

Challenged to Change
Epiphany 3, c, Jan. 21, 2007
Luke 4:14-30

In the summer of 1991 -- a church that was my spiritual home from age 4 through my years at seminary in Chicago, First Christian Church in Ocala, Florida, celebrated 100 yrs. of ministry in the community. Along with the other Timothies of the congregation I had been invited back to preach at one of the services that summer as part of the festivities.ⁱ

Now from any technical point of view, the people there in my home church and I might believe that that preaching occasion went well. The message was there, and far stronger than any of the several messages I had shared there in the 20 years of occasional visits since I had graduated from the high school across the street from the church. But I could feel that something important just wasn't right.

Let me predict that same thing will be true for our own Jack Knox when his years at the seminary are completed and he returns here to speak with us...often, I pray. Regardless of how sound or even profound the content of his sharing, the messenger will always be received.... well, differently.

When you've changed the diapers of baby, it is hard even 25 years later to receive from that child, a deeply challenging message.

The old saying is that, "familiarity breeds contempt." And while that is not quite the spirit we are naming here.... it isn't far off either.

It is hard-- sometimes impossible to receive a difficult word from one whose clay feet we know so well. An expert is someone who blows in, blows off, and blows out. We can look up to her. But the one we know well? That's another story.

In Jesus' case, his first sermonette at home seemed to go well, for a while:

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."

20 And 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.

21 Then he began to say to them, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."

22 All spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his mouth. They said, "Is not this Joseph's son?"

"I always knew that that boy would go far... yes, indeed."

"I had him in synagogue school class as an 8 yr. Old, and he has a great mind for memorizing scripture."

"And such a sweet, fellow, always so gentle..."

They loved Jesus, but they hadn't really heard him. They were just been pleased that their boy was doing so well. At first, they missed the revolution proclaimed in his words.

Then Jesus went to meddling.

You see, Jesus had chosen to read from Isaiah 61, the announcement of the arrival of the Messiah's reign, and not just some mealy-mouthed religious realignment, some tinkering around the edges of the way things are done, but an Isaiah passage that turns the whole society on its head! Jesus was echoing that deep Jewish hope for the year of the Jubilee!

In the year of the Jubilee which the book of Deuteronomy says should happen every 50th year:

All the Prisoners were freed;

All economic debts of everyone in the society, were forgiven, even big ones like mortgages...

All slaves were freed...

In those days like ours, there was a strong tendency for the rich to get richer at the expense of the poor who get poorer, so in the Jubilee year, you don't just get a paltry minimum wage hike, your family gets back the land that you lost in prior years when the family finances were distressed... to the loan shark who gave you some money for that land.

The Jubilee was a new start.

The Jubilee was to be a total reset of the economic relations of the society. For the rich it wasn't necessarily good economic news, but for the poor it was. The signature line on all the email from our speaker next week, Amy Gopp, reads, "'Good News for the poor is that they are poor no more.'"(Steven Mohammed, Trinidad)

We are talking revolution. And Jesus, fresh from the desert, was God's prophet of the inbreaking of this revolutionary new day of Jubilee.

What does it mean to be God's prophet?

Now, in our common parlance, the word "prophet" usually means someone who can predict the future, who can see what's coming better than the rest of us. This is only rarely the meaning of the word in the Bible.

Sometimes, we use the term "prophet" to mean someone who stands outside the established social order and challenges those within to straighten up, to get their house in order. And, while this second understanding is often

the Biblical one, even more fundamentally, to be a Biblical prophet means to be one who is so in tune with God's heart, so in tune with God's relationship with the people - the love of God, or the righteous anger of God, or the sense of abandonment of God's ways - the prophet is so in touch, that he or she emotionally spills out what God yearns for and what God feels.

How does one get that way? What makes a prophet a prophet? Beyond the narrower Biblical sense of the word prophet, author Philip Slaterⁱⁱ says that all societies create prophets, and for a purpose. The society causes or guides or pressures certain individuals out of their society, out into another place, either physically or psychologically or spiritually. The prophet is one who sent out, or forced out. Slater says that they are extruded out into the wider world to experience what the others back home have not.

Then when the prophet returns to the community, such as Jesus did to Nazareth, the community has new information, new perspectives. It is a way of refreshing the range possibilities for community life. But Slater says that time and time again, nearly ever time, communities- like Nazareth- reject the prophet, and they reject the message the prophet brings. But in the community's memory they hang on to the message as possibility, putting it away in the community memory library of perspectives, expanding the repertoire of their thinking, and providing for them a possible adaptive response sometime down the road when the community needs to make a change.

