

JANUARY 27, 2019 SERMON Rev. Ryk Brown

St James United Church, Waterdown

Scripture Reading: Luke 4:14-21

14Then Jesus, filled with the power of the Spirit, returned to Galilee, and a report about him spread through all the surrounding country. 15He began to teach in their synagogues and was praised by everyone. 16When he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, he went to the synagogue on the Sabbath day, as was his custom. He stood up to read, 17and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written: 18“*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, 19to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.*” 20And he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down. The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. 21Then he began to say to them, “*Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.*”

The wealth of this world is being held by increasingly fewer and fewer people each year.

This year Oxfam released a report that said for 2018 that the top 26 richest billionaires in the world have as much wealth as the bottom 50% of the entire world’s population. That’s the bottom 3.8 billion people. Think about that ratio for a moment: 26 people have as much money as 3.8 billion people.

How fair is that?

And, according to the report, the situation is only getting worse, not better.

They say that in 2017 it took 43 of the world’s richest to equal 3.8 billion of the world’s poorest. In 2016, it took 61 of the world’s richest to equal 3.8 billion of the world’s poorest. That’s still a horrendous ratio, but the real point is that the situation is getting worse, not better.

The rich are getting richer with each passing year and the poor are getting poorer. The richest are increasing their wealth at a rate of \$2.5 billion a day, while the poorest are decreasing their net worth by 11%. A new billionaire is created in the world every two days. There are now 2200 billionaires in the world.

The way our economies are organised means wealth is increasingly and unfairly concentrated among a privileged few while millions of people are barely subsisting. Women are dying for lack of decent maternity care and children are being denied an education that could be their route out of poverty. About 10,000 people per day die for lack of healthcare and there were 262 million children not in school last year.

It doesn’t have to be this way – there is enough wealth in the world to provide everyone with a fair chance in life. If only people would share. Oxfam said that a tax of only 1% on the richest

would raise enough money to educate all the poorest children on the planet who are not in school as well as provide free healthcare to prevent 3 million deaths. If ever we needed a redistribution of wealth in this world, it is now.

Jesus came to bring good news to the poor. But good news for some, sometimes means bad news for others. For the poor to receive the good news that they need, it means that the richest must be prepared to give up some of their wealth and share it with the poorest. And if they won't do that willingly, Oxfam suggests they should be forced to do it by fairer taxation. This can be perceived as bad news for the greedy.

But the poor of this world today are not getting much good news.

Not only does good news for some sometimes mean bad news for others, but often good news itself is preceded by bad news.

You can't experience relief for the poor without first being poor, which is bad news.

Jesus came to proclaim release to the captives. You can't experience release as a captive unless you're first put in prison, which is bad news.

Jesus said he came to proclaim sight to the blind. You can't experience new sight without first being blind, which is bad news.

Jesus said he came to proclaim freedom to the oppressed. You can't experience freedom unless you're first oppressed, which is bad news.

For those healed by Jesus, it presupposes that they had something they needed to be healed from, which is bad news.

Jesus came to forgive sins, which presupposes that people did something wrong or bad that they needed forgiveness for, which is bad news.

The good news of the gospel is often preceded by the bad news of the reality of this life. Life often doesn't bring us good news. It often brings us bad news. That's why we need the good news of the gospel so badly.

Today's bible story begins just after Jesus returns from being tempted by Satan in the wilderness for forty days. He beat this temptation and now returns from the wilderness to the real world.

It says he returned to Galilee and began preaching in the synagogues. And word spread throughout the surrounding country about him. He was building up quite a good reputation.

Then he went to Nazareth, his home town, where he grew up. It was the Sabbath, so he went to the synagogue like any good Jew. His reputation had preceded him there, so he was asked to stand up and read the scriptures for the day. He was given the Old Testament scroll of the prophet Isaiah.

Back in Jesus' day, they didn't have books. Book binding hadn't been invented yet. So the bible for them as they knew it, came written on hundreds of rolled up scrolls. Each of these scrolls had to be unrolled individually and read from. People didn't have their own bibles. The only time they could hear the Word of God was when it was read for them from a scroll in the synagogue on the Sabbath. So it was quite a privilege for Jesus to be asked to read from the scroll of Isaiah. To honour this tradition, synagogues today still have their Old Testament Scriptures written on scrolls, and they still unroll and read from the scrolls every Sabbath day.

When Jesus was given the scroll of Isaiah, he chose to read from chapters 58 and 61. This is found in verses 18 and 19 of today's reading:

18 "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, 19 to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."

The year of the lord's favour is also known as the year of Jubilee. This was a special celebration that took place in ancient Israel every 50 years. In this year all debts were to be forgiven. All slaves were set free. And all land was returned to its original owners or their descendants. So for those land owners who had taken or acquired land from others, they had to give it back.

Even the most orthodox of Jews today do not follow the regulations of the year of Jubilee anymore and they haven't for centuries.

Imagine what the world would be like if we still practiced this today! Imagine how that would change our relationship with first nations' peoples. If we had to give back all the land our ancestors had taken.

Imagine how that would change the situation in South Africa. If the Afrikaans had to give back all the land they had taken.

Imagine how it would affect colonized people across the globe. Imagine how it would change the lives of disenfranchised across the globe.

Imagine how it would change the lives of wealthy land owners who had to give back the land they'd acquired.

Imagine if we actually forgave debts every 50 years.

Excluding mortgages, the average Canadian carries a debt of \$23,000. Imagine what it would be like if that was forgiven.

Not just personal debts, but also countries' debts. Imagine what the world would be like if governments were forced to forgive the debts of poorer countries every 50 years. How that would change the redistribution of wealth around the world. What it would do for the poorest of the world.

Imagine what the world would be like if these words of Jesus came true today.

The bible says that when Jesus finished reading from the scroll of Isaiah he just sat down, and everybody just stared at him. Then he said to them "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." Today, this ancient prophecy of Isaiah has come true, Jesus said. Jesus himself was the fulfillment of these ancient words. Jesus came to proclaim good news to the poor, release to the captives, recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, and to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor. Jesus came to fulfill all these things.

And now it's up to us to carry that on.

We say that we are the body of Christ. The church is the body of Christ. We are the continuation of Christ's ministry on earth. If we are the body of Christ, then it is up to us to bring this good news today.

Imagine what it would be like if we lived by Jesus' words today. These ancient words of Isaiah that Jesus read. Imagine how it would change the world if we actually lived these words. Imagine if we called the world to account to also live by these words today.

It starts with us sharing our wealth with the poor and holding governments to account for fairer taxation and relief for the poor. To proclaim to the richest 26 billionaires of the world that, hey, you don't need to have half the wealth of the world's population all to yourself. You can share it with those who need it. You can help clothe the naked, feed the poor, bring health care to those who need it and education to those who have none, so that they actually have a fighting chance to lift themselves out of poverty.

Imagine what the world would be like if we actually lived the words of Jesus, if we actually lived like the body of Christ.