

Sermon 1-24-10

Rev. Mark E. Sloss

Luke 4:14-21

14 Then Jesus, filled with the power of the Spirit, returned to Galilee, and a report about him spread through all the surrounding country. 15 He began to teach in their synagogues and was praised by everyone. 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, 17 and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written: 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, 19 to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." 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. 21 Then he began to say to them, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."

Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing. Those words continue to ring true. TODAY this Scripture, once again has been fulfilled in our hearing. Today the blind see and the oppressed go free. Today, the captives are released and the poor hear the good news. Today, it all happens because the one anointed by God, the Christ, is right here in our midst, fulfilling the word he speaks.

Today in Haiti the homeless hear the good news that help is on the way. Homes will be rebuilt. Lives will be restored. Today, we who are blind to God's ways in the world, we who are blind to our own sin, will be given sight. Today, we who are in bondage to sin will be released from our shackles.

As Jesus gathered one particular Sabbath with others to worship in his home congregation, he shows us how Scripture can come to life in any present moment. Keep in mind that Jesus has just returned from his 40-day prayer retreat and encounter with Satan in the wilderness. He must have also gained some clarity of mission as well, for his reading from Isaiah takes on the character of a mission statement. This, Jesus says, is what God has called me to be all about. This is it, bringing good news to the poor, forgiveness, restoration, and a new start as exemplified in the Jubilee.

Proclaiming the year of the Lord's favor is a reference to Jubilee, the Sabbath of Sabbaths that was to occur every 49 years. Theoretically, in a Jubilee year all debts were to be forgiven, slaves released, properties returned to their original owners, and the land would lie fallow for the year. There's no evidence that the concept of Jubilee was ever fully carried out, but it certainly is a Biblical ideal for equality, forgiveness, and new life. Jesus affirms that his mission lines up with God's mission of bringing about reconciliation of the world. The Greek word for forgiveness appears twice in Jesus' mission statement. It's translated as both release, and letting go free. Thus forgiveness is at the heart of what Jesus is all about.

Division has long been a problem within congregations as evidenced in our second lesson today, where we find Paul addressing the congregation at Corinth. He uses the metaphor of a body having many parts, "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 the Church, or with this congregation. Well, that's what one would expect Paul to say, but that's not how he puts it. Instead, makes an important substitution when he says, "so it is... with Christ."

Paul knew where our unity comes from. Paul instinctively knew what the one anointed by God was still at work reconciling the world. Reconciliation wouldn't just come from a reminder that we're one body with many different members, and many different gifts. Reconciliation and unity comes from its' source. Reconciliation comes through remembering whose body we are. Reconciliation comes when we hear Jesus, even while dying on the cross, reaffirming his God given mission, "Father, forgive them, they know not what they do."

Adolpho Perez Esquivel, winner of the Nobel Peace prize in 1980 was imprisoned and tortured by the military dictatorship in Argentina. He spent 18 month in solitary confinement. He felt anger, outrage, and depression, but was determined not to seek revenge on his oppressors if he were to be set free. Instead he would work to bring a new order into being, where life would be sacred and people would live in peace and dignity.

In the months following his release Perez Esquivel was haunted by Jesus' words, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do." The words made no sense to him, for his torturers had known exactly what they were doing. Suddenly it dawned on him what they did not know. What they did not know was that all of humanity is one. We are all brothers and sisters in the family of God. What his torturers did not know was that they were not torturing an enemy, but a brother. Perez Esquivel concluded that the only way to communicate the truth to them, was not retaliation, but to love and forgive them. And that is what he did.

Our unity is our being in Christ, witnessed by how God's mission of reconciling the world takes shape within and through our lives. The good news is proclaimed in how we love and care for one another, and in how we respond to those in need around us.

Once again these last two weeks, it seems that a natural disaster has temporarily removed our blinders to see the abject poverty in which our neighbor lives. Lutheran Pastor, Ed Markquart reminds our proclamation of good news must be specific and often more than just words.

Good news is only good news when it meets the needs of the people.

God's story is always related to human need. For example, if a woman is dying of cancer, the gospel is God's strong word of resurrection. If a person is permeated with guilt, the gospel is God's assurance of forgiveness. If people experience extreme suffering, the gospel is the prayer: "God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in time of trouble." For the starving, the gospel may be bread. For a homeless refugee, the gospel may be freedom in a new homeland. For others, the gospel may be freedom from political tyranny. The gospel is always related to human need. It is never truth in a vacuum, a theologically true statement, which may or may not relate to one's life. The gospel is God's truth, God's message, God's action, God's word to a particular person, to a particular need, to a particular historical situation. You don't throw a drowning person sandwich. However good the sandwich may be, it just doesn't meet that person's need. You throw a drowning person a life jacket or a lifeline, or you dive in for the rescue. So it

is with the gospel. The gospel is God's truth, God's action, aimed at a particular human need.

Today, this scripture is fulfilled within us and through us. Today our blinders are removed, and we see more clearly our own sin and alienation from God and from each other. Today, our blinders are removed so that we can see with God's eyes the poverty all around us, both spiritual and physical. Today, this day, the blind shall see.

I've been struck this week by what I detect to be a double meaning in the title of the movie, *The Blindside*. It obviously refers in football to the importance of protecting the quarterback from the pass rush on his blind side, and the blocking abilities of Michael Orr. Yet, I also think that it refers to the blind side in all of us to the poverty right in our midst. It's the story of how one particular rich woman's eyes were opened, and a poor inner city child from Memphis receiving some tangible good news, releasing all sorts of new opportunities for him.

Today this scripture is fulfilled in our hearing, as our eyes are opened and our hearts transformed. Today this scripture is fulfilled in our hearing, as we're freed up to use our wealth to forge a more equitable world. Today this scripture is fulfilled in our hearing, as we sing, "Lamb of God, you take away the sin of the world," as we break bread and pour wine, and as we say to one another, "The peace of the Lord, be with you." Today this scripture is fulfilled in our hearing, as our sins are forgiven, and as we're drawn into a unity of life and love, one body with many members.

Today this scripture is fulfilled, sending us forth to give our lives away in service. Whether it's mentoring an underprivileged student, or delivering meals, or serving them at the Rescue mission, whether it's sending a note of encouragement, or writing a check for disaster relief, or preparing a meal for a sick neighbor, whether it's lobbying Congress on behalf of the poor, or teaching someone to read, or reconciling a broken relationship, whenever we do these things, we aren't just doing good deeds. We're being the body of Christ so that each and every day more people will hear Jesus loudly proclaim, "Today, this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing!"