

Sunday 27th January, 2019
3rd Sunday after Epiphany - Year C

Nehemiah 8:1-5
Psalm 19
1 Corinthians 12:12-31
Luke 4:14-21

In the name of the Trinity; Creator, Redeemer, and Life-Giver...

So often, those of us who preach the gospel, and lots of folks who gather to be the church, make the faith we proclaim too complicated. We use lots of words, some of which cause dissent and diminish hope, in order to defend positions that often have more to do with personal preferences than the basic truth of the gospel and which can do more harm than good.

For example, we argue about whether baptism should be by immersion or sprinkling. We wonder how Jesus can be both human and divine. We debate whether all people should be welcomed into our church family, or only some people; or whether Jesus is "the" way or "a" way.

Yes, it's true. More than not, we use lots of words that complicate the basic truth of the gospel, words that may divide rather than unite, confuse rather than clarify, words that rob us of a way of living that is intentional, clearly understood, and straightforward, and leave people with little hope of being transformed by God's ever-gracious, always-faithful love.

We would do well, I think, to remember an apt bit of wisdom most often attributed to Saint Francis of Assisi: "Preach the gospel at all times," he said, "and when necessary use words."

Isn't that the deeper meaning behind what Jesus said? "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing" is not a proclamation seeped in arrogance. It points to the enduring truth of the one we call Saviour and Lord--who he was and how he lived; and if it is our intent to be more like Jesus, then we must make what Jesus said shape who we are and what we do.

As with many occasions, we need to put this passage into context, and so I think it's important for us to recall the progression of the gospel story. Just before the passage we are focusing on today, Luke records two important events.

First, Jesus was baptized by John. Secondly, Jesus was driven into the wilderness where he was tempted by the devil. Both events establish the essential connection between God and God's people. For Jesus, baptism wasn't an end; it was a beginning; the beginning of his public ministry.

Righteousness, right living, is a choice. We know this intuitively in our own lives - we all make choices, each and every day, about how we will act, what we will say in a given situation. Immediately after his baptism Jesus was driven into the wilderness where he needed to choose, no less than you and me, a way of living that honors God.

Baptism does connect us to God--not to make our lives carefree, but to enrich us with God's Spirit and empower us to choose grace rather than judgment, engagement rather than indifference, and forgiveness rather than revenge.

To me it's important to note that when Jesus was handed the scroll of the prophet Isaiah, he opened it to the place where it says, "...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."

This becomes, then, the simple truth that stands at the heart of the gospel--that God's love is for everyone--not the privileged few, not even the people with whom we are already connected.

And how do so many of us within the church respond? We live with an "us/them" mentality. We view people as right or wrong, good or bad, in or out. We are impoverished by our lack of vision, captive to behaviors that demean and devalue other people, and blinded by attitudes that people of different color or culture or gender or sexual orientation or political persuasion are less than children of the living God and don't deserve to be treated as brothers and sisters in Christ.

The prophecy of Isaiah was given at a time when the people of Israel had returned from exile and were faced with the enormous task of physically rebuilding their city, as well as their lives. They were a reminder to the Israelites of God's love for them, and that God cared for them all - the broken, the captive, the bereaved, the lost, the questioning and the doubters.

Who else but these same sorts of people are we, as the church in this time and place, also called to serve? I am incredibly conscious of the privileged life that I have. I have come from a loving family, where we always had food on the table and warmth in winter, and clothes on our back. Were we perfect? No, we all have our faults and our shortcomings, but for me - these words of Jesus remind me that I can't simply be thankful for the blessings that I have in my own life and yet be blind to the needs of others.

These words are explicit - because of the love and grace of Jesus we must not just stay where we are. They prompt us to value people we would sometimes rather ignore; and we must do this because to be the church, we must be daring and bold enough to step beyond traditional boundaries to encounter God in radically new ways.

Are we bold enough to capture this vision? Dare we commit ourselves fully to live into the truth which is at the very heart of the gospel, the truth proclaimed by Jesus when he opened the book of the prophet Isaiah? This is the challenge of the Gospel today, and it the mark by which we should judge our life together as a faith community...

Let us pray. Ever gracious God, as we seek to become more like Jesus, enrich and empower us with the simple straightforward truth of the gospel. Make us bold in our witness so that your love is known to all people. This we pray in the name of Christ, our Savior and Lord. Amen.