

Job Description

Luke 4:14-21, I Corinthians 12:12-31

The synagogue is stuffy and crowded . The air is electric, People are whispering to each other about their hometown boy who is making such a name for himself. And he is back in town! As a matter of fact, there he is, sitting near the front. Surely he will be asked to speak--word has it that he's been speaking, speaking very well, in other synagogues.

A sudden hush- the service is beginning. The usual prayers, a Psalm, and yes, they are asking Jesus to come forward. Someone was handing him a scroll. He's unrolling it, looking for the passage he wants. Now he begins.

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.

Slowly, reverently, Jesus rolls up the scroll and hands it back to the attendant. Then, as is the custom, he sits down to teach. Everyone's eyes are riveted on him. They all hold their breath, thinking, "Well, he certainly picked a well known passage. Let's see how well he remembers what his teachers told him about it, let's see how good he is at recounting the lessons he's learned."

But what Jesus says next is not what they expect at all. He doesn't repeat the teachings of other rabbis. Instead he says, "Today, the scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." He's saying to them, and through the words of scripture, to us, "Isaac was talking about me. This is my mission, my job description. I've been sent to the poor to the captives, to the blind, to the oppressed. I've been sent to proclaim good news, and release and recovery of sight and freedom."

At first they don't really understand. They're amazed impressed by his way of speaking and his confidence. We'll see next week how they react to the end of his sermon, how they respond when what he's saying really sinks in.

We're not all that different, really. Jesus comes to us, Jesus speaks to us, and we say, "Lord, we're amazed by your graciousness and authority. We

belong to your church, so you belong to us, and we're so glad to have you here. We could listen to you all day!" But do we really hear what he's saying? True, all of us, at some time or another, are outsiders, and goodness knows we are often blinded by our prejudices and captive to our sins. We are oppressed by the values and attitudes of our culture. Goodness knows we need the work of Jesus in our lives. But we can't get around the fact that he's saying his primary job is not to us, not to us comfortable, well-fed, insiders. His primary job is to the poor, the blind, the captives, the oppressed--to the outsiders.

That's the way he lived his life, too. He really fulfilled his job description. He spent a lot of time with tax collectors. In our time they'd be called crooks. They might be Enron Executives, gang members, corrupt politicians. He talked to prostitutes, he touched lepers (who in those days were ostracized even more than people with AIDS are ostracized today.) And it got him in trouble.

But the scriptures don't stop there. The scriptures don't stop by telling us that Jesus came to help the underdog. They go on to say that we are supposed to be doing the same thing. They go on to say that Jesus' job description is the job description for the church and for each Christian. We just listened to Paul's words to the Corinthians--you are the body of Christ and individually members of it. Doesn't it stand to reason that if Jesus Christ went about doing these things, then we, who are now his body should be doing them, too?

Before you tell me it's impossible for us to act like Jesus, let me remind you of a few things we just read in scripture.

First the same that filled Christ and that anointed him is at work in our lives. Paul says that our gifts are activated by the spirit, by the spirit we are baptized into one body, and we all drink of the same Spirit. Sometimes we feel the spirit, sometimes we don't. You may feel overcome by the beauty of music or of nature. That's the spirit. You may sense an inclination, a gentle nudge, to do something generous or kind. That's the spirit. Or you may look back on the path your life has taken and realize God was at work all along without your realizing it. That's the spirit at work, too.

Second. We're all part of the body of Christ. we're not in this alone. Notice, too, Paul isn't saying we need to try to be the body of Christ. We're

already the body of Christ, we're already interconnected. The question is, how do we interact? In her book *Amazing Grace*, Kathleen Norris talks about joining the church. Here is what she says.

Before the service, the new members gathered with some of the elders.

One was a man I'd never liked much. I'll call him Ed. He'd always seemed ill-tempered to me, and also a terrible gossip, epitomizing the small mindedness that can make small-town life such a trial. The minister had asked him to formally greet the new members. Standing awkwardly before our small group, Ed cleared his throat and mumbled,

"I'd like to welcome you to the body of Christ." The minister's mouth dropped open, as did mine--neither of us had ever heard words remotely like this come from Ed's mouth. Like distant thunder, the words,

made me more alert, attuned to further disruptions in the atmosphere. What had I gotten myself into? I was astonished to realize, as that service began, that while I may never like Ed very much, I had just been commanded to love him. My own small mind had just been jolted, and the world seemed larger, opened in new way.

The Spirit has made us all members

Third. As parts of the body we are each different, but we are all important. How many of you like to play sports? to draw? to use a computer? to balance your checkbook? to cook? to do gardening? I hate to balance my checkbook. This church would be in a sad state if I had to do that task instead of Dave or Jack. Isn't it interesting that we are given such different gifts and interests? Isn't it fascinating that God can use them all, use us all, in the work of the kingdom. A rabbi once said. "When I meet God I won't be asked, Why weren't you like Moses? I'll be asked why weren't you more like yourself?" The New England philosopher Henry David Thoreau wrote: "I would not have anyone adopt my mode of living on any account; for ... I desire that there may be as many different persons in the world as possible, but I would have each one be very careful to find out and pursue his own way, and not his father's or his mother's or his neighbor's instead."

Therefore, because we are empowered by the spirit, because we are the body of Christ, because we each have gifts to give, we really can, we really must, reach out and do the work of Christ; we really can, we really must reach out to the blind, the captives the oppressed. Writing about what it means to be a Christian, and Kathleen Norris talks about the Roman Catholic sister,

Sister Helen who is portrayed in the movie Dead Man Walking. Sister Helen ministers, literally, to captives and the oppressed. She counsels convicts on death row and their families. Norris says the director of the movie had a hard time using the word “Christian.” instead he talked about the “force of goodness” in Sister Helen’s life. Norris goes on to say:

If only that director knew how much of what he terms “a force of goodness” lurks in ordinary church congregations, in commonplace Christians I could name, both ordained and lay, people like Tom and Esther, Caroline, Jerry, Pam, John, Marilyn , Florence, Elmo, Cindy, and Ella Mae, he might be more tolerant of the word “Christian”.

Ministry to the hungry, the ill, the lonely and despairing, to children, to prostitutes, convicts, elderly shut-ins, to the abused and to abusers-- in short, to their neighbors.

What Norris says of the congregations she knows we can say, too, can’t we? Our neighbors eat better because of the Share program, children do better in school because some of you care enough to spend time helping them, people live in warm, decent houses because of your work with Habitat for Humanity, children you don’t even know, in some remote corner of the world have the medicine they need because you contributed to the One Great Hour of Sharing.

What are your gifts? Where is the Spirit calling you? Where is the Spirit calling us? How can we live out our job description?

Please stand if you are able and reaffirm the mission of Christ that is now our mission as members of his church. I encourage you to point to yourself as we read these words.

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.