

Healing and Being Healed

Luke 1:1-4; 4:14-21

A young college student is a lay reader for the Sunday morning worship service. He's been away at college and is now home for the weekend. Fresh out of the youth group, he still is green as a spring branch. The service is the same old comfortable process. A few of the men have leaned back in the pews and they're slowly lowering their eyelids. The women are sitting with their heads bowed forward. Some of their heads are bobbing.

The young man comes forward and lifts up the Bible...open to his place. He begins, booming out in a loud, almost defiant voice, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me...He has anointed me to preach good news to the poor, release to the captives, recovery of sight to the blind, to set free the oppressed..." Heads jerk upright...Eyes pop open..."What's going on here?!"

The same booming voice continues... "To proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord." He reads the words but it's not like reading, it's like they are his own words. When the young man is done reading, he closes the book and goes and sits down. A stunned silence fills the church. Absolute quiet. Every eye is focused on the young man. And then he speaks, "What you have just heard has been fulfilled today – right here, right now!"

Gasps of breath are heard around the room. "Blasphemy" is whispered between offended people. "He can't mean that." A shock rolls through the congregation like an electric charge. "It's just Joseph and Mary's boy – who does he think he is?" "What arrogance!" "It just goes to show you shouldn't let your kid go away from home. He was such a nice boy – now look."

When they got over the shock of who was saying these words, there was the shock of the message itself. Good news for the poor. Release to those held captive. Vision for the blind. Freedom for oppressed people. That's revolutionary stuff. He's talking about turning the world upside down. The have-nots will have. The captives will be let loose. The disabled are healed. The slaves will be turned free.

All that is very uncomfortable to hear if you are not one of the poor, captive, blind or oppressed. It means changing the whole order of society. Of course, those are good goals to have, but we also want to be comfortable. We don't want radical change – especially if it will hurt us, or cost us something.

Those poor peasants on the hillside of Columbia who spend all day picking coffee beans for pennies a day, should get a decent wage. BUT don't raise the price of coffee. The grocery bill is enormous as it is. Change is o.k. as long as it is painless change. So don't turn the world upside down, Jesus.

We like our lives like we like our worship. So maybe it's a little dull, but at least it's comfortable and we know what to expect. Please don't disrupt worship by talking like that, Jesus. And please don't disrupt our lives.

WHO ARE THOSE POOR WHO JESUS IS TALKING ABOUT? The young shabbily clad girl with straggling hair sitting on the front steps of the ramshackle house in Syracuse or Utica or any city, USA. The gaunt mother kneeling lifeless on the ground in Bangladesh. Her arms like gnarled branches, each bone showing through the skin clearly.

Or the street kids 14 and 15 years old selling drugs at school, sometimes with their parents' knowledge and permission. And not only sellers but users too. Using it as a way to escape from the bitter reality of life.

WHO ARE THE CAPTIVES? The people thrown in jail and forgotten because their political view disagreed with that of the ruling dictator. A man like Alexander Solzhenitsyn who dared to speak against the government and was sent to the prison camp to pay for it. The Christian who preaches against secular humanism in our schools even though he knows it's against the grain of acceptance in this anti-God age. Or the hostages held in the Middle East – innocent pawns in an international chess game, locked away just because they're from the wrong country.

WHO ARE THE BLIND? Yes, the man or woman walking with the white cane tapping out in front of him, but also the individual in the wheelchair. The man without legs and the woman suffering in the nursing home bed.

The deaf, the blind, those unable to speak, the one with the twisted body. The one in bed with the degenerative disease that is slowly destroying their body.

WHO ARE THE OPPRESSED? The people ruled by tyrants who have to toe the line. People under the iron fisted regime of gorilla war thugs in Sierra Leone. Those tortured for their beliefs around the world. The individual denied a job because he's of the wrong race, or wrong religion, or the wrong age.

Oppression is working all day for a hand full of change when a wealthy corporation takes your product and sells it in another country for 20 times what you were paid to make it.

For most of us this is foreign territory. We aren't the poor, the captives, the blind, the oppressed. We're fairly well off, healthy, and part of the strongest democracy in history. These words aren't for us. Jesus isn't talking about us here.

OR IS HE?

Who are the poor? Are they also those who are poor on the inside? Is it the person who spends all day and all night – who leaves before the kids are up in the morning and comes home after they are in bed at night?

Is poverty the person who works frantically year after year to have the “good things of life” and then has no time to enjoy them - or anything else?

Is the person poor who will do anything for money – to have more, look better, impress people? Americans are often the people who spend money that they don't have to buy things that they don't need at prices they can't afford to impress people they don't care about.

I know of a family who has an enormous home that faces right out on a beautiful scenic bay. It is a huge house with all glass on the side that faces out to the water. They can sit in their living room and look out over the bay and look down to their three boats docked there – a sailboat, a speedboat, and a paddleboat. Their fourth boat – a cabin cruiser – is too big and has to be docked at the marina. What a life. The husband is a vice-president of his company. He's on the road 28 days of every month. A friend asked him one time, “When do you get to use all these things?” He laughed sadly, “Almost never.”

That's wealth – it is in fact luxuriant wealth. But isn't it also a kind of poverty? Who are the poor? Do WE need the Good News of Jesus Christ too?

WHO ARE THE CAPTIVES? AND THE OPPRESSED? Are they the people held captive by alcohol, or other drugs...stimulants or depressants? Are they also the men and women locked in destructive behavior they can't seem to break loose – the ones who keep acting in ways that hurt themselves or their families and can't find the strength to turn around?

Are those people also oppressed who live day in and day out year after year with hopelessness? Maybe they live comfortably in terms of physical surroundings but inside there is a kind of helpless despair. Who are the captives? Do we need to be set free too by him who is the way the truth and the life?

AND WHO ARE THE BLIND? Are we blind also when we have strong eyesight, but no vision? Are the blind the ones who have ears to hear but can't hear? Are the blind those surrounded by poverty, violence, prejudice, and fear, and pretend that it's not really there? Who say, "It's not our problem."

Are we blind when deep inside we know that we could be different – better – but don't even ask for God's help in making any change?

Who are the blind? Do we, too, need our vision to be restored?

IT ISN'T THE SAME KIND OF POVERTY, CAPTIVITY, BLINDNESS, AND OPPRESSION. Certainly it doesn't physically hurt in the same way. But it is a kind of oppression. Maybe when we know what it is like to be held captive and to want freedom, then we will also want freedom for other people who are oppressed. When we ask for God's help in overcoming our own poverty, we also want others who are physically poor to be set free as well.

Albert Schweitzer once said that those who have been hurt always carry the scar of that hurt with them. And because of it, they are drawn close to others who have suffered. He called it, "The brotherhood of those who bear the mark of pain."

When we hurt and work to overcome it, they are drawn close together with other people who also hurt. We want healing for them too.

One of the laws laid down for Israel in the Book of Exodus is that you must always welcome a stranger. The stranger must never be ignored or mistreated. Why? "Because you once were a stranger in the land too." You know what it's like to be in that situation, so never make anyone else feel the way you did.

If you know what it's like to be poor, held captive, blind, and oppressed in some sense, then work to free others who are treated that way too. When we know what it's like to stand in those shoes, we want help for others who stand there also.

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