

WPC
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The Kingdom of God is a Party
Lev. 25: 1-12; Luke 4: 14-30

After overcoming the devil's temptations in the wilderness, Jesus is filled with the power of the Holy Spirit and returns to Galilee, where he begins teaching in the synagogues. He eventually makes his way to his hometown of Nazareth where, on the sabbath, he goes to the synagogue and follows the tradition of male Jews participating in the service by reading a passage of Scripture and commenting on it. He chooses to read a passage from Isaiah which proclaims God's special concern for the poor and oppressed. He also creates quite a commotion with his radical comments following the reading.

"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." Why was Jesus' reading of and commentary on this text radical enough to make his audience want to kill him?

Part of the fuss had to do with the phrase "the year of the Lord's favor." The Old Testament defines the sabbath as having three levels.

We're all familiar with the first level, which is the 4th Commandment: we are to rest every 7th day, which is the sabbath day.

The other two levels are recorded for us in Lev. 25, which was read for us this morning, where God commands the Israelites to observe the sabbatical year and the year of Jubilee. Every seventh year there was to be a sabbath of complete rest for the land, when no one was allowed to sow seeds or gather the harvest. Thus, the land was given a period of rest for revitalization and renewal. The sabbatical year signified that God owned the land and gave it to the people of Israel, who were merely stewards of it. The sabbatical year is still observed in certain fields – including ministry.

And then, after seven sabbatical years, that is, on the fiftieth year, the Jews were to celebrate the year of jubilee, when all debts were to be canceled, all the slaves released, all the land redistributed and the people returned to the land of their ancestors. "The year of the Lord's favor" is another term for this year of jubilee. It was to be good news for the poor and oppressed and a time of celebration. The year of jubilee was an attempt to prevent economic exploitation and to provide social justice. Every fiftieth year, people would have a chance to start over without any debts. Wouldn't that be good news for the poor? Wouldn't that be good news, in fact, for middle-class people today?

Unfortunately, there is no record of the Jews (or anyone else in human history) ever observing the year of jubilee. Jubilee might have been good news for the poor, but it was not such good news for those who had lent out their money. It was to their advantage to keep poor people powerless rather than cancelling their debts. It's ironic that the Jews tried so hard to keep the sabbath day every week, while ignoring the year of jubilee.

But when Jesus read from Isaiah 61, it would have called to mind for his audience this year of jubilee. The passage states that God's anointed one, or the Messiah, the Christ, would bring to reality the hopes of the poor, the oppressed, and the imprisoned. When the Messiah came, one way that the people would know that he was the Messiah was that he would finally institute jubilee.

The Jews who were listening to Jesus read that day knew their Scriptures well, and they were well aware that the Messiah would be the one to proclaim jubilee. They might well have been wondering what their hometown boy was up to in choosing this particular passage, but after Jesus finished his reading and sat down, in case anyone still had any doubts, he pronounced, "Today, this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." In other words, "Hey, in case you didn't get it, I'm it, I'm God's anointed one, and Jubilee is hereby instituted!"

Their response was really quite reasonable. They took him to the edge of town to throw him off a cliff. Basically, they were going to stone him, and it didn't matter if the stones were thrown at him or if he was thrown at the stones. They knew what to do with troublemakers! This Jesus thinks he's the Messiah? But we know his family. We knew him when he was just a little tyke playing with our kids. What makes him think he's so special? We know how to deal with blasphemers! But the interesting thing was that as they were about to throw him off the cliff, Jesus simply passed through the midst of them. It was not yet the time for him to die.

Fred Craddock calls our attention to the fact that, in Luke's Gospel, "the first public word of Jesus as an adult, apart from reading Scripture, is 'today.' This is the beginning of jubilee. The time of God is today." Unfortunately, the history of Christianity does not bear unbroken testimony to Jesus' announcement, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled."

When we look around us, it's pretty obvious that the hungry still need food, the poor still need a decent income and a safe place to live, and that many are still sick and in prison. But jubilee has been declared by our Lord, so today is still the time when we are to bring good news to the poor, release to the captives, and freedom to the oppressed. We are to work for economic

equity and social justice. Today is still the day for jubilee, a time to give those who have no hope a reason to celebrate!

And that's really what the Kingdom of God is all about. We are indeed to work for peace and justice, but we are to do so with a cheerful and joyful attitude, not grudgingly. The Kingdom of God is about bringing joy and celebration into the world. Tony Campolo even goes so far as to claim that the Kingdom of God is a party! That's really what the church should be all about.

Unfortunately, the last thing that comes to many people's minds when they think about church is a party. A number of years ago, Group magazine included a survey of what young people dislike about church. One of the most popular criticisms was that they considered church to be boring. Surprised? Probably not, since I'm guessing that there are more than a handful of adults who share this criticism. But we should be surprised. In fact, we should be shocked, because we have managed to do the impossible: to make the gospel boring and dull. How in the world have we managed to take the most exciting, joyful news ever and make it boring? Centuries of hard work and effort, I guess.

We need to share the exciting and joyful news of jubilee with other people. Why is it so easy for people to get excited about something as trivial

as a football game and so difficult for people to get excited about the news that God loves us and has redeemed us? If the Seahawks were ever to win the Super Bowl, you know that there will be a huge celebration in Seattle: people will honk their horns, run around shouting in the streets, and hug total strangers. All because their team won a simple game. Now how many people react the same way after attending church service and hearing the good news of salvation? But the gospel is indeed a cause for celebration.

I've shared before a story Tony Campolo tells that illustrates quite powerfully the idea that the Kingdom of God is good news for the poor and oppressed, that it is time for jubilee, that it is indeed a party. I want to share it again, but this time I'd like for us to hear Campolo himself tell this story:

[PLAY VIDEO CLIP]

I love that story. I'll never forget that ending, when Harry leaned over the counter and said, "Hey, you never told me you were a preacher. What kind of church do you belong to?" And Campolo's inspired response: "I belong to a church that throws birthday parties for prostitutes at 3 in the morning." Harry almost sneered as he answered, "No you don't. You don't belong to a church like that. There is no church like that. If there was, I'd join a church like that."

Wouldn't we all? Wouldn't we all join a church that throws birthday parties for prostitutes at 3 in the morning?

But that's precisely what the church of Jesus Christ is all about. The Kingdom of God is a huge wedding feast where everyone is invited, including the lame, the poor, and the blind.

Sally Brown says: We are faced with the possibility that God is *really and truly* capable of *scandalous* mercy, *offensive* mercy. Imagine, for example, there's a father, and he has two sons. The younger one is a real piece of work, always talking down the family and the home place. One day he says, "Dad, I've had it with you and this crummy place! I'm outta here! Give me my share of the stuff!" – and he's gone. He goes away and never looks back; and he has a good time, a very good time, until all that money is gone. Then things get bad, really bad.

And one day he comes crawling back home all ready with a nice little speech. And the father, instead of turning a blind eye and a deaf ear to this kid – *runs out to meet him!* Imagine that father throwing his arms around this son who has treated him like dirt, dressing him in the best robe, and – how about this? – *throwing a party!*

We are that prodigal son; we are that prostitute in Hawaii, and the good news is that, if we're willing, God wants us to come home so he can throw a party for us.

It's easy to get excited and invite people to a party. It's easy to get excited when we have good news to share. The good news - the best news ever - is that Jesus Christ has come to bring good news to the poor, 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. Amen.