

Sermons at St. Luke's

A sermon preached by the Rev. Joseph H. Hensley, Jr. on St. Luke's Sunday, October 18, 2009.

“Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.” Jesus really knows how to start a sermon! “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.” Among the Gospel writers who remembered how Jesus went to his hometown to preach in the synagogue, only St. Luke, the evangelist, records these specific words in his account. St. Luke, the evangelist, literally the “bearer of good news,” of Gospel, has a special message of hope when he recalls Jesus' words, “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.” Today a prophecy of release for captives and good news for the poor, a prophecy of proclamation of the year of the Lord's favor...today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing. St. Luke, our namesake, our patron saint, was an evangelist, a bringer of good news, especially to the poor and oppressed, especially to the victims of economic injustice. If only St. Luke were alive today to see the hard times in which we live, how poverty and economic injustice continue. If only St. Luke could bring some more good news to the poor. If only today, October 18, the Feast of St. Luke, this scripture could be fulfilled in our hearing.

In this passage from Luke's Gospel, Jesus gets up to read in the synagogue from the prophet Isaiah. Remember that Isaiah had promised some good news to the children of Israel in exile, God's people in hard times. At the end of the passage which Jesus reads there is this intriguing reference about proclaiming “the year of the Lord's favor.” You may recall that the “year of the Lord's favor” refers to another scripture back in Leviticus (so we have Jesus referencing Isaiah who is referencing the Torah). The year of the Lord's favor is about God commanding God's people to set aside a year every fifty years called the jubilee. This jubilee year was a year of rest and putting things back in balance. If people were in debt they would repay what they could and be forgiven for the rest. If people had come on hard times and had lost or sold their family home in order to survive, they would have the opportunity to get that home back. People who had sold themselves into slavery just to live were released from their servitude. The jubilee was an economic “reset,” a “do-over” so that no one would be forced to live in poverty or slavery forever. It was a practice of remembering that all good things come from God, and no one should use those things to keep someone in debt indefinitely. No one should have that kind of power over another, because that kind of power belongs to God alone.

We do not know if the year of jubilee was ever observed exactly how the Bible commanded it. When Jesus says “today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing” he is declaring himself to be an embodiment of this jubilee, an incarnation restoring the balance so that mercy instead of money will reign supreme. As Christians, as followers of Jesus, we are also called to embody the jubilee spirit. These days, in the midst of recession and economic failures, in the midst of hard times, we have no shortage of opportunity to bring a jubilee message. People are losing homes. Businesses are struggling. Families are uprooted and sometimes forced to choose between paying interest on a debt or paying for their basic needs. Economists and politicians have offered numerous, complicated explanations for why we find ourselves in this re-cessed, de-pressed, big-messed state of economy. The most simple explanation I have heard boils down to one word, “greed:” greed on the part of consumers who wanted more than they could afford; greed on the part of lenders who sought to make money from the illusion of money and to expose themselves and borrowers to huge risks. Another word that I think we need to remember in these times is a word we do not hear much anymore: usury. U-S-U-R-Y. Usury once referred to the practice of charging any money as a cost for borrowing. Now we use the term to talk more about charging exorbitant interest on a loan. Usury is charging so much for someone to borrow money that they end up paying many times what they

originally borrowed, if they are able to repay it at all. Usury often puts people in states of endless debt. For example, a person signs up for a credit card at 20-something percent interest, intending to pay the balance every month. But then they lose their job or encounter some other unforeseen hardship and they cannot pay the balance. Quickly, the interest payments on this credit card loan add up and the debt becomes so great that it is nearly impossible to repay. We have seen examples of people buying houses with loans that started at one interest rate but then jumped to a much higher interest rate. Unable to pay, people defaulted on the loan and lost their homes. The Bible forbids lending practices that deprive people of basic necessities or take advantage of people's misfortunes. For most of its history, the Church has preached against usury. Now, though, we have allowed such practices to dominate and corrupt our financial system. When so many people defaulted on their home mortgages, it contributed to the failure of banks which in turn caused a lack of funding for business which in turn caused the stock market to tumble which in turn caused people to lose income and jobs, and on and on. It is more complicated than that, but we can see that usury, oppressive interest, played a central role. Usury, a mis-use of God's gifts of wealth and resources to impoverish others, has not just corrupted our financial system. It has corrupted our hearts. We do more to protect our money and the banks that hold our money than we do to protect one another. It has corrupted us such that we will bail out banks on the edge of failure but turn a blind eye when those same banks refuse to show mercy to people in danger of losing their homes.

