works. This is right before Chapter 13 on the greater gifts of faith, hope, and Love with LOVE being the greatest.

1 Corinthians 12:12-31a

12:12 For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ.

12:13 For in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body--Jews or Greeks, slaves or free--and we were all made to drink of one Spirit.

12:14 Indeed, the body does not consist of one member but of many.

12:15 If the foot would say, "Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body," that would not make it any less a part of the body.

12:16 And if the ear would say, "Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body," that would not make it any less a part of the body.

12:17 If the whole body were an eye, where would the hearing be? If the whole body were hearing, where would the sense of smell be?

12:18 But as it is, God arranged the members in the body, each one of them, as he chose.

12:19 If all were a single member, where would the body be?

12:20 As it is, there are many members, yet one body.

12:21 The eye cannot say to the hand, "I have no need of you," nor again the head to the feet, "I have no need of you."

12:22 On the contrary, the members of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable,

12:23 and those members of the body that we think less honorable we clothe with greater honor, and our less respectable members are treated with greater respect;

12:24 whereas our more respectable members do not need this. But God has so arranged the body, giving the greater honor to the inferior member,

12:25 that there may be no dissension within the body, but the members may have the same care for one another.

12:26 If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it.

12:27 Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it.

12:28 And God has appointed in the church first apostles, second prophets, third teachers; then deeds of power, then gifts of healing, forms of assistance, forms of leadership, various kinds of tongues.

12:29 Are all apostles? Are all prophets? Are all teachers? Do all work miracles?

12:30 Do all possess gifts of healing? Do all speak in tongues? Do all interpret?

12:31 But strive for the greater gifts.

The gospel of Luke has taken us on a roller coaster ride as we follow Jesus. Let's review: Newly baptized, Jesus is singled out by the Holy Spirit appearing as a dove, and a heavenly voice calls Jesus "my child, the beloved" (things are looking up!). The Holy Spirit then promptly leads Jesus into the desert for 40 days of fasting and temptation by the devil (whoops - not looking so good!). Jesus successfully wards off the devil's ploys, has some breakfast, and then begins a teaching tour in synagogues all over greater Galilee, to rave reviews (whew - looking better again!). And now, returning to his hometown of Nazareth, he's about to be warmly received (Look that's Joseph's boy)- and then violently rejected (actually they almost through him off a cliff). This turbulent back-and-forth is central to Luke's vision of the Gospel: it's received as good news by many (especially supposed outsiders), and as bad news, even infuriating news, by others (especially supposed insiders).

Listen for the Word of the Lord:

Luke 4:14-21

4:14 Then Jesus, filled with the power of the Spirit, returned to Galilee, and a report about him spread through all the surrounding country.

4:15 He began to teach in their synagogues and was praised by everyone.

4:16 When he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, he went to the synagogue on the sabbath day, as was his custom. He stood up to read,

4:17 and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written:

4:18 "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,

4:19 to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."

4:20 And he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down. The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him.

4:21 Then he began to say to them, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."

Proclamation of the Word

TODAY what a wonderful word, what a wonderful gift.

We have been given today.

It is full of promise and possibilities, right?

Spoke recently with the spouse of a hospice patient, who says we just enjoy today.

It is the present that we have been given so we treasure it.

It reminds me of what Walter Brueggemann said,

"What God does first and best is trust us with our moment in history."

Wow- God trusts us with our moment, our today in history.

I love the question poet Mary Oliver asks, "What will you do with this one, wild, and precious life?"

I think God would ask, "What will you, will y'all, do with this one precious day I give you?"

When Jesus uses this word "Today," it is when the Kingdom of God breaks in.

Five times, he says it in Luke's gospel and people are set free.

Once here in Luke 4:21, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."

- Luke 13:32- Jesus casts out demons and performs cures today- setting people free
- Luke 19- he encounters Zaccheaus, a hated tax collector, and says, "I'm coming to your house today." And Zaccheaus makes right what he has wronged and is set free.
- Jesus tells Peter, "Today you will deny me three times" and God's will be done. (Luke 22:61)
- And finally, the thief on the cross asks that Jesus remember him when he comes into his kingdom. And Jesus replies, "Today you will be with me in paradise." (Luke 23:43)

Each time, in that moment, Jesus announces his kingdom come near, and his work is done. The one bound by demons and illness, the outcast tax collector, the thief on the cross, are all restored, set free. Jesus shows us what a Spirit-filled life looks like.

Today- the promise of God is fulfilled.

For Luke, this is how Jesus begins his public teaching - with a call to serve those who need it most. And how does Jesus end it? "The greatest among you must become like the youngest, and the leader like one who serves. For who is greater, the one who is at the table or the one who serves? Is it not the one at the table? But I am among you as one who serves" (Luke 22:26-27).

Jesus steps into the synagogue in his hometown, and uses it for his inaugural address, telling all who had ears to hear that this is his mission bringing good news to the poor, release to the captive, recovery of sight to the blind, and so on...

