

"Poor"

Luke 4:18

A Sermon by Dr. Jim Davis

First Presbyterian Church of Kingwood

March 20, 2011

Leadership Journal is a magazine for ministers. It runs the kind of articles you'd expect; articles on preaching, church boards, stewardship. But it also runs cartoons because, well, a lot of humor happens at church. And honestly, only a few of the cartoons in are "laugh out loud funny." Most are what you'd probably call "smilers." But a few years ago, the editors decided it was time for a contest. So they gathered nominations in different categories and asked readers to choose their favorites.

One of the cartoons chosen was one I'm going to try and describe to you. So picture this. A minister's standing at the door of a church greeting people after worship. It's Easter Sunday. And standing in front of him is a nicely dressed couple. But the woman's face looks like her husband's just stuck his foot in his mouth again and probably doesn't even know it! He's standing there right beside her, still shaking hands with the minister. But as he does that he says, "Reverend, you know, I think you're in a rut! Every time I come here you preach about the Resurrection!"

And in case you're wondering, that cartoon was the winner in a category called "kinda' makes you think." And in case you're wondering why I brought it up, here's the reason. For the next few weeks between today and Palm Sunday, I'm afraid your minister's going to be stuck in a rut! Because each week he's going to be reading you the same Scripture. And even worse, he's going to be preaching on the same verse!

Why? Because in the Gospel of Luke, there's a verse that every follower of Jesus should know by heart. But very few of us do. It's a verse that tells you more about the mind of Christ than any other verse in the New Testament. And if you let it, in this season of Lent this verse will help you understand more about why Jesus took up his cross and why he told his followers to do the same. The verse I'm talking about is Luke 4:18. It's the personal mission statement of the Messiah.

Last week, as we read John 4, we found out that as the Messiah, Jesus knew and embraced the fact that the Father had been sent him into the world with a mission. But this week, and for the next few weeks, we're going to discover

what that mission looked like. And we're going to do that by taking Luke 4:18 apart phrase by phrase.

As we do that, we're going to find out that God sent His Son into the world to accomplish a five-fold mission. And every part of that mission, each and every part was crucial to our redemption and the legacy that Jesus wanted to leave behind him at the end of his life. So let's get started this morning by taking a slow and careful look together at the first line in the mission statement of Jesus.

And let's start by quickly putting this verse into its context. Jesus has been baptized in the Jordan. He's been led for forty days through the wilderness. He's been tempted three times to betray the One who sent Him into the world, to use his life to serve only himself. But three times he's refused to do that. And now he's come back to Galilee, to Nazareth, where he had been brought up.

And "on the Sabbath day" Luke tells us, he went into the synagogue in Nazareth, a place he must have known well, as well as you or I know the church where we grew up. And to honor him, the elders of the synagogue in Nazareth ask him to be a reader in the service that Sabbath day. They hand him the scroll of Isaiah and ask him to read to them any passage he'd like.

And Jesus took the scroll Luke says. And he unrolled it. And he found the place where it was written, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor ..." That's the first line Jesus read that Sabbath morning. And it's also the first line of his mission statement. But it wasn't originally his. For as the story makes clear, the mission statement of Jesus' life isn't one he made up. It's one he found. And he found it in the Scriptures, a good place for any of us to discover the mission statement for our lives.

Actually, if you look in the footnotes of your Bible, you'll see that the lines Jesus read come from Isaiah 61. In fact they're the line that open the chapter. And if you don't know much about Isaiah 61, let me tell you one important fact about it.

Isaiah 61 is a chapter of prophecy that looks forward to the day when God will send His Messiah and establish His kingdom on the earth. It's one of the chapters that any Jewish boy like Jesus would have heard read in the synagogue over and over again. It's a chapter that people sitting listening to Jesus that day in the synagogue would have smiled to hear him start to read.

Until he stopped, abruptly, after reading just the first few lines and rolled up the scroll and gave it back to the attendant. He sat down, Luke says, and then he said "Today this Scripture's fulfilled in your hearing." And everyone who knew

Jesus must have felt a little bit like the woman in the cartoon whose husband stuck his foot in his mouth at the door of the church. For that's exactly what Jesus had just done as far as his neighbors in Nazareth were concerned.

