

“Getting With The Program”

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Luke 4:14-21 = Jesus’ mission/our mission

A minister named Dennis tells the story of one Sunday morning:

“A family in his church had adopted a child from Mother Teresa’s orphanage in Calcutta. The child, a little girl, was severely disabled, born with paralyzed legs and other physical problems....



When the family brought the little girl home, they immediately sought medical help for her, and the result was a series of major surgeries that happened over the next years. The members of the congregation prayed throughout this time for the child to be restored to health. When the child was about twelve and the worst of the surgeries were completed, the family realized that they had never had [her] baptized.

[O]n the appointed Sunday, the family, caught up in the frantic last-minute preparation for the service.... arrived late for worship. When they came into the sanctuary, Dennis was already reading the Scripture [from Matt. II].... Their daughter, dressed in her beautiful baptismal dress and smiling radiantly, led the way, walking on her crutches. It was the first time the congregation had seen her walk on her own strength.

It just happened that the Scripture being read was... [Jesus saying] **“Go and tell John what you hear and see.”** As the little girl walked down the aisle for all to see, Dennis continued reading, fighting back tears: **“The lame walk... the poor have good news brought to them.”** As this newly healed child of God sat down in the pew and awaited her baptism, Dennis looked at the congregation and [quoting Luke 4, he said], **“Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.”**¹



Thus endeth the message. A wise preacher knows when to sit down. Short and sweet ~ real

and living. Sort of like the way Jesus preached more often than not. That sermon on that Baptism Sunday: with a living object lesson which brought tears of joy:

“The lame walk!....Today this scripture has been fulfilled.”²

But the record for the shortest sermon ever goes not to Pastor Dennis but to Jesus’ first sermon in the Nazareth synagogue. Quite unlike every other first sermon ever preached, Jesus read his text from Isaiah and then the sermon was all of one sentence:



“Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.”

Notice the verb, **“has been fulfilled,”** meaning the action is a past, completed action. Jesus proclaims it has already happened! Is available right now!

Jesus is saying: **“Here is what God is doing. You can get with it or not, but this is God’s program.”** Audacious! It would have been an outrageous claim, if Jesus were not the Messiah standing in front of them. Jesus offers no apology for being blunt.

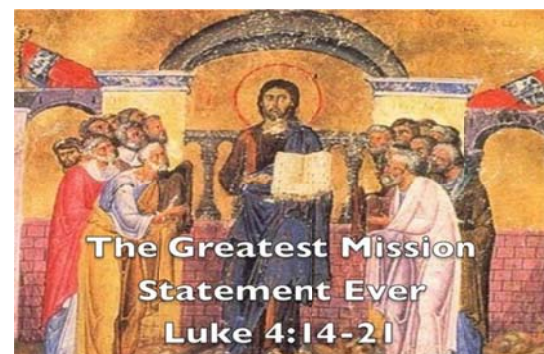
This sermon is also Jesus’ vision for us. The program, God’s program, which Jesus describes for us in that first sermon:



“The Spirit of Adonai is upon me, because God has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. God 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.”

There it is: **“Jesus’ Mission Statement.”** You can find a number of congregations who have adopted this very text as their congregational mission statement. And I say, “You go, girl.”

However, if you read these mission statements carefully, you can also see that most interpreters miss Jesus’ point. They are uncomfortable with Jesus’



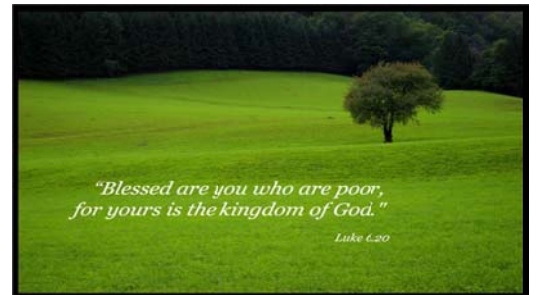
literal meaning. They talk as if Jesus was expecting only personal change, did not expect social change ~ was not challenging the principalities and powers. They talk of the kingdom as spiritualized beyond recognition ~ no longer good news about the end of grinding poverty, but only as good news to the “spiritually poor.”



In actual fact Jesus is calling for a Biblical program for addressing real poverty. In saying the “**year of the LORD’s favor,**” Jesus uses the word Jubilee. The mandatory Jubilee year is the redistribution of wealth every 50th year, a practice required by the Law of Moses. Jesus proclaims the Jubilee as essential ~ not extraneous. He says it over and over: in

God’s realm everything changes:

“Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God. Blessed are you who are hungry now, for you will be filled.”³



Why is it so easily jettisoned that in God’s network poverty is ended?

