

“To Bring Good News to the Poor”

Luke 4:14-21

Richard C. Allen

January 27, 2013

South Glastonbury

Connecticut

By Chapter 4 in Luke’s Gospel, Jesus has reached the age of adulthood and he qualifies to read and comment on Scripture in the context of temple worship. Returning to his hometown, he was no doubt prompted by his mother to attend worship and to volunteer to be the lay reader. I totally understand this because I remember my very first visit to First Church Westfield after I had begun studying theology at Andover Newton. My mother quietly arranged for me to be the preacher that Sunday. So I know, first hand, that it’s no easy assignment to be the preacher in one’s home village.

Taking his turn, Jesus unrolled the Hebrew scroll intentionally to the Prophet Isaiah and read aloud those words that describe the ministry of God’s Messiah, words that would become the mission statement of the Christian churches. **“I have come to bring good news to the poor.”**

That is a proclamation that has reverberated through my ear and my mind and my heart and my bones for the last 38 years. How can a local church be a vessel for bringing good news to the poor? For this is what it means to be the presence of Christ in the world, “to bring good news to the poor.”

Sometimes the poor are those who are poor in health, which means that all of us, sooner or later, fall into this category. We bring good news to the poor when we volunteer with Hospice, when we make a pot of soup for a neighbor who’s been running a fever.

We bring good news to the poor when we advocate for universal health care, when we make a wheelchair available, when we stop by for a friendly visit with one who has become confused. To bring good news to the poor in health is to bring a caring presence, a specific resource, and a fearless advocacy for physical, mental, and spiritual well-being.

Somehow, the word leaked out that I am going to visit my older brother most Saturdays. He has chemotherapy twice a week and dialysis three times a week. By Saturday he is exhausted, and my sister-in-law is exhausted as well. Members of our Christian Service Ministry Team sent me there with a picnic basket of Italian Wedding soup, tossed salad, home-made bread, and brownies! I wish you could have seen Bob's smile when I opened the basket. That picnic basket and the thoughtfulness behind it are a beautiful example of what it means to bring good news to the poor, the poor in health. It is the Messiah's work. It is a Christ presence.

“I have come to bring good news to the poor.” Sometimes, the poor are the poor in imagination. Jesus was often frustrated by his community's failure to imagine non-violent solutions, to imagine forgiving the enemy, or to imagine loving someone from a different religious persuasion. We know this because of his many colorful parables, word pictures meant to stimulate the imagination. In my view, peace begins with imagining it. If we can't imagine peace, it is unlikely that peace will ever come. A wolf and a lamb snuggle up together. There's an image of peace! A spear bent into a garden hoe. There's an image of peace! A Wethersfield hockey player and a Glastonbury hockey player split a burger and an order of fries. That's an image of peace!

Jesus understands his ministry as a matter of stirring the poverty of imagination of those who can't begin to conceive of peace with former enemies or with former spouses or with former employers.

Good news is delivered to the poor whenever an image of peace is raised up for the community. This is why I still get goose bumps whenever I listen to Martin Luther King's "I Have a Dream" speech. It is laced with these images of peace. On that day in Washington D. C. the poor went away rich. Those who could not imagine a Black child and a White child attending the same school came away with treasure. Their imagination had been well fed.

"I have come to bring good news to the poor." Sometimes the poor are the ones who never seem to make ends meet, who, through no fault of their own, can not earn enough to buy the groceries or pay the utility bill, let alone pay a college tuition. I'd like to introduce you to the Rev. Grandon Harris, a UCC minister who served in the South Dakota Conference at the same time I did. Grandon Harris established Milk's Camp Industries. He had noticed that the unemployment rate among Native Americans hovered around the 80% level. Though he had gone there to preach and to teach, he saw that to bring good news to the poor meant to create meaningful employment opportunities. Milk's Camp Industries is a home-based manufacturing business. Lakota women make drums for sale. Lakota men make earrings and pendants and necklaces for sale. Using raw materials available on the prairie and along the river banks and upon the buttes, men and women gain dignity and self-respect as well as income for the family. Grandon Harris is known on the Great Plains as one who brought good news to the poor.

Sometimes ministry means creating employment opportunities. This is what it can mean to bring good news to the poor. It has to do with teaching a neighbor how to fish or teaching someone how to make shoes from a cowhide or teaching someone how to turn maple sap into pancake syrup.

On that fateful day in Nazareth, Jesus opened the scroll of the Hebrew text of Isaiah the Prophet. He read aloud the words defining the Messiah's role, **“to bring good news to the poor.”**

Then, he set the scroll aside, and said , “Today this Scripture has been fulfilled.” From that day until this day, this is how we have come to understand the role of the church, **“to bring good news to the poor.”** I have named three categories of poverty. There are many others. Our work together at the Congregational Church in South Glastonbury is to discern the nature of the poverty in our neighborhood, and then to bring good news to that place. This is my understanding of the text. I share it with you all in the greatest of hope. Amen.