

Good News to the Poor

WEEKLY BIBLE STUDY

2nd in a six-part series

April 10, 2011

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Luke 4:16–19 (NRSV)

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.”

Luke 6:6–11 (NRSV)

⁶ On another sabbath he entered the synagogue and taught, and there was a man there whose right hand was withered. ⁷ The scribes and the Pharisees watched him to see whether he would cure on the sabbath, so that they might find an accusation against him. ⁸ Even though he knew what they were thinking, he said to the man who had the withered hand, “Come and stand here.” He got up and stood there. ⁹ Then Jesus said to them, “I ask you, is it lawful to do good or to do harm on the sabbath, to save life or to destroy it?” ¹⁰ After looking around at all of them, he said to him, “Stretch out your hand.” He did so, and his hand was restored. ¹¹ But they were filled with fury and discussed with one another what they might do to Jesus.

Acts 2:41–47 (NRSV)

⁴¹ So those who welcomed his message were baptized, and that day about three thousand persons were added. ⁴² They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.

⁴³ Awe came upon everyone, because many wonders and signs were being done by the apostles. ⁴⁴ All who believed were together and had all things in common; ⁴⁵ they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need. ⁴⁶ Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, ⁴⁷ praising God and having the goodwill of all the people. And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved.

Jesus announced that he was bringing Good News to the poor, sight to the blind, and liberty to the oppressed. From the beginning, it was clear that this work would involve all of those who called themselves God’s people. And it is still our work today.

It’s a typical Saturday in Nazareth. The sun is up early. It’s warm. Since no work can be done on the Sabbath, many of the villagers sleep a bit later. It is the day set aside to rest, as God had rested after creating the cosmos. After morning prayers and a morning meal, the villagers make their way to the small synagogue where they will hear and then discuss passages from the Torah¹ and from the Prophets. One man will read from the Hebrew while another translates it into Aramaic, as many of the villagers neither read nor speak Hebrew.

On this particular day, a villager by the name of Jesus, the middle-aged son of Joseph and Mary, rises to read from the Prophets. He asks that the scroll of Isaiah be brought to him. Jesus unrolls it to the desired section and begins to read, “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. . . .” All eyes in the synagogue are on their neighbor as he reads. A stunned silence falls across the room as Jesus proclaims that God’s great promises are being fulfilled on that quiet Saturday morning.

¹Torah, meaning “law” or “instruction” in Hebrew, was also used to designate the first five books of the Hebrew Scriptures, Genesis to Deuteronomy. These books, believed to have been written by Moses, were accorded a special status in the Scriptures.

For a long time, the Jews had been awaiting just such an announcement. That the promises brought by the prophets of old were about to be fulfilled. That God was stepping in and finally putting things right. But this . . . the neighbor's kid? Today, in Galilee? . . . it just couldn't be . . . could it?

What follows starts well and ends badly. Though everyone in the synagogue that day was stunned by what they heard, some heard the shocking proclamation with grace and wonder. Could it be that God's prophet, even God's anointed, could come from Galilee, from Nazareth? But we can be sure that many others responded with derision. Wasn't this just the boy from down the block!?

In the end, wonder and derision both turned to anger as Jesus explained that his anointing would be not just for the Jews, but for the Gentiles also.² Not just for the Jewish poor, but for the world's poor. In Jesus, all the blind would see and all the captives would be freed, irrespective of race, gender, or nationality – or even their covenantal status with God. And his neighbors ran Jesus out of town for it.

This story is one of the most significant in the gospels. From that Sabbath day onward, everything Jesus said and did had to be understood in the light of his anointing by God and the arrival of God's kingdom.³ He came to turn the world upside down and refused, therefore, to let people rest comfortably in their self-righteousness.

Jesus' countless healings, his welcoming of tax-collectors and prostitutes, and his forgiving of sins were all acts of caring compassion, but they were far more. Jesus made the blind see because in the kingdom of God there are no blind. Jesus ate with outcasts because in the kingdom of God there are no outcasts. He made the lame walk, because in the kingdom of God there are no lame. He forgave sins because with the arrival of God's kingdom, the prisoners had been set free.⁴ It was time to deliver on God's promises of Good News for the poor. . . . read again the passage from Isaiah. It was time for the arrival of heaven-on-earth, the kingdom of God.

