

“Bring Good News”
Sermon by Oby Ballinger
Edina Morningside Community Church; January 17, 2021

Luke 4:14-30

Then Jesus, filled with the power of the Spirit, returned to Galilee, and a report about him spread through all the surrounding country. He began to teach in their synagogues and was praised by everyone. 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, and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written: “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.” 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. Then he began to say to them, “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.” All spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his mouth. They said, “Is not this Joseph’s son?” He said to them, “Doubtless you will quote to me this proverb, ‘Doctor, cure yourself!’ And you will say, ‘Do here also in your hometown the things that we have heard you did at Capernaum.’” And he said, “Truly I tell you, no prophet is accepted in the prophet’s hometown. But the truth is, there were many widows in Israel in the time of Elijah, when the heaven was shut up three years and six months, and there was a severe famine over all the land; yet Elijah was sent to none of them except to a widow at Zarephath in Sidon. There were also many lepers in Israel in the time of the prophet Elisha, and none of them was cleansed except Naaman the Syrian.” When they heard this, all in the synagogue were filled with rage. They got up, drove him out of the town, and led him to the brow of the hill on which their town was built, so that they might hurl him off the cliff. But he passed through the midst of them and went on his way.

Jesus’ sermon in Nazareth here serves as a mission statement for his ministry. He has just been baptized by John, and then returns to his hometown as a “local boy done good”. His neighbors, friends and family give him a prominent role in the synagogue, and ask him to interpret scripture. The gospel writer Luke tells us that Jesus went looking in the scroll of the 6th century prophet Isaiah, whom we read a little of last fall. Jesus chooses this passage to read: *“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.”* That is Jesus’ first recorded sermon, chosen deliberately to set forth his mission. And that is the *true* mission of the countless churches who have gathered in his name for all the centuries since.

We have new members joining this mission at Edina Morningside Church today, and at our new members gathering several weeks ago I told them what I love most about this church: our sincere focus outward, to serve our neighbors near and far in the name of Christ. We serve the neighbor whose child attends the preschool (in non-pandemic times), the neighbor youth inspired by creative music and theater, the neighbor whose community group finds the building a welcome place to meet, the neighbor who sees in our rainbow flag God’s affirmation for her identity, the neighbor who joins in our antiracism film and book studies, the neighbor who gathers with us from far away because of online worship, and the neighbor across the world at our partner Daylight School in Kenya. I am so proud of this church’s active efforts to live out the mission of Christ’s love, doing our part to keep bringing good news to the poor, proclaiming release to captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free and proclaim the liberation of divine grace. This is what every Christian and every church should be about in our own ways, as we claim the name and mission of Christ.

But for too many, this is not the mission of the churches and Christians that they see. Christianity instead in recent decades has earned a reputation for anti-LGBT bias, judgmentalism, hypocrisy, mistrust

of neighbors who look different, and a desire to maintain cultural dominance by whatever means necessary. We saw a terrible manifestation of this at the US Capitol on January 6th, when the Proud Boys knelt to pray before their armed assault on the capitol, and flew flags that said “Christ 2020”, as though the Almighty was on the ballot. Such idolatry serves the false gods of White supremacy and Christian nationalism, seeking to make this a nation where White Christians dominate all others. May God take the name of Christ off of such lips, and away from such actions, because they fly in the face of Christ and his mission. Still, this alliance between our faith and movements for controlling power has a long and sad history in America. Christian missionary schools sought to eradicate Native American identity, White Christian preachers twisted the Bible to enforce slavery, and the Ku Klux Klan required people to be Christians before they could be members. Father Hennepin and those who came after him claimed God’s right to take the land on which my home and the church now rest, away from those they regarded as “savages”. These are hard truths to hear, and to say, but what we have seen in recent weeks are only the latest fruits of a twisted tree that uses Christianity for control and division, on behalf of some rather than all.

Such distortions aren’t a surprise to Christ, though—he experiences it in Nazareth. He proclaims this mission from the verses of Isaiah, and then goes on to show people just how expansive and universal is the love of God. Everyone praises Jesus for his good words, presuming that his mission of healing, freedom, and liberation are meant for them only. But Jesus reminds them that God doesn’t just show mercy to Jews in Galilee. He tells them of a widow in the foreign city of Zarephath—likely a worshipper of the enemy god Baal—whom God fed throughout a three-year famine. He tells them of the Syrian general Naaman, commanding enemy armies, who came to the prophet Elisha and received divine healing from leprosy. In other words, these foreigners didn’t belong to Israel, and yet Jesus reminds his native audience that God’s healing love extends to them. The wideness of God’s mercy scandalizes this crowd, and they run Jesus out of town. Nevertheless, the witness of Jesus’ life, death and resurrection testifies that divine love and salvation extend to *every* neighbor, stranger and enemy, no matter what.

We who are called now to the mission of Christ have the privilege of doing the same. In the midst of great division in our nation, the proliferation of White supremacy, and the fragility of our democracy, this is great work to do in partnership with God. Reflecting on how Christians can serve as agents of healing in these times, [writer David French suggests](#) that we heed the call of another biblical prophet, Micah, who asks “what does God require of us?”, then gives a three-prong mission: “to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God”. Christians today are called to do justice—not by venting political anger on social media, but in the harder work of building community with neighbors unlike ourselves, and advocating for just policies that create a world closer to the realm of God. We are called to love mercy, including mercy to those we regard as enemies. This is what the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. sought in the midst of his efforts, teaching that “There is some good in the worst of us and some evil in the best of us. When we discover this, we are less prone to hate our enemies.” And finally, we are called to walk humbly with God, recognizing that we do not know everything, and that we need not always insist on our own way.

These are the practices by which—today—Christians can further the mission of Christ. We bring good news with a vision of God’s peace and justice for every neighbor, in every community, of every skin color and identity. God dreams of a world where such differences do not create division, of a faith that doesn’t draw lines between “us” and “them”, and of a people universally committed to building up rather than tearing down. Whether you are a lifetime member of the Jesus movement in the church, are joining today, or are here for the very first time, let us commit ourselves to justice, mercy and humility as we dream God’s dream. Amen.