In our passage from the Gospel of Luke, Jesus begins his public ministry at his home synagogue in Nazareth. He announces to the people assembled at his home congregation that Isaiah's promises of good news for the poor, release for the captives and recovery of sight to the blind have been fulfilled in their hearing. No matter how you interpret this passage, there are

real challenges, but we who are so often focused on the spiritual meaning of Jesus' teaching, cannot ignore the very clear economic nature of this radical message. We cannot ignore the social and power issues here, even if, like Jesus' home village of Nazareth, we'd prefer not to.

You see, the vision of community wholeness, the vision of the Beloved Community – as Martin Luther King called it, is based on justice. Justice is an equal concern for all the people, and an equal concern inevitably leads toward an equaling of power.

In his version of the vision, the prophet Isaiah clearly understood what Lord Acton in his famous pronouncement left out. Lord Acton reminded us that power tends to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely. What he neglected to say, that our Hebrew heritage champions, that Isaiah and Jeremiah radiate intensely, is that powerlessness corrupts, too. The lack of power produces lives that are wretched and hopeless, and that such a way of living is absolutely incompatible with God's designs for our human community.ⁱⁱⁱ

On Micah 6 Sunday we recognize that many in our community right here haven't the power to obtain even basic shelter, even enough food. In a nation as rich as ours, this is dreadfully wrong. So in Micah 6 we treat the symptom, and that's important ministry. But treating the symptoms is not enough.

There is a cost in focusing on this truth. That day in Nazareth you will recall, "All spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words which came from his mouth,"^{iv} until he started getting too close to their perceived deep self-interests. And we are likely to respond to Jesus similarly...listening for what we want to hear, tuning out what we don't.

But as we are more faithful, more accurately attuned to the full spectrum of Jesus' teaching, all this talk about the inbreaking of God's Kingdom clearly is the full definition of Gospel, Good News. It may play well in poverty stricken Venezuelan hovels, or in run down U.S. inner city slums. But God's Jubilee plan would seem to undermine Wall Street. Redistributing wealth completely twice a century, would seem be the ruin of the mortgage industry and the bond market. Jubilee, sounds like more of a problem than a solution for those who are more threatened than heartened by this kind of "Good News."

Now, you and I know that the Good News is all about God's design and God's desire to provide for all God's children the best possible world here and hereafter. You and I know that Good News for the poor, is deeply Good News for the rich, too. But for the rich it is a harder sell.

Jesus clearly wanted to draw the wealthy into this new community.

Jesus challenged his contemporaries and he challenges us with, "You cannot serve God and mammon." God and money. Jesus wants us all to know the joy that God intends.

What did Jesus say to the rich young ruler? "Jesus, looking at him, **loved him** and said, "You lack one thing; go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me.""

Later Jesus said, "How hard it will be for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God!" (Mk 10:25)

And He said, "It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God." (Mk 10:25)

Though we don't normally relish the thought, the fact is that Jesus talked more about money, about its distribution, about its positive and

negative power, than he talked about anything else...except for the Kingdom of God...which, apparently, also has a lot to do with money.

The Gospel comes to us this morning as serious challenge to change.
 The Challenge to Change the way we see the poor;
 the challenge to change the way we handle our financial power;
 the challenge to change and so reclaim the normal Christian position in any society, that of being nonconformist gadflies;
 the challenge to subsume our own self-interest underneath a God drenched, passionate thirst for justice for all, whatever it costs us personally... is everywhere we turn in this Bible.

Basically, we've only got two options once our eyes have been opened:

- We can follow the lead of village of Nazareth, and dismiss the prophet. Ideally, we'd kill him to squash those ridiculous ideas and claims. Careful though, the word is that this Jesus spirit doesn't stay dead well, or....

- We truly follow his lead, and begin to deeply embody the compassion that – at our best- we do express. At our best, we discover that compassion for the least of these, is not only love of Christ, but it is also a thirst for justice for all.

As Dr. King said it,
 “The hope of a secure and livable world lies with disciplined nonconformists who are dedicated to justice, peace and brotherhood.”

May God keep us all uneasy until that day fully comes.

Let us pray:.....

Lord of heaven and of earth, in the midst of this often overwhelming rush of life,
we pause now....

Asking that we might hear the voice of Your prophets,
where ever,,, and however it comes,
Grant us a hunger to know your will,
Grant us the patience to discern your way,
Grant us the fortitude to stand in the power of that new understanding,
We pray in the name of our prophet, Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

ⁱ See YOUR WORDS IN MY MOUTH, Epiphany 4, c, Jan. 29, 1995, my sermon delivered to the Christian Church in Kalamazoo.

ⁱⁱ In *EarthWalk*, 1975.

ⁱⁱⁱ This insight is from the section on Social and Human Rights in William Sloane Coffin's book, *Credo*, Westminster John Knox Press, 2004.

^{iv} For this section see source, "In need of a prophet - Jeremiah 1:4-10, I Corinthians 13:1-13, Luke 4:21-30" in *The Christian Century*, Jan. 18, 1995 by Darrell Jodock.