Jesus would not abide any interpretation of the Law of Moses that interfered with the blooming of heaven-on-earth. How much sense could such an interpretation really make? Not heal on the Sabbath because a few deem it to be work. Absurd.

Jesus enacted heaven-on-earth in all that he said and did. And he called his disciples then and now to such enactments acts as well. In these acts of feeding and clothing and caregiving, we not only care for those who need caring, we pull God's future into the present. Every act of love we perform is an eschatological moment, giving a glimpse of the coming marriage of heaven and earth.

After Jesus returned to the Father, it would be up to his disciples, empowered by the Spirit of Christ, to continue working for this heaven-on-earth.

²In the rest of the passage, (4:16-30), Jesus reminds them, for example, that Elijah and Elisha had both gone to the Gentiles. Also, Jesus' first miracles were in Capernaum, not Nazareth. Capernaum, the town on the Sea of Galilee that Jesus would make his ministry headquarters had a sizeable Gentile population. "Who was Jesus to go the Gentiles?," the villagers thought to themselves. God's anointed, the Christ/Messiah, belonged to the Jews! As Luke emphasizes throughout his gospel, Jesus was not only the Jewish Messiah, but the Savior of the world. It makes you wonder how often we try to put exclusionary claims on Jesus.

³The arrival of God's anointed (the Messiah), the liberation of the captives, recovery of sight to the blind, the defeat of sin and death, and the resurrection of the dead were all part of one single package: the Day of the Lord, the day when God would step in and put things right, keeping the promises God had made long before. It is the day that the prophets from centuries before had envisioned and the day for which the Jews had long waited. Jesus announced its arrival. God's new age was dawning; the kingdom of God had come.

⁴I couldn't help but be reminded this week of Martin Luther King's great "I Have a Dream" speech delivered at the 1963 March on Washington. This great preacher ended with these words from an African-American spiritual: "Free at last, free at last . . . thank God Almighty, we are free at last." The marriage of heaven and earth, aka heaven-on-earth.

The first community of Christians lived out this understanding. The Jerusalem community had been created by the Holy Spirit during the festival of Pentecost (see Acts 2). And they

Were the first Christians communists?

I invariably get a question something like this whenever I teach today's portions of Acts. We read about their having "all things in common" with no claims of private ownership and we imagine Moscow, not Jerusalem.

There are three directly relevant passages in Acts. The two for today and the story of Ananias and Sapphira in chapter 5.

First, the TNIV translation that "No one claimed that any of their possessions were their own" is better than the NRSV, "no one claimed private ownership of any possessions." As Jews, the believers knew that the world and everything in it is God's and we are merely stewards. God is the owner; we are the trustees.

Second, the process of selling possessions to raise money is on-going, not completed: "they would sell their possessions and goods" (2:45). Even 4:35 can be read "for as many as owned lands or houses sold them *as needed* and brought *all* the proceeds of what was sold."

But most important, the ambiguities in Luke's grammar are cleared up by the events. What is the point of noting Barnabas' generosity, if selling the field is something that he is required to do? Even more to the point, when Ananias lies to Peter about having turned over all the proceeds of a sale, Peter's replies, "Didn't it belong to you before it was sold? After it was sold, wasn't the money at your disposal? What made you think of doing such a thing? You have not lied just to human beings but to God."

In all these passages, Luke wants us to see that the transformed hearts of the believers has resulted in their recognizing that all they own is to be shared as needed, that this is what it means to be good trustees of God's world. There was simply to be no needy persons among them and from what we know of the early church in its first centuries, the Christians did a remarkable job of living this out.

were now empowered by God's Spirit, preaching the Good News and caring for one another. They did their best to live out the reality that they were Spirit-filled. They shared what they had for the good of all. They prayed with boldness in telling the Good News even when faced with hostility. And the community grew.

Like all growing communities, they had to learn new ways of doing things. As Luke tells us, the leaders found themselves torn between their proclamation of the word of God and the needs of the community. So they chose leaders who could see to the caring ministries of the community, to the feeding of the poor and the needs of the widows. The apostles prayed for these ministers and laid their hands on them. They would not merely be doing good, though good it would be, they would be building for the kingdom of God. This would be love made concrete.

