

Epworth Chapel on the Green
January 27, 2013
Third Sunday after the Epiphany
Rev. Dr. Brook Thelander

Nehemiah 8:1-10
Psalm 113
I Corinthians 12:12-27
Luke 4:14-21

Our lives are full of words. Some are more important than others. For example, try to recall the words you used to invite your spouse on a first date. Or consider how different the words might be when used to hurt someone as opposed to apologizing to someone. The words we use to say goodbye to a loved one for the last time would be different from the thousand other goodbyes we have said.

In our Gospel lesson today, we are exposed to these kinds of words. Not last words, but *first words*. Other than a brief question when his parents are looking for him in the temple, these words from Jesus today in the synagogue at Nazareth are his first recorded words for Luke.

Matthew and Mark place this story much later in Jesus' ministry. But Luke places it right up front, at the beginning. It's as if Luke wants to say, "pay attention, folks – this is who Jesus is, and this is what Jesus is all about."

Inaugural addresses are important. Earlier this week President Obama used his to set the tone and direction for his second term in office. A century and a half earlier, President Abraham Lincoln used his second inaugural address to do something no President had ever done before – to criticize the nation for the evil of

slavery and to show why it was necessary to resolve both the civil war and its cause.

And for Luke, these words of Jesus are *his* inaugural address. They are important. They set the tone and direction for *who* Jesus is and *what* Jesus is about.

The bulk of Jesus' message could be summarized in two words: *Good News*. Jesus, reading the assigned Scripture lesson for the day, stands and says: *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.* (Quoting Isaiah 61:1-2)

Now let's look a bit more closely at the Good News Jesus brings. If you listen closely, you notice that it is not "good news" in general, but good news *for the poor*. It is not just release, but release to those *who are captive*. It is sight for those *who are blind*, and freedom for those *who are oppressed*.

Jesus offers words of comfort here, but they only mean something to those living with *discomfort*. The good news is only good for those willing to admit what is hard in their lives, what is lacking, what is most difficult.

Contrast this with what we constantly hear from our televisions and see on our billboards. We are inundated with messages that promise us that if we just

purchase this or that product, we will never feel insecure again. If we buy this or that gizmo, we will “have it all together. We can have a self-contained life where we never need anything or anyone.

There’s just one problem. The advertising hype that we swallow about being perfect, about having it all, about having it all together, is a lie. And deep down, we all know it.

Jesus’ inaugural address here is indeed *good news*. But in order for us to hear it as such, it must first strike us as *bad news* – the truth that we are not who we want to be, or who we should be. Jesus comes bringing good news to those who are in need, but those who don’t see and admit their need want nothing to do with him.

But when we can admit our need, when we can be honest about our deep hurts, fears, and longings, something begins to happen. First, we feel an immense freedom simply from admitting the truth, for bad news (even when it’s true) is better than a pretty lie. Second, when we admit our need, we begin to receive the help and comfort that God offers us – release, sight, freedom, health. And once that happens, we realize that we are not meant merely to receive God’s help ourselves, but to offer it to others. We are invited not just to hear and receive *good news*. We are invited to *be* the good news.

This is, I believe, what the Apostle Paul is talking about in his letter to the Corinthians. Using the metaphor of the body, Paul shows the Corinthians how the church is to *be* the good news for all who are in need. By God's grace, we can be hands that reach out and help those who are hurting. We can be the feet that carry the message of peace and forgiveness and healing. We can be the voice that speaks love and encouragement to those who are lonely and discouraged.

When some of us are walking a tough road and are afraid, the rest of us can surround them and help them to find courage. When some of us are lonely, the rest of us can be a source of true community. When some of us are sick, the rest of us can minister grace and healing.

As we come to the Lord's table today, let us come with humility, with the awareness that we stand in need of God's grace and mercy. And let us also come with gratitude, because grace is available to us in two distinct ways this morning.

Grace is available in these tangible symbols of bread and wine, as Christ meets us here at his table. And grace is also available to us through one another, as we continue to be formed together as Christ's body. So come with joy. Receive the grace he offers you. Then rise up and join with your brothers and sisters here, so that we can *become* the good news we have received.

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

