

Last Sunday After Epiphany, Year C
Luke 4:14-30

Let Justice Roll
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The Cooperative Baptist Fellowship offers a gathering known as Current every February for young ministers and seminarians. In 2007, the Current Retreat was held in Austin, Texas, at First Baptist Church. The intimacy of this event allows for honest exploration among these whom God has called to lead among this 20-30 something generation and beyond. As with all Current retreats, the overarching theme centered upon that of justice. “Let justice roll” was the mantra of the three day event. Worship, breakout sessions, literature, all was designed to engage and encourage each person to reflect on what it means to bring good news to the poor, what it means to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor, what exactly does the justice God brings in the presence of Christ look like.

When reflecting upon my time in Austin, I am often drawn back to the passage of Jesus beginning his ministry in Nazareth. Luke’s gospel, used in many instances during our retreat, gives us a vision of how Christ began to public-side of his earthly ministry. “Let justice roll” might have served as an appropriate title for Jesus’ first sermon. Jesus stands inside the walls of the temple, unrolls the scroll and reads from Isaiah a message which many of us are familiar with, man of us who spend our ministry striving to meet the needs of the poor and disenfranchised. “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." Jesus reads these words of the prophet, then assumes the roll of teacher by sitting down and rolling up the sacred scroll saying to all who have gathered, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."

Jesus, in other words, is saying to them, "Today, let justice roll." "Today, let those who are in power know that their power is not real, let those know who are oppressed that one has come to bring them freedom, let those know that God is and you are not." The reading of Isaiah's words sets the tone for who Jesus will be among God's people. Jesus declares that his ministry will be radical and powerful, that his words are more than just spiritual, his words are more than salvation for all who are broken by the power of sin; his words are a message of radical liberation. These are words of justice, words of concern for the real, physical, and social needs of the world. Jesus' fulfillment of this scripture is not a spiritual fulfillment, to consider that Christ only spiritually fulfilled his calling is to deny Christ his humanity. Christ's words cannot be spiritualized anymore than the Beatitudes from the Sermon on the Mount can be spiritualized. The ministry of Jesus is not only release from bondage to personal sin but also includes freedom from physical, social and economic forms of bondage.

Jesus' reading of Isaiah alludes to the radical idea of "the year of the Lord's favor." This idea is known to most as we are given a description of this event in Leviticus. The jubilee year or year of the Lord's favor was one of the most radical laws of Scripture. Though it is unknown if it was ever practiced, the law called for every fiftieth year to be known as a jubilee year, a year in which all land was returned free to the original owners and all slaves released. It is

thought that this levitical law was put in place to protect the poor from their two greatest threats: the loss of land and the loss of freedom. Every fifty years, their land was to be returned and if they were forced into slavery because of debt, they would be freed. Every fifty years, equality was to be restored among the people, restoring justice and putting the focus upon people and not upon money, land, or the use of slaves for the paying off of debt. The law was a hope, a challenge, and a reminder to God's people that they are called to affirm the God who owns the land, for God's economy supersedes every human economy.

When Jesus lays out his mission statement in the temple, he proclaims that his ministry will be concerned with the mind, body and spirit of every person he comes across. Jesus' short sermon provides a challenge to the people who heard him read Isaiah that day. He proclaims that his ministry is like the year of jubilee, bringing good news to the poor and landless, freedom to the enslaved and indebted; proclaiming that his ministry is both one of justification and of justice.

When this passage from Luke was used at Current in Austin, I thought a lot about the church. I thought about how we in the Church often hear this scripture today when it is read. We hear this scripture often and go about our day like nothing has ever occurred. As difficult as it may seem to admit to this for us as a Church, this passage may be on the verge of being irrelevant for us. Irrelevant because many of us simply hear these words but we aren't listening to them. For if we were listening we might hear the words of Jesus and become disturbed at the thought of who just might receive this justice Jesus promises to bring. We

might hear our calling to walk alongside Christ as his followers to bring this justice to others. Sadly, I see the Church listening to this passage and walking away from the encounter unchanged. Do we hear this passage and want to disagree with Christ to the point that we get as angry as the temple crowd did that day? We know thanks to Luke that the crowd responded to Jesus by trying to push him off a cliff when they realized that the Kingdom of God and God's justice were more inclusive than they ever imagined; God was God even to those outside of Jerusalem! How do we hear this passage? Do we hear God's call for justice to God's people?

Trying to discern how we as the Church listen to Jesus begin his ministry here in Luke, I realized that we struggle with passages like these, we struggle when we hear a passage like this one, when we hear of things like justice, when we are challenged to work for social justice, to build equality and to bring good news to the poor. For too long now, we have listened to God's justice and simply allowed the Church to excel in giving lip-service to these things, yet we are never quite good at doing the work which the church is called to do.

You see the church is called to reach out the world and profess the good news of Christ, that Christ came to redeem the world. When we read the story of Christ, we learn that Christ not only cared about people spiritually, but he cared about them socially, physically and economically. Christ cared about bringing justification and justice to the world; Christ came bringing good news to the poor.

Yet too many times we have allowed "poor" to only symbolize those who are poor in spirit, those who live a life without Christ. And although I believe

Christ is speaking on behalf of these who are spiritually poor, that we are called to share Christ with those who have not heard, Christ is equally speaking on behalf of those who live a life chained to poverty; real poverty, those who are poor physically, socially, and economically.

