

In the name of one God, Father, Son & Holy Spirit, Amen.

In this morning's Gospel reading we find Jesus at a time near the beginning of his public ministry. He had just finished the 40 days in the wilderness and headed back to the region of Galilee to start His ministry. He was full of the power of the Spirit and was going into synagogues and teaching the people. Then he headed home.

I remember the first time I got to go back home to preach. I was in seminary, barely five blocks from my home church, but I was doing my fieldwork at a church across town, so I rarely got back to All Saints' for any reason. Then I got the invitation to come and preach in front of my home congregation. It was so exciting to walk up the steps into the pulpit; to stand above the congregation (seeing them from a new vantage point) and then to address them on the subject of the Good News.

Since the day I started preaching I have been very comfortable and, "at home" in the pulpit, but that day I was more than a little nervous. You see, I knew that these people knew me on a very different and much deeper level than did the congregation at St. Alban's, where I was interning. These folks had been with Donna and me from the time that I graduated from law school. They had been our

church family during the entire time we were raising our older kids and sending them off. I had been a lay leader in that congregation – vestry member, warden, member of a rector search committee, Stephen Ministry leader, Lector/Chalice Bearer coordinator, Sunday school teacher and assistant acolyte master, as well as altar guild member and delegate to diocesan council. So I knew a lot of these people from many years of serving with them on committees and boards – and on our hands and knees, cleaning and repairing things. I had no idea how they would accept hearing the Gospel message coming out of my mouth. That must have been part of what was going through Jesus’ mind as he stepped up to the scrolls that morning.

Just imagine what it must have been like in Nazareth that day. Jesus’ mother (and maybe Joseph as well) was there, sitting where she could see and hear him easily. His siblings, cousins, aunts and uncles were there, as were those with whom he played as a child. In other words, all of Nazareth turned out to see the local boy come home as a new preacher. And Jesus started off with a bang. He unrolled the scrolls and read from Isaiah – “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 to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.” That’s where the similarities between my debut and Jesus’ end.

When I preached my first “home town” sermon, it was carefully crafted. I used enough seminary words to let everyone know that I had been attending class, but not enough of them to lose the congregation. I preached a very “orthodox” sermon that I knew would reach that audience – an audience with whom I was very familiar. When it was over, I knew that I had not said anything that would upset the congregation. And I was right. They liked the sermon. But not so with Jesus. While I worked on my sermon long and hard and made sure that nothing in it would be controversial, ensuring that everyone would like *me* when it was over, Jesus – on his “first day,” – gave an inaugural address. And it made an impression.

My average sermon has somewhere between 1400 and 1600 words in it. Jesus’ had NINE words, “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.” This single sentence, coming as it did on the heels of the reading from the prophet Isaiah, said more than I ever did, or ever will, in a sermon. In this simple sentence, Jesus, just as American presidents do in inaugural addresses, laid out His vision for His ministry. He told the people assembled that day, exactly what His ministry was about and why He was there.

“[God] has anointed me to bring good news to the poor.” Jesus said. “He 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.” That is *exactly* what Jesus’ ministry was about from start to finish. Jesus, anointed by the Holy

Spirit, worked every day of His earthly ministry, proclaiming that the Kingdom of God was here and now. He preached the grace and the love of God for God's creation, in and through His Incarnation.

Jesus proclaimed release of the captives – both those who felt the heel of the Roman boot on their necks, politically, and those Jews who felt as if they were captives to the Law of Moses. His message was one of love and hope, which, when heard *and lived*, resulted in people experiencing freedom of a brand new kind – freedom of spirit from the bonds of sin and death. He gave sight to the blind – both the physically blind and those whose blindness was in their hearts. To all who spent their time turning a blind eye to their brothers and sisters in need, he gave the instantaneous ability to see what was before them and the heart to do something about it.

Jesus' message of love and hope was most clearly enunciated in his bringing of good news to the poor. Jesus never meant that He only preached, taught and healed the poor – remember that the Apostle Matthew and Zacheus were both tax collectors (generally a well-to-do profession). And remember that the young man who asked to follow Jesus was never denied, he was just told to sell all he had that got in the way of following first – which he could not do. But Jesus never *refused* to preach, teach or minister to the wealthy. It's just that the poor heard his message much easier and were perhaps more joyful when they did. It is always

good news to hear that someone has come to release captives, but unless you *feel* captive, it really doesn't make that much difference. And the poor are always the ones who feel the most captured by their circumstances.

Next Sunday we will get the response from the home town crowd to Jesus' message of hope and love. I don't want to steal any thunder from next week's sermon, but the people will try to corner and kill Him before He leaves town. The reason they got angry with Him was because they felt He had separated Himself from them, that He had gotten "above His raisin'" as we in the South say, or that He somehow was no longer like them. But that wasn't it at all. Jesus was, indeed one of the community. But His ministry had changed. He now knew who He was and what His mission in the world was – and no one in Nazareth, or anywhere else – was going to keep Him from fulfilling His mission.

Notice that in Jesus' mission statement that day, there is not one word about dividing people, one from another. It was the people of Nazareth who did the dividing – Us vs. Jesus. He proclaims Good News, release, healing and freedom, and the congregation wanted to kill Him.

This week the earthquake in Haiti has dominated the news – as it should. But while all of that death and destruction – in one of the poorest countries in the Northern Hemisphere – goes on, there are still people in the halls of government,

arguing about ridiculous power struggles; and there are people in the Church trying to divide us one from another over issues that just don't really matter.

But if *we* would all:

- † bring good news to the poor.
- † proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind
- † let the oppressed go free,
- † proclaim the year of the Lord's favor; and (as the Great Commandment says)
- † love one another as Jesus loved us;

everything that is wrong with the this country, with the Church – indeed, everything that is wrong with the world, would cease to be problems.

Through our baptisms we have all been endowed with the Holy Spirit, empowered to do the work of ministry. Our ministries are the same as Jesus', to go into the world and be replicas of His gift of love to the world. There are many in this nation, this city, this St. John's community who are poor in spirit if not money, who are oppressed by their life situations, who are blind to the call of God in their lives, who are captive to innumerable pressures of the world. It is *our* job, yours and mine, to let Christ shine through us, and to deliver the Good News by thought, word and deed in every way we can.

Jesus came not to divide, but to love and to heal. Let's do what we're called and empowered to do, and start living like, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in (our) hearing." Amen.