Essentially Jesus is saying to us: **“Here is God’s mandate for mission”** ~ God’s program. It does make a pretty good Mission Statement. It could be ours.



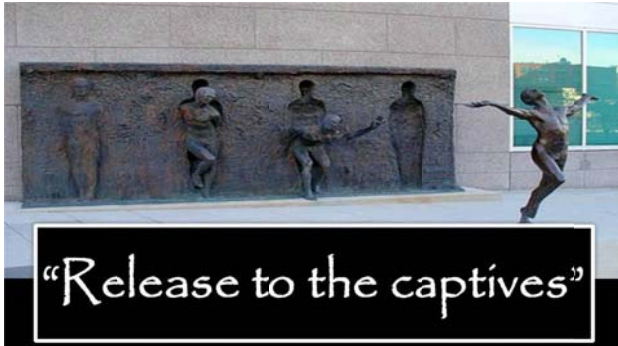
Jesus’ sermon is simple and straightforward: **“Look at what God is already doing. Get on board, little children, get on board.”** Yet in 2,000 years of God’s reign, why is it we see so few signs? Why is it so easy to discount Jesus’ claims? Maybe, just maybe, the signs are already

there in abundance, and we have chosen to ignore them.

Have you not seen? Have you not heard? I think back to when I was a chaplain in Holmesburg Prison in Philadelphia. After bitter experience,

I and the other chaplains were fairly cynical whether “jailhouse conversions” were authentically life changing. Yet time and time again, we nevertheless saw the Spirit working where our own estimations of individuals fell so short.

We saw individuals, hardened criminals and repeat offenders, whose characters were reformed and they emerged from prison totally different ~ all through Bible study and Christian fellowship. It wasn't us because we didn't really believe it could happen. So it must have been the Spirit.



“Release to the captives!....Today this has been fulfilled.”

Let everyone who has ears listen, and eyes see. One of my congregations in Dallas had a substantial mission partnership with a church in Piedras Negras, Mexico helping with the physical labor of building a church building, a school dormitory and a clinic. Doctors and dentists too would take some of their vacation time as volunteers to support the clinic there.

One of the young women in Piedras Negras always wore her hair covering half her face in order to hide the fact she was born with crossed eyes so severe that without one eye covered, she could not see. Her outgoing personality was well hidden by her disability.

That all changed after the Dallas congregation arranged for her to travel to Dallas and have the simple operation which restored not only her sight but her vivacious spirit. She never after that had to cover her beautiful face with her hair.

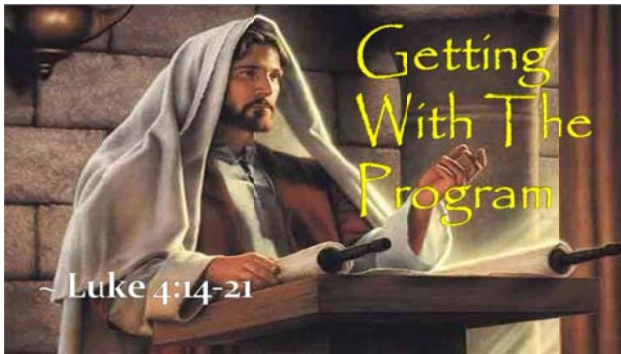
“The blind see!....Today this has been fulfilled.”



This happens here at GPC. I know it does.

We have the signs here, too. I haven't been here long enough at Gaithersburg to hear all the stories, much less to share in any of them. But I am confident that signs of God's reign do present themselves here ~ with regularly ~ and will continue. I'm sending you home with some homework:

to think on where the signs of God's kingdom are ~ and to share them with me so I can tell of these signs as well.



So you have a little homework, but you also have a plan ~ God's plan. Jesus is serious about it. Whatever we call it, it will not allow itself to be spiritualized away, nor reduced to a single ideology, or nation, or political party. There are so many followers of Jesus who take these scriptures to the one side or the other.

Yet, ultimately we cannot have any real transformation without both changed hearts and change in society ~ working in both dimensions simultaneously. We leave either one out at the peril of us no longer doing God's mission in God's way for God's people. No longer with the program.

So as we start this time together, let's "get with the program." What program? God's program:

Sight to the blind, the lame walk, the prisoners released, the oppressed go free, and real poverty is ended."

¹ *Pulpit Resource* 1/21/2001, pp. 17-18

² Matthew 11:5 and Luke 4:21

³ Luke 6:20-21