

## Jesus Is a Liberal!

Luke 4:14-21

Georgetown Presbyterian Church

January 24, 2010

Rev. Stephen H. Wilkins

There are a few instances in the gospels when Jesus tells a story or gives a teaching, and at the end Jesus says, "Whoever has ears to hear, let them hear." One Sunday a pastor was reading one of those texts in the worship service. He read the passage, but as he came to the last verse, his eyes played a trick on him, and instead of saying, "whoever has ears to hear, let them hear," the pastor said "whoever has eyes to hear, let them hear." The pastor immediately realized his mistake, but as he addressed the congregation, there was no indication that anyone had caught his error. So he simply continued without missing a beat.

After the service, the pastor was at the front door greeting people as they left the church. Everyone was friendly and complimentary as usual. But as one congregant came up to the pastor, she had a mischievous grin on her face. "I think it was a great sermon, pastor. But I couldn't hear it very well because I left my glasses at home."

Whoever has ears to hear...

Speaking of hearing, this past Friday at the community health screening the hospital held in our gymnasium someone suggested I take the hearing test. It seems that someone very close to me thinks I don't always hear very well. The result of the hearing screening on Friday is that I have perfect hearing—no hearing loss whatsoever. I guess my hearing problem must be related to something other than a physical cause...

To tell the truth, I think my hearing is more a factor of my attention than anything else. Whenever I am engrossed in something, it is hard for me to give attention to something else. Or conversely, sometimes there's so much extra noise around me that I can't pay attention to a conversation I may be having with someone; the background noise distracts me.

The point is this: what we hear is a factor of our focus, of the intensity of attention we can give to something or someone.

I think you'll find the same dynamic at work when we approach Scripture. It is only natural that we are prone to have an affinity for perspectives in the Bible that are similar to our own. When I first started to explore Scripture seriously, I was quick to latch onto images of the majesty and glory of God, and God's grace and compassion. And as one who stood firmly in the protestant tradition, I soaked up like a sponge the passages about how we are saved by the grace of God through faith in Jesus Christ. As I read Scripture, what I heard the best was what somehow intersected with my own experiences, my own tradition, my own perspective.

The problem, of course, is that often we won't hear other voices. We'll be so engrossed in following a particular line of thought that we won't notice some of the other things that are being said.

A case in point could be this morning's text from the gospel according to Luke. You see, sometimes we get so caught up in doctrine and salvation and what it takes for us to have personal righteousness, that we overlook the fact that there is an enormous social component to the life and ministry of Jesus, and the calling of those who would follow after him.

Jesus has returned to his childhood hometown of Nazareth. He has matured into a renowned teacher and religious figure, and so the people are anxious to hear what Jesus has to say when he shows up at the synagogue. He takes a scroll off the shelf and opens it to what we now refer to as Isaiah 61. And he reads these verses: “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 for the blind, to let the oppressed go free, and to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.”<sup>1</sup> It was a passage that would’ve been well-known in those days, for it was a focal passage among the members of the Dead Sea Scroll community, a passage that described the character of the Messiah for whom Israel was awaiting.

And after Jesus sat down, which was simply the custom to differentiate between the reading of Scripture and its interpretation and teaching, Jesus said these words: “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.”<sup>2</sup> It is clear from the scripture reading, as well as from what Jesus says afterward, that Jesus is articulating his divinely-appointed purpose. When you read what Jesus says he’s about, you get a not-so-gentle reminder that our focus is too narrow if all we emphasize is whether or not we’ve gotten our ticket to heaven. When you read what Jesus says he’s about, what we hear is the echo of the loud voice of scripture that calls the people of God to give attention and compassion to the poor, the down-and-out, the sick, the weak, those who are oppressed by injustice and personal and corporate evil.

As a lifelong conservative, both in the socio-political realm and in the theological realm, one of the things that strikes me the more I read the words and actions of Jesus, is that Jesus really does fit the profile of the modern-day liberal. Jesus is the advocate for the poor. Jesus is the advocate for those on the margins of society, those who have no voice because they have no power. Jesus is the critic of unjust structures of society and oppressive leadership.

It’s so easy for us to get caught up in our debates over the requirements for righteousness and morality and right doctrine and personal salvation that we could easily fail to hear the call to action, compassion, and care. Some may object by saying that I’m making more of this one passage than what it’s really saying. But the social mandates are loud and clear throughout Scripture. If you go back to the prophets in the Old Testament, and when you look at the criticisms that they directed toward the people of God—they cried out against corruption and injustice and neglect of the needy and the powerless in their communities. And if you look at the whole of what Jesus says and does throughout the gospels, you’ll see that his ministry, his sense of purpose, does center on compassion and care for the poor, the sick, the oppressed, the blind.