While in Austin we spent part of our time at the retreat discussing issues in the world perhaps allow poverty to continue, one global issue being the devastation caused by the HIV/AIDS crisis. Many I am sure are aware of the One Campaign, the campaign which is led in large part by Bono, Irish rock star and front man for the band U2. The campaign has raised a significant amount of awareness and discussion about the HIV/AIDS crisis in the world, helping countries to realize that this disease affects 36 million people and 25 million of them alone live in Africa. The One Campaign has worked relentlessly to petition the world's wealthiest countries to give just one percent of their budget to the relief efforts of poverty in the world by reducing or wiping out debt of impoverished countries, funding education, helping with food distribution, and supplying much needed medical supplies for HIV/AIDS relief and other diseases. In 2007, the United States Senate voted to protect the \$1 Billion at stake for this effort and allocated an additional \$450 million, perhaps proof that the campaign is working, as just two years ago the United States gave the second smallest percentage of its wealth to poor countries, giving less than two-tenths of one percent. Bono and the work of the One Campaign are to be praised; their efforts have caused the leaders of the world's richest countries to forgive \$40 Billion in debt owed by the poorest. Bono is quoted as saying, "It's not about charity, it's about justice." The

One Campaign is about bring justice to those who live lives of poverty. It is about reaching out to those who live on less than a dollar a day, who live in countries that struggles to make it because of the debt they owe to other nations. It is about seeking justice for all the lives cut short due to the rampant disease spreading across the continent of Africa, diseases that have long since been dealt with in other countries through simple medication. It is about seeking justice for those who are victims of corruption by their government, who are unable to receive the food and supplies they need because of dictators and war mongers who hold little regard for the human lives in their care. Bono is working with as many people who will listen through the one campaign to make poverty history.

I am impressed with Bono and the work of the One Campaign. I am in awe of his willingness to stand up and speak for those who are the voiceless of the world, to go before the leaders of the world and convince them of their need to help those who are in poverty. The campaign has brought together countless people of all nations, classes, and colors to help promote, organize and eliminate the harmful causes of poverty in all the countries of the world and to promote the idea of justice for those who are powerless to do anything about their own lives.

As I read this passage of scripture, hearing Jesus declare that he comes to bring good news to the poor proclaiming that this is the year of the Lord's favor while at the same time I hear about people like Bono and his campaign; it stirs me into thinking about the church. And I am usually led to think that as much as the One Campaign is doing in the world, and as thankful to God as I am for peo-

ple like Bono, I wonder why it has taken an Irish rock star to lead to the charge on this matter of justice in the world. Why is Bono leading the charge, and the church seemingly sitting back and watching him lead? Why is the church so often on the sidelines? Why are those who are the hands and feet of Christ, those of us who are the body of Christ, those of us who claim Christ as Lord and Savior; why are we not more often on the front lines leading campaigns for justice to help to end poverty and bring good news to the poor?

The commonality between both Bono and Jesus is they were among the poor; they spread their message of justice by being among the poor. The gospel is filled with stories of Jesus being among the least in his society. What barriers do we allow to exist among us that keep us from the poor. How can we ever expect the poor among us to know Christ and to believe in God's justice if we ourselves are unwilling to be among them, to go where they are, and to see life through their eyes.

Our challenge is to begin to see life through another persons eyes. We could all benefit from learning how life is like for those who must live without a home, who live with the threat of never eating another meal, who live with the threat of their child dying from a common cold, who live with the threat that their two low paying jobs will never be enough to release them from the cycle of poverty. Only then will the message of justice truly be carried to the poor, for when we walk with those who struggle to live, then we offer the hope that exists through the good news of Christ.

Reaching out to the poor and the oppressed, all who were cast aside in society of his day is whom Jesus was speaking of when he addressed the crowd in Nazareth. Too often I believe we as Christians hear this passage only to agree with our mouths that Jesus preached a message of justice while doing nothing with our lives to demonstrate our belief in God's justice. We talk the talk but don't walk the walk. Let justice roll. What can that mean for us today? What does God's justice mean for any of us, no matter how rich or poor we are? What does it mean for Christ to empower us to bring good news to the poor? What does it mean for those of us as followers of the Son of God to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor?

This message of Christ reminds us that we are to bring the good news in two profound ways. On one hand we are to reach out with the good news of forgiveness, with a new beginning in Christ, with salvation by grace alone. We are to preach Christ who lived, died and was raised to live again for all of us. All while with our other hand we are to support justice. Often we say we support justice without much of a clue what it may look like in our own lives to offer support to the ways of justice in our society. On behalf of those without a voice we can write letters to our leaders in support of justice, we can give away our overstuffed closets of clothes to those who need in order to share, we can pay attention to where our money goes so that we learn to live simply so as not to live on the shoulders of others. When we do accomplish this in our own lives, we realize that poverty is for us a matter of choice, as Mother Teresa once said it is, "Choosing to let a child die while we live a life of comfort."

“Today, this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.” The justice of God is the good news for all of us. It is good news for the millions of this countries' children who live below the poverty line, good news for the 45 million who do not have access to adequate healthcare, good news for those made poor by guilt and sin. God's justice heals both body and soul. This day, Jesus comes to the world bringing grace and liberation from God. This is good news for us. For those of us who are baptized into the body of Christ, this text is a commission, a calling to go forth and let justice roll, to go and share the good news of Christ, to go and proclaim the liberation of God's favor both in word and deed. May it be so for us today.