

Psalm 19
I Corinthians 12: 12-31
Luke 4: 14-21

Called, Anointed and Striving for Greater Gifts
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Mary R. Brownlow

I remember Tom Kinder, who was a seminarian here almost 20 years ago, reading this passage from the Gospel of Luke. First he read it, his voice ringing with the words, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me..." Then he began to speak about how it felt for him, Tom, to be preaching as a fledgling pastor in a place like Norwich. Tom went on to bring many wonderful gifts to our church, including an adult education class that spun off into a discussion group that lasted for years after his departure. Now he is the pastor of the Thetford Hill UCC church, but I like to think of those words, spoken early in his career, as particularly significant at the inauguration of his ministry.

Because, in a way, this passage from the Gospel of Luke, the first public words we hear spoken by Jesus in this Gospel, are his inaugural address. Since we have recently listened to our President's inauguration, on the radio or on the television, this thought may help us understand the importance of today's reading.

In Washington, DC last Monday, President Obama used that occasion to lay out the priorities of his second term of office. But it was not just a to-do list: it contained a picture of what kind of country we should live in, given the particular challenges of our time. 150 years ago, President Lincoln named a particular vision for his second term. Lincoln had a vision of what a war-torn and divided country needed to do for healing. Both Lincoln and Obama drew heavily on biblical texts for their visions.

In our Gospel story, Jesus had recently been baptized at the River Jordan, then went out into the wilderness for a time of fasting and preparation. Now he is traveling back north to Galilee, stopping along the way at village synagogues to teach. He is getting some attention, most of it positive. Then he comes to his home town, where, apparently, it is his habit to read and teach. But something seems different. His experience of being called and anointed and tested seems to have wrought some kind of change, and people listened to him in a new way. They were hearing about his vision. It was an announcement of his mission, and a description of what the Kingdom of God could look like, given the particular challenges of that time.

Jesus does not have to make up new words for this: he turns to their shared tradition, the words of the Prophet Isaiah. God's Spirit had alighted on him at the River Jordan - or came crashing down on him, depending on how you look at it - for a purpose found in Scripture: to bring good news to the poor, to proclaim release to captives, recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, and to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor. Jesus actually mixes a couple of different quotations from Isaiah in his reading, doing a bit of word-smithing to get the message across. But what makes his inaugural address most powerful are the words he speaks after he sits down, in what may be the shortest sermon ever: "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." Not, "through my study and work I hope to grow and develop into a good pastor," not "in

the next four years my administration hopes to accomplish these things,” but, **today** there is fulfillment.

I am trying to grasp what it could mean for that Scripture to be fulfilled when there was still so much work to do. This is a work in progress, surely, not an accomplished fact. Then I think of that man, reading and then sitting down in the gathered faith community – that called, anointed, tested man – and I think of the ways that his words and his living embodied Isaiah’s prophecy. Everything that proceeds from that moment is an illustration of the fulfillment of prophecy. Even the words he leaves out of the reading are a statement of how he means to live.

As Jesus reads from the scroll, he ends in the middle of a verse, leaving out the words “and the day of the vengeance of our God.” In many of the prophetic writings, this is the equation: God will take revenge on the enemies of Israel, and the chosen people will enjoy the spoils of that vengeance. We know that this is the classic dream of oppressed people: when we are delivered, we will be in charge. Those who were cruel to us, or ruled over us, will surely suffer. That’s justice.

Jesus leaves that out of the picture of fulfilled Scripture. So, the question is, how does he bring this good news to the poor and let the oppressed go free? As the story unfolds, we see that fulfillment of Scripture means befriending the outcast, the hungry, the enemy. It means sitting down with them for a meal. It means healing those who are troubled or infirm. He just kept on with that until he fell victim to those who held power through violence. Even then, he did not speak of vengeance, but forgiveness.