We are the body of Christ on earth. We are his hands, his mind, his heart, his feet. So Jesus' Mission of setting people free is our mission.

I have not spent much time in prisons. Some of you may have.

I do have a friend who teaches theology classes on the weekends at our Union Presbyterian Seminary in Charlotte, but he admits that his favorite unpaid job is teaching Bible and Theology in the State prison in Columbia each Thursday.

He loves to see the men, in this case, have God's love and purposes revealed to them. People who are invisible and behind bars are seen and valued by my friend.

I think they know something of Jesus' presence in their lives because of him.

I do know that God's discipline for us is always with the hope of restoration.

I think prisons should have that goal-

to see inmates as people not beyond God's redeeming.

According to Scott Hoezee, Angola Prison in Louisiana was once one of the most violent prisons in the country. Then Angola Prison transformed from the bloodiest prison in America to one of the safest after the New Orleans Baptist Seminary opened up a satellite campus inside the prison and began to graduate fully credentialed and then ordained pastors inside Angola. Those pastors and the presence of Jesus within them transformed the whole prison. They now hold 400 worship services per month. So folks at Calvin Seminary got the idea to try the same thing in Michigan.

Eventually the Seminary partnered with Calvin College and now Calvin College has its first-ever satellite campus inside the Handlon Correctional Facility nearby. And this program that is graduating inmates with degrees in Ministry Leadership is already transforming Handlon Prison, as the warden will tell anyone who asks.

At one point these Calvin students behind bars decided they wanted to plant a big vegetable garden in the prison and they were given permission to do so.

It's a good garden. It generates a lot of produce.

So the inmate students put their heads together and tried to decide what to do with all the cucumbers and beans and squash and such they were growing.

As they talked, they hit on a common theme: almost every one of them,

before they heard Jesus calling their name to follow him and become ministry leaders, almost every one of them had been guilty of abusing the women in their lives.

Girlfriends, sometimes sisters, sometimes wives:

they had verbally and very often physically abused women in ways they are now heartfelt sorry about.

Then they heard of this ministry in nearby called Safe Haven.

It's a shelter for battered and abused women and their children.

It's a safe house, a place to be protected, a place to heal,

and place to begin to put shattered lives back together.

So since these inmate Calvin students had once been guilty of abusing women,

they decided to donate all their vegetables to Safe Haven Ministries as a concrete way to express their repentance and to quite literally show off the fruits of their newfound faith in Jesus.

This ministry shows us what a Spirit-filled life looks like.

Jesus read Isaiah 61 and claimed those words had been fulfilled TODAY.

It reminds us also of all those times when Jesus proclaimed
 “The kingdom of God is at hand.”

And you wonder: fulfilled? At hand? How? Where?

But then you hear a story like this and you say,

“Well what do you know: these words really ARE being fulfilled in our hearing;
 the kingdom of God really is at hand. Indeed, it has come upon us!”ⁱ

TODAY these words are fulfilled in YOUR hearing. Hearing makes things happen.

The church exists for folks like to us to get spiritual nourishment.

But today's scripture reminds us that our mission to serve our neighbors is not an afterthought. Jesus' mission of liberating people is our mission, too.

Jesus shows us what a Spirit-filled life looks like.

And hopefully, by my saying that, you won't haul me off and throw me off the bridge at Lake Hartwell.

Paul wrote: "Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it."

We have many talents, many gifts here in this room.

God placed us here to be a church for Clemson area.

So Fort Hill what if we take Jesus' Mission plan and ask what can we do in a 5 mile radius around this church to impact our neighbors, in order to set people free? (Repeat)

I went to the Chamber of Commerce for a map.

I tried to draw a circle, but it is a bit off center.

We would have to ask the question what enslaves people? (repeat)

is it terrible work conditions? or substance abuse? or online pornography?

is it lack of decent, affordable housing?

high-octane, over busy lifestyles?

mental health or disability support?

the caregiver who needs a respite?

the unwanted child that needs a home?

Then the second question,

Based on what talents we have, how are we called to use the gifts the Spirit gives us collectively to serve in our circle of influence?

You are the eyes and ears of Christ. What do you see?

You are the church wherever you go. Through your baptism, you have an indelible cross etched into your forehead. What do you see and hear?

Maybe it's something we are already doing. Or maybe something we have not seen and need to consider.

I would love to hear how you answer those questions. So this week your homework to ponder those questions. Send me an email. Or write on a prayer card today, place it in the plate.

1. What enslaves people?

2. Based on what talents we have, how are we called to use the gifts the Spirit gives us collectively to serve in our circle of influence?

And then we make it our business to join Jesus in his business of bringing good news to those places and to those people, to work for freedom and recovery.

That, indeed, would be the fulfillment of our hearing the Word of God,
the dawning of God's kingdom right here, where we live, work, and worship.
God's Jubilee is here.

Let's join God in that restoration work.

¹ Hoezee, Scott. *The Lectionary Gospel, Epiphany 3C*, Calvin Institute for Preaching. Thanks again to Scott for this great illustration.