

January 24, Third Sunday after the Epiphany: 1 Corinthians 12:12-31; Luke 4:14-21

Sunday's Coming Premium

January 20, 2016

If Jesus brings a sense of entitlement into the synagogue in this week's Gospel reading, this is the least of the concerns the people of Nazareth have. Prophets are never accepted in their hometown, as he reminds them later. But more astonishing than the hometown boy reading the scroll like a man is Jesus' claim that he is the fulfillment of the scripture he reads. Indeed, many are praising his teaching until the moment he crosses that line.

It is difficult for 21st-century Western Christians to grasp just how shocking Jesus' announcement is to this first-century synagogue. When a teacher unfurled a scroll to read the sacred text aloud, Jews expected interpretation. They awaited fresh insight from their teachers—but not this. This goes beyond the pale.

The passage that Jesus reads, Isaiah 61:1-2, describes the year of Jubilee, when it is promised that crushing debts will be forgiven and captives will be set free, injustices turned back and equity reset. Furthermore, in some communities Isaiah 61:1-2 was understood as a reference to the Teacher of Righteousness—the Messiah—who was to come. Jesus' proclamation that "today this scripture has been fulfilled" identifies him as the one they have been expecting for centuries.

It is tempting for American Christians to think that the most shocking aspect here is the specific content of the Isaiah passage. We think people anywhere would be upset by a claim that God's favor rests on the lowliest of society: the poor, the captive, the blind, and the oppressed. From our cultural perspective, this kind of favor is nonsensical. The evidence demonstrates that God's favor rests on those who prosper. Why would Jesus announce that he has come to do the opposite, especially when the opposite could potentially upset the favor the powerful already enjoy?

The epistle reading addresses this theme more directly. In his letter to the church in Corinth, Paul admonishes the powerful members to honor the weaker members for their own sake. He encourages the congregation to be unified, using a common metaphor of his day—the human body—but he gives the metaphor an important

twist. In many ancient writings, the image of the body is used to mollify those of the lowest social and political status, reminding them of their duty to serve those who are naturally superior. Paul reverses this interpretation: “The members of the body that seem weaker are indispensable, and those members of the body that we think less honorable we clothe with greater honor, and our less respectable members are treated with greater respect.”

Paul instructs the people to understand that each member of the body of Christ is essential to the others, neither subservient nor superior. For is it not ludicrous to reduce a body to just one function? If it has only a head, it is no longer a body.

Like the Corinthians, many American Christians identify more readily with the strong than with the weak. So Paul’s metaphor of the body rings true. We recognize the admonition to honor the weak as shocking, revolutionary teaching.

But in Luke’s story, the people of Nazareth are themselves the poor, the captives, the blind, and the oppressed. They are under the rule of a foreign power; they are starved, controlled, and enslaved. They wait for the Messiah with great anticipation and hope because they believe he will change their condition and free them from their captivity. The Messiah is good news. They have been praying for his arrival for centuries.

So the specifics of the promise of what the Messiah will do are not what shocks Nazareth, however it might shock us. The shock in Nazareth is Jesus’ claim that now is the time—that the Messiah is here, and he is the one.

It brings to mind the Hebrew people wandering in the wilderness and longing to return to Egypt where, even though they were slaves, they had food to eat and shelter over their heads. They are on their way to the promised land; they have committed themselves to the long journey toward freedom. But it frightens them to embrace liberation. The shock in Nazareth is the shock of an oppressed people being told that the chains of their captivity are falling to the ground—not in the future, but on that very day.

In the 1980s, priest and theologian Ernesto Cardenal studied Luke 4 with a group of Nicaraguan peasants. He writes that one woman responded this way:

What he read in the book of the prophet is prophecy of liberation. And it’s a teaching that a lot of Christians haven’t learned yet, because we can be in a

church singing day and night tra-la-la-la, and it doesn't matter to us that there are so many prisoners and that we are surrounded by injustice, with so many afflicted hearts . . . so much unfairness in the country, so many women whose eyes are filled with tears.

Another member of the group offered this insight: "Just by announcing liberation he was already fulfilling this prophecy. And just by saying 'today this prophecy is fulfilled' he was announcing liberation."

Perhaps this view from the underside of society provides a lens to see what others cannot. Perhaps we might "clothe with greater honor" the weaker members of the body if we heard the Gospel through their perspectives. Jesus' pronouncement takes on fresh, powerful significance when we understand that Jesus was not only challenging the powerful but also provoking the least among us to claim liberation.