He'd just put his foot in his mouth in front of the whole synagogue. Isaiah's prophecy fulfilled. How wrong could a man be? It was embarrassing to everyone to even hear him say it. But Jesus wasn't embarrassed. He was full, Luke says, of the power of the Holy Spirit at that moment. And as he read the words of Isaiah, he wasn't embarrassed by them. He embraced them.

Unlike the words he'd heard in the wilderness that tempted him to abandon the One who sent him, these were words that expressed His Father's will for him. They were whispered, he knew by God's Spirit to Isaiah. And they were written down to describe him. They were meant for him to read and remember. They were meant to become his mission statement, the mission statement of the Messiah.

And every word of the statement had meaning for Him. Take the first line for instance, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor."

The poor? Why start off his mission statement with words about the poor? It doesn't seem like the right place to start, does it. For although the poor are certainly deserving of attention, if material poverty is what this verse of Scripture is talking about, then the only way to proclaim good news to the poor would be to tell them that you were going to make them rich. And Jesus certainly didn't do that, did he? In fact, he did just the opposite. "The poor," he told his followers "you'll always have with you."

But what if the kind of poverty that Isaiah meant was more than just material poverty? What if he was referring to spiritual poverty too? And what if, in that case, in God's eyes, those who are rich are often the most impoverished? Wasn't it Jesus who once said, "how hard it will be for a rich man to enter into the kingdom."

You see the truth about being poor my friends is the truth that Jesus and the Scriptures teach us. And that truth is the fact that in the kingdom poverty is measured not merely in material terms. It's measured in spiritual terms.

Don't believe me? Well then listen to Jesus. But not, this time, Jesus the Son of Man who speaks to us out of the pages of the Gospel, but Jesus the Son of God who speaks to his church out of the pages of the Book of Revelation. Listen to what he says to us in Revelation, "These are the words of the Amen, the faithful

and true witness, the ruler of God's creation ... you say 'I am rich. I have acquired wealth and do not need a thing. But you do not realize that you are wretched, pitiful, poor ..."

And the reality, my friends, when my life or yours is evaluated on spiritual terms that's what it looks like to God. It doesn't look rich. It looks poor. And the reason it looks poor is because sin impoverishes us. Sin sucks the Spirit right out of us. It's there for a moment, the Spirit of God. He's speaking to us. We can sense it. We can hear the voice. And then it's gone, isn't it? Replaced by another voice, the voice that reminds us that it's time to get back to work so we can earn more and buy more and do more and go more. Because after all, that's what life is all about.

But what if it isn't? What if the truth is life, real life isn't about more; earning more, or buying more, or doing more, or going more? What if it's about mission? What if it's about discovering the *Missio Dei*, the work God wants to do in you and through your life the same way Jesus discovered the work that God wanted to do in Him and through His life? What if real life, abundant life, eternal life is all about that?

Because if it is then you and I need to take a look at our lives don't we? And Lent is the season that offers us the opportunity to do that. But as we look at our lives this Lent, as we take a good, long look. Let's ask ourselves if sin has impoverished us. Let's ask ourselves if we need to let Jesus redeem us from the poverty of a life that is all about more because that's what he went to the cross to do. And then let's ask the Holy Spirit to help empty our minds of thoughts about more so we can hear Christ call us into mission.

Two years ago, a Christian recording artist named Carolyn Arends shared a story about how it happened in her life. And it all came out of an Easter Sunday sermon. Listen to her story.

"During our Easter service this year, our pastor said something that stopped me in my mental tracks. He said, 'The world offers promises full of emptiness. But Easter offers emptiness full of promise. Empty cross, empty tomb, empty grave-clothes ... all empty, but full of promise.'"

And those words says Carolyn Arends turned her life around. "The world," she writes, "makes a lot of promises to me. Smoke and mirrors, mostly. Frantic, cartoonish attempts to distract me from the gaping holes in the middle of my soul.

So I'm hoping in the days that lie ahead of me that I'll be a little more willing to die to that stuff. I'm praying I'll become more aware of my spiritual poverty, of the empty space within my life. And I'm praying that I'll resist the urge to fill it with any old thing I can find. Instead I'm going to wait on the life God wants to call me to live."

How about you? Are you willing to pray that prayer that Carolyn's praying? Are you willing to empty your mind of thoughts about more so God can fill it up with a call to mission? "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me," Jesus says, "because He has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor."

Let's pray ...