

Sermon by Rev. Judy Bagley-Bonner 1/24/16

As Brian mentioned recently, we are currently in the very early weeks of our new lectionary year. For those of you who may have forgotten, the lectionary is the three year schedule of Bible readings shared by most of the liturgical churches in the world, so on any given Sunday, we are hearing the same readings as people in churches all over the world. I think that's pretty cool. It fits in with that idea of a critical mass which can reach a tipping point, affecting the world for good. Well, the lectionary year starts on the first Sunday of advent, with preparation for the birth of Christ. After Epiphany and the three kings, it does a great jump from the birth stories to the beginning of Jesus' public ministry. And that's where we are now. Two weeks ago, Brian lead us through a study of the three synoptic gospels which tell the story of Jesus' baptism. Last week, the Gospel reading that we didn't hear, because Brian went a different direction, was about how immediately after Jesus' baptism, the Spirit drove him into the wilderness for forty days of fasting and prayer. During that time he was massively tempted by the devil, tempted to create a loaf of bread to sate his hunger; tempted to accept the devil's offer to rule over the world's kingdoms and win the world's praise; and temptation to accept the devil's offer of the ability to defy death. Well, even though he struggles mightily with these temptations, Jesus passes each of the the tests, and after forty days of this spiritual struggle in the dessert, he returns to Nazareth, goes to the temple, and that is where today's passage picks up.

In today's passage we are told that he stands up to read scripture, and is handed the scroll from the prophet Isaiah. Jesus reads the scripture, "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, and to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." Then he hands back the scroll and says something really remarkable. He says, "today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." Jesus, in other words, is taking up his authority as the promised anointed of God, and he is telling them, in the clearest possible terms, what his ministry is going to be about.

And what is that? Is he saying his ministry will be about the creation of vision statements and strategic plans and then task forces to implement them? Will it be about the creation of committees and pot-lucks and theological councils that hammer out proper doctrine? No. It will be about release to the captives, those held hostage by unjust systems or by personal habits that have them in rigid lock jaw. It will be about good news for the literal poor and the poor in spirit: the depressed and bereaved and those who struggle just to keep going through the motions. It will be about recovery of sight to both the literal and figurative blind. It will be about liberation from anything that oppresses both societally and personally. In other words: it will be about changed lives! It will be, in short, about the Kingdom of God- Jesus's number one most frequently discussed topic; his all consuming passion.

Jesus came both to proclaim and embody, and therefore to initiate the Kingdom of God. To build it one stone at a time, to plant its seeds one sapling at a time. It exists only in glimpses now, as our theology says it will not come in totality until the close of history. But as followers of Jesus, we are its first fruits. We are its early glimpses. We who follow Jesus and collectively make up the Body of Christ, are to be filled with that

same Spirit of love and joy and forgiveness and compassion and commitment to justice and to righting hurtful structures. We are, in other words, to proclaim and embody love in every moment, just as he did. That's the Kingdom of God. Love in each moment.

Now don't get me wrong. There is nothing wrong with all the other stuff, with the institutional concerns of the church. We need it so that we can do our greater mission! Some jokingly say Jesus had it easy because he only had to deal with the church as an organization for three years. In one sense, it's tougher being in it for the long haul, having to deal with the church's institutional, practical and tedious aspects. But I'll tell you one thing that makes it easier: keeping first things first. Remembering that our reason for being here is first and foremost to create a little glimpse of the Kingdom of God, to have our individual lives do that and to have our church communal life do that. To be a community of contagious love and extravagant welcome of all, to care for one another such that the world will say about us what the first century Romans begrudgingly had to admit about the early Christians, "behold those Christians, how they love one another!" They need to be saying that about Faith Church, "behold how they love one another and how they seek out all those outside their ranks who need love too! Look who they welcome in! The poor and the lame and the gay and the depressed and the eccentric and the petty and the self righteous and the occasionally obnoxious, in other words, even me!"

When we remember to keep first things first, to seek first the kingdom, then the other stuff which can, at times, become dispiriting, at least makes sense, and is able to stay more fresh and life giving, even when it challenges us.

I've heard it put this way: We need to be so consumed and committed to the work of the church (creation of the Kingdom of God on earth as it is in heaven) that we remember why we're doing church work: having stewardship campaigns and establishing committees and holding rummage sales and balancing budgets, things like that.

And here is another thing about these scriptures from early in Jesus' ministry. Together, they show us that the process will be up and down, and that we need not get discouraged during our own desert times, both individually and as a church. Jesus went from the spiritual high of his baptism, where God proclaimed "This is my beloved, in whom I am well pleased" and went IMMEDIATELY to the desert for forty days of hunger and temptation. Then he returned, picked up the scroll and his newfound strength, and won the praise of his contemporaries as well. In other words, he went from spiritual high to low to high again.

Why do we think it will be different for us? Why do we think that we should always be on the mountaintops and never in the desert? Always in the easy, successful parts of church life or our own spiritual lives, and never struggling with the down times? Its all a part of the life cycle of ministry. Somedays you're drinking the wine, and some days you're crushing the grapes. You lose a couple generous givers due to relocations, and you're back to the age old financial struggle which can feel so disspiriting. You make all kinds of headway with your tendency to lose your temper, and then something happens and you blow your stack. Its always three steps forward and one back. If Jesus went through desert times of temptation and struggle, why do we despair when we do?

But it helps, in the vicissitudes of church work or our own spiritual work, to touch center now and then and remember why we are actually doing it all in the first place. We are not here just to perpetuate an institution. We are not even here first and foremost to grow! We are here to create glimpses, insofar as we are able, of the Kingdom of God- We do it by embodying love; by staying rooted in the reality of love, not fear. By channeling that and embodying that in every moment, as we are able, through how we treat people to how we vote to what we do with our money to what we do with our time.

There is a contemporary Christian song I love that speaks to this. Its by Sara Groves and is entitled "Kingdom Comes"

When anger fills your heart

yet in your pain and hurt
You find the strength to stop
to bless instead of curse

When doubting floods your soul
and all things feel unjust
yet you open up your heart
You find a way to trust

That's a little stone that's a little mortar
That's a little seed that's a little water
In the hearts of the sons and the daughters
The kingdom's coming

When fear engulfs your mind
Says you protect your own
You still extend your hand
You open up your home

When sorrow fills your life
When in your grief and pain
You choose again to rise

You choose to bless the name

That's a little stone that's a little mortar
That's a little seed that's a little water
In the hearts of the sons and the daughters
The kingdom's coming

In the mundane tasks of living
In the pouring out and giving
In the waking up and trying
In the laying down and dying

That's a little stone that's a little mortar
That's a little seed that's a little water
In the hearts of the sons and the daughters
The kingdom's coming

Building the kingdom, bit by bit, stone by stone, glimpses in each moment. That's the work of the church. May our church work always be in the service of that. May we keep first things first, and may we never lose heart in the midst of the ups and downs.