

## ***Good News isn't Easy News***

A sermon shared with the congregation of St. Andrew's United Church

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Scripture: Luke 4:14-21

by Rev. Dave Le Grand

The book entitled *The Gospel in Solentiname*<sup>1</sup> is a record of various Sunday morning studies of a Nicaraguan priest and his parishioners, peasants, as they grapple with Gospel passages each week. As they discuss today's Luke passage, they resonate with Jesus' reading from Isaiah: that God has anointed him "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.

This is Good News for the peasants of Solentiname. The original Greek phrase from today's passage is often translated as "evangelizing the poor," but the priest in Solentiname points out that the more accurate translation is "to bring good news to" the poor. A very provocative choice of Scriptures that Jesus chose to read for his big return, the hometown boy among his elders. Ancient synagogue worship is not too different from St. Andrew's; except that only the males could speak. That IS different.

Any male could volunteer, or be asked to pray or read portions of the Torah or from the Prophets. Any male could also be asked to give the sermon, but readers were always appointed before the service began.<sup>2</sup> As we finish this story next week, we find out that Jesus will likely not be invited to read or preach again there.

There is nothing random about the choice of readings for Jesus in Luke's Gospel. Scholars tell us that for the Gospel of Luke there are two themes in this story that will dominate in Luke. First is that Jesus' ministry is driven always by the Spirit. Just prior to this story in Luke is the story of Jesus guided into the wilderness by the Spirit to be tempted by Satan. The Spirit's fundamental role in Jesus' ministry is Luke's focus, and then, in the sequel for the writer of Luke, the book of Acts, that same Spirit is the sparkplug of power for the disciples in the Pentecost story.

The other theme that will occur over and over again in Luke is how Jesus will be an instrument of liberation: liberating captives; helping the blind to recover sight. Jesus includes in his chosen reading Isaiah's call for a year of the Lord's favour - the year of Jubilee. Not only calling for it, Jesus is declaring that it is here! We need a year of Jubilee, but scholars remind us that we have yet to see a year of Jubilee. Prisoners would be released; debts forgiven; agricultural land allowed to go fallow everywhere. What a vision of God's! But a coldly rational person might ask: has God truly thought that vision through?!

There is great risk in such liberation that Jesus speaks of. Prisoners set free – some prisoners might be ok released, but there are quite a few characters who might not prove to be very upright as citizens. And forgiving debts, not growing crops for a year; to whose depends on growing crops, or servants that Jesus is declaring God's call for the release of - this is a threat to the economy of the land. Modern, opportunistic politicians might declare it a security threat!

Truth is, on the surface, Isaiah's message as delivered by Luke's Jesus is wonderful. Take some time to reflect on its implications; true liberation is costly to those who have a stake in the systems that Isaiah, and Jesus, are confronting. Our sense of security is threatened by people on the fringes. We see the polarities that emerge when talking security south of us. But look at

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<sup>1</sup> *The Gospel in Solentiname*. Ernesto Cardenal. English Translation © 2010, Orbis Books.

<sup>2</sup> Linda Mckinnish Bridges [Luke 4:14-21]. *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary Year C*, Volume 1: Advent through Transfiguration.

border towns, like some in Quebec, and ideological walls get erected, even between people who call themselves followers of Jesus!

Forgiveness of debts. Forgiving people for harm they have done to us. Letting go of comforts that we think we are entitled to. To some of those peasants of Solentiname that is Good News. But to one person whose partner was abducted by government forces by night, and years later has not been seen; well, maybe the call to forgive is a bit premature.

Liberation, justice, are not at all easy concepts to live out. One moment we are with Jesus – yes, our call is to liberation. But then, only a moment later, that same Gospel Good News Message of liberation impinges on something dear to us; financial stability, a long held principle that is challenged, an issue in our world that tugs on our heart, but to act on it will rock the boat with my partner.

That happens a great deal, I think, for people of faith whose partner does not share that faith.

Theologian Robert M. Brearley points us back to that Spirit that is so fundamental to Luke. He quotes Past Moderator of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), Joan Gray, who said:

When you really think about it, this (strength) of the Spirit is the only thing the early church had going for it. It had no buildings, no budget, no paid staff, and very few members.

Brearley really challenges us with Gospel Good News, saying that, “the opposite situation may face us: we have buildings, budgets, staff, and members, but do we have the power of the Holy Spirit?”<sup>3</sup>

Gospel Good News is neither cheap nor easy. For Jesus in Luke, this message of liberation of Isaiah’s is foundational for his ministry, that’s why it is his first public act in the Gospel of Luke. Good News of liberation is not at all comfortable, and costly. Next week, as this story continues, Luke gives us a taste of that cost. Now don’t read ahead! ...I’m kidding. Please read on. The greatest cost of God’s Good News will be to systems that hold the vulnerable captive. But God also wants to liberate US from what holds us captive. Like the concept we are ever so subtly taught about success; and energy we expend to achieve success rather than being authentic children of God.

How about the systems that divide us from people who are very different from us? As I have learned in my life, and I have a hunch some of you too, it is often the people who I am tempted to label “those people” who could carry important truths that I need to listen to. Gender walls that divide: male, female, gay, lesbian, transgender. Cultural walls that divide. Religious walls that divide...

Isaiah’s Good News of Jubilee proclaims that in our time, with our participation, walls that divide WILL be broken down. Maybe it hasn’t happened yet, but emancipation is coming. Get ready!

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<sup>3</sup> Robert M. Brearley [Luke 4:14-21]. Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary Year C, Volume 1: Advent through Transfiguration.