Jesus took pity on the poor and hungry—five thousand of them—and gave them food. Jesus healed a man born blind, restoring his sight. After his resurrection, Jesus met a man named Saul on the road to Damascus and lifted Saul’s spiritual blindness, enabling him to see the truth of the gospel and transforming his heart; Saul became Paul, the most influential man in the early church. Jesus freed a woman of ill repute from the oppression of ostracism and rejection, by accepting her and assuring her that her sins had been forgiven. Jesus freed the tax collector Zacchaeus from a life of captivity to greed and corruption.

And by the power of the same Spirit that anointed Jesus, the disciples after him picked up where he left off—sharing their goods so that no one had need, tending to the widows and orphans, caring for their brothers and sisters in Christ in far-away lands, embracing the Gentiles with the good news of God’s love and salvation.

---

<sup>1</sup> Luke 4:18-19

<sup>2</sup> Luke 4:21

They recognized that the gospel of Jesus Christ is not simply meant to punch their ticket to heaven, but to transform the world in which they lived, anticipating the arrival of the kingdom of Christ.

You see, when we focus only on the salvation of souls or the right doctrines of faith or the rules of righteousness, we are neglecting one of the most important and imperative components of the life of faith, and that is to seek to glorify God in all of life by seeking the transformation of our society to the conforming to the will and character of God. If the Spirit of the God has anointed Jesus to proclaim good news to the poor, release to the captives, sight to the blind, to proclaim the arrival of the Lord's favor and forgiveness—then it is also the task of those to follow Jesus and who refer to him as Lord and Savior to do the same. The purpose for which Jesus came now becomes the purpose toward which we are to work in our own lives. The plight of the poor and needy, the setting free of those who are oppressed and held captive, the healing of the sick, the announcement of forgiveness and the call to reconciliation—these things that formed the agenda of Jesus now fall squarely in our laps, as well.

John Calvin recognized the importance of this social component in the early Reformation. Calvin was certain that in all of life we belong to God, and therefore all of our lives our calling is to glorify God. It was Calvin's contention that "God's purpose for us human beings is not primarily to earn ourselves a mansion in Heaven, but rather, God's primary purpose for our lives is to reform the world according to the word of God."<sup>3</sup> One of the ways Calvin put this principle to work was through the establishment of a Christian magistracy in Geneva. The church council became the city council; and though that kind of arrangement is not possible today, still it is informative for us today to see how the church in that day saw the general society and its welfare as the church's realm of responsibility. The elders were required to visit the citizenry in their homes; laws were enacted to ensure safety in the homes; public sanitation became a concern of the church; rent was regulated to protect the poor from being taken advantage of; weights and measures were standardized in the market as a way of protecting against fraud and deceptive business practices.

The point is this: the public concern became the church's concern. "You and I are the theological descendants of a religious tradition that understood the mandate for the common good as a Christian calling."<sup>4</sup> That means the concerns of the world become our concerns. That means the plight of the poor is placed upon our doorstep. That means the responsibility to be a loving critic of our social and political structures falls squarely in our lap. That means the promotion of the well-being of all people becomes a task we cannot ignore.

One of the other lectionary scriptures assigned to today is the passage in the 12<sup>th</sup> chapter of First Corinthians, where Paul talks about the body of Christ. It is as Christ's body that we are to carry out the continuing ministry of Christ in the world. There is a song by the contemporary Christian group, Casting Crowns. The song is titled "If We Are the Body." In the song they critique American Christianity for not attending to the down-and-out, to the outcast, to the ones on the margins, on the outside looking in. And they ask the question:

"If we are the body, why aren't His arms reaching? Why aren't His hands healing? Why aren't His words teaching? And if we are the body, why aren't His feet going?"<sup>5</sup>

Good questions. Poignant questions, directed at how well you and I are continuing the ministry that Jesus began one Sabbath in Nazareth. 2000 years later, can we read these same verses and say with confidence, "Today this scripture is being fulfilled"?

---

<sup>3</sup> See P.C. Ennis, "The Christian Citizen," in *Journal for Preachers*, Advent 2004, p. 43.

<sup>4</sup> Ennis, p. 44.

Today this scripture is being fulfilled. How accurately can we say that?  
Amen.

---

<sup>5</sup> "If We Are the Body," Casting Crowns, My Refuge Music