I know we are not really blind to the injustices that are being perpetrated right in front of us. I know we want to do something to keep people from going hungry while others feast off the interest money that hungry people pay. I know we want to do something to stop the abuses of financial power, but perhaps we feel powerless to act. The banks are so big, and we are so small. The problems are so complicated and we barely understand. But I think we do understand some things. We understand that we follow a savior who came to fulfill the year of the Lord's favor. We understand that Jesus did not let an empire get in the way of proclaiming good news to the poor. We understand that Jesus died on the cross and rose again to show us that not even death can curb God's care for the oppressed. We understand that when Jesus said, "Today, this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing," he meant "today." Not tomorrow. Not next week. Today. This is the day that the Lord has made, let us rejoice and be glad in it. But we cannot rejoice, we cannot be glad when our brothers and sisters struggle under the weight of crushing debt. So we must act today, even if it seems unlikely to make a difference. We must do something today, even though we may be afraid. Today this scripture is fulfilled in our hearing as we, the church, we St. Luke's, we the people of God, continue to be evangelists, bringing good news to the world.

What can we do? St. Luke's church and its members do a lot to bring good news to the poor. From this Eucharistic feast we go forth each Sunday to fulfill our baptismal promises to seek and serve Christ in all persons and to proclaim the dignity of every human being. We do not have time to list all the ministries of this church that share such good news. I will share that today, this afternoon, St. Luke's will join with other Christian congregations, Jewish congregations, and Muslim congregations to begin building a house together through the organization, Habitat for Humanity. This inter-faith house will be good news to the family who will live in it. The good news is that will they build it with us in a spirit of mutual respect and faith. They will also receive a home loan from Habitat with zero percent interest. Habitat does not charge any interest to its homeowners, and that is good news for the poor. Today this scripture is being fulfilled in our hearing. What other good news can we bring? There is a small but growing number of faithful people who are speaking the truth about usury to lenders and lawmakers. Christians, Jews, and Muslims are also joining together in a movement to put pressure on the financially powerful to stop oppressive lending practices. Their aim is ambitious

and their slogan is simply put: “10 percent is enough.” This 10 percent is enough campaign is building relationships with bankers and government leaders to lower interest rates on credit cards and loans to rates of no more than 10 percent. I know some of us are probably saying, “hmm...good luck!” This is not a movement based on what is realistic and practical but one based on what is faithful and just. As one leader of the campaign put it, “If ten percent is good enough for God, it is good enough for the banks.” If God, who loans us the whole of creation for our prosperity asks for only ten percent as a tithe offering of our bounty; if ten percent is good enough for God, then ten percent is certainly enough for us as we loan each other the very fruits of God's creation, as we trade in what rightfully belongs to God. If God can afford to forgive us our sins, our debts, when we default on our responsibilities, then certainly we can afford to forgive one another so that the hungry might eat and the homeless might have shelter. Perhaps we can, today, fulfill the scripture and continue the jubilee ministry of Christ by refusing to let our debt laden brothers and sisters suffer in silence. Today, the scripture can be fulfilled in our hearing when we decide to join our voices with others and speak truth to power that usury and the greed it cultivates, is against what God wants for us and for God's creation.

St. Luke was an evangelist to the poor. Thus, he was an evangelist to us all. When one of us does not have enough to eat or adequate shelter, we are all impoverished. When the system of finance in which we all participate has encouraged us to value money over people, we are all poor, and we are all held captive. On this St. Luke's Sunday, the Spirit of the Lord is upon us, the Body of Christ, the Church, anointing us to bring good news to all the poor, to proclaim release to all of us in captivity, to preach recovery of sight to all of us who have been blinded by greed and fear. The Spirit of the Lord is upon us, anointing us, surrounding us, blessing us to let the oppressed go free and to proclaim the year of God's favor. Today, with God's help, this scripture has been and is being fulfilled in our hearing.