Our Gospel reading today is saying, watch the way that Scripture is fulfilled in this man. Our epistle reading, from the letters of Paul, is saying, watch how you may become the Body of Christ. The fulfillment goes on through us, if we allow the body to function in a healthy way. Through each of us, Jesus still strives to live out the inaugural address, bringing good news to the poor – whether poor in body or in spirit – releasing the captives – whether captive in body or in soul – giving sight to the blind – whether through acts of healing or teaching of insight – and freeing the oppressed – whether oppressed by a political system or exploited by our culture. And there is something in this striving about the omission of vengeance as well: something key to the striving and the fulfillment. Something was inaugurated that day in Nazareth, and the mission statement is still there for the Body of Christ to live out.

It is in this gathered body – this local body and the church that includes all followers of Christ - that the tension between what is proclaimed and what is fulfilled is... embodied, lived. Paul recognized the challenge of this, as members of the church in Corinth jockeyed for position and influence. It would be almost comical, if it were not so sad, to see the way that people inspired by the message of Jesus descend into bickering and division. So Paul gives us this rich and meaningful metaphor. In a flight of absurdity, he has the body parts argue amongst each other about whether they need each other or not.

I read a new paraphrase of this passage from first Corinthians that is especially appropriate for this season. It goes: “For the team is one and has many players, and all the players of the team, though many, are one team ... Indeed, the team does not consist of one player, but of many. If the defensive end would say, ‘Because I am not the quarterback, I do not belong to the team,’ that would not make him any less a part of the team. And if the right tackle would say, ‘Because I am

not a wide receiver, I do not belong to the team,' that would not make him any less a part of the team. If the whole team were tackles, where would the running backs be?....etc., etc.

We could keep going with Paul's body metaphor endlessly, though, with all of the implications about connectedness and dependence. We are not here to enjoy an individual, disconnected spirituality, to pray alone or be transported by a sunset on a mountaintop – though those things may be wonderfully satisfying. We are here to share gifts and to bind them together in continuing to fulfill the mission of Isaiah and Jesus. Much as people complain about “organized religion,” we find meaning in this sharing.

The word “religion” contains a root word, “lig-“, which means to connect or to unite. It is also the root for ligament, those connectors of the human body. And the prefix “re-“ means again. When the body of Christ functions as it should, when religion is healthy and whole, we find that we are connected together again, and through this, connected to God and God's healing purposes. A church that recognizes and honors the gifts of each member is part of the fulfillment of Scripture, an example of the good news, a powerful engine for release, freedom, and proclamation.

Karen Armstrong, a writer on various religions has written: “Religion is a practical discipline that teaches us to discover new capacities of mind and heart. It is no use magisterially weighing up the teachings of religion to judge their truth or falsehood before embarking on a religious way of life. You will discover their truth – or lack of it – only if you translate those doctrines into ritual or ethical action. Like any skill, religion requires perseverance, hard work, and discipline. Some people will be better at it than others, some appallingly inept, and some will miss the point entirely. But those who do not apply themselves will get nowhere at all. Religious people find it hard to explain how their rituals and practices work, just as a skater may not be fully conscious of the physical laws that enable her to glide over the ice on a thin blade.”

We follow a religion that says that each of us is called as a child of God; each of us is anointed with gifts of spirit and body; each of us has been given the work of striving for the greater gifts of faith, hope and love. When we come together, we work on the “practical disciplines,” translating the teachings of Jesus into ritual and ethical action that feeds body and soul. We work on our “ligaments,” the ties that bind our hearts in Christian love. And we work in the world, because the inaugural address given in the synagogue in Nazareth was not addressed to insiders only. The “us and them” of freedom and vengeance is absent. What is left is shared suffering and joy. On each day that we work on behalf of and with the poor, on each day that we work on behalf of and with the captive, on each day that we strive to work on behalf of and with the victims of violence and prejudice, Scripture is fulfilled in our hearing.

I pray that we will be filled with the power of the Spirit, and strive for the greater gifts.
Amen.