It is one thing for Peter to make his many proclamations of the Good News. It is another for the Jews in Jerusalem to see this Good News lived out among this newly created community of believers. Peter's speeches are a witness to Jesus. But just as much so, perhaps more so, are the lives of the believers.

Of course, we all know that abundant generosity is easier said than done. Luke depicts a community where property is still private (see text box) but is held so that it can be shared as needed. We are tempted to see Luke as painting an idealized portrait of this community. Yet, such generosity was a hallmark of the early Christians. They understood that since we are stewards of God's world, "mine" takes on a different meaning, setting them apart from their Greco-Roman neighbors. In the third century, the Roman writer Lucian talked about the Christians' "absurd generosity and their sacrificial concern for others whom they didn't even know by name."⁵

I wonder who says this about us now – absurdly generous.

⁵Quoted on p. 24 in Charles Williamson's Bible study on Acts which is part of the *Interpretation Bible Studies* series. These studies are uniformly excellent. They are divided into ten study units and run about 100 pages total.

God Builds His Church

The Book of Acts is the second-half of a two volume work by Luke. In it, he tells the story of the first 30 years or so after Jesus' death and resurrection. An important key to understanding Acts is to see that the key driver in the story, the one who makes things happen, is the Holy Spirit.

The Holy Spirit comes in great power to Jesus' disciples on Pentecost (Acts 2), when Jews from all over the empire were in Jerusalem for an important Jewish festival. From the story of Pentecost, Luke goes on to tell us about the establishment and growth of the church in Jerusalem and how Jewish leaders began their attempts to stamp out this blasphemous cult. Three or so years after Jesus' resurrection, Saul/Paul was visited by the living Christ while on his way to round up Christians in Damascus (Acts 9).

Paul emerges as a leader in the early church and becomes the missionary to the Gentiles. Acts tells us of three missionary journeys Paul made over a period of eight years or so (50AD–58AD); one trip in Asia Minor and two trips through Greece. Many of Paul's letters in the New Testament were written to churches he founded on these trips – 1 & 2 Corinthians, 1 & 2 Thessalonians, Philippians, and so on.

The Book of Acts closes with Paul in Rome under house arrest as he awaits trial before Caesar. This was probably about 62AD.

Memory Verse of the Week

If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food, and one of you says to them, “Go in peace; keep warm and eat your fill,” and yet you do not supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that? So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead.

James 2:15-17

This verse has gotten lots of attention over the years. It drove Martin Luther crazy! Here, James isn't claiming that we are made right with God by what we do (our works). But he is saying that what we do to live out our new life in Christ really does matter. Directly to the point, our professed faith in Jesus Christ and the new life that we are given must affect what we do and how we live – mustn't it? How could new life not be seen by others?

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

The following questions for discussion and reflection are from the Fellowship Group curriculum for the current series, prepared by St. Andrew's preaching pastors.

1. Discuss the following questions after reading James 1:27:
 - a. Have everyone share what hit them from this verse and why?
 - b. In the verse we just read, James says that true religion means caring for the orphans and the widows in their distress. What does this mean?
 - c. Share the experience where you have felt powerless (poor)?
 - d. What does being powerless (poor) look like where you work, live, shop and socialize?
 - e. What does powerless (poor) look like in Mexico or the inner city?
 - f. How does God want us to respond to the powerless (poor) in our lives? Why?
 - g. Brainstorm some ways you might expand the scope of your mission.
2. How will we/I synthesize today's discussion with a view towards the poor as priority and outliving your life?
3. Last thought: “OK...so we had an awesome time together...Now what?” Based on this week's sermon and today's discussion, what is God nudging you to do this week?

Daily Bible Readings

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help. Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

<p>Monday, Matthew 15:31-46 The sheep and the goats face judgment</p>	<p>Tuesday, Acts 4:32-37 More about life in the Jerusalem community</p>
<p>Wednesday, Acts 6:1-7 The apostles are overwhelmed with the work of the community and decide to reorganize!</p>	<p>Thursday, 2 Corinthians 8:1-5 Paul commends poor congregations who have given generously to an offering that Paul has collected for the poor in Jerusalem.</p>
<p>Friday, James 1:19-27 Righteousness in word and deed; religion that is personal and social</p>	<p>Weekly Joys and Concerns</p>

