

A Heart for the Poor (Part Two)

“To preach good news to the poor”

Reflection 34 in the series “A New World in the Morning”

Luke takes the story of Jesus in his hometown synagogue (Luke 4:14-21) and tells it out of order, puts it first, because this is the mission Jesus launches: to preach good news to the poor, to those who have lost hope, to young people overwhelmed by the daily struggle just to survive, to single mothers cleaning offices late at night, to the many who are haunted by mental disorders who cannot for long hold a job, to all those frustrated and unemployed young men thrashing around for some meaning in their lives across the Middle East or the Midlands of England.

The mission is to step in when families are broken and not up to the task as mentors, tutors, foster parents, as friends to children who desperately need caring responsible adults to show them the way. The mission is to be attentive to the poor; to remember in the words of an African proverb that “A poor man shames us all;” to be companions to those who are old and forgotten; to bring hope to those who are anxious and fearful whether they be here or in the war-torn villages of Syria, the universities of Saudi Arabia, the back alleys of Peshawar and Islamabad, or the bombed-out marketplaces of Baghdad; to heal the wounds of those who have been victims of violence and abuse; to bind up those whose hearts are breaking; to help those who have no home to come home to, no meal to sit down to, no bed to lie down in; to create a future all can trust, so that one day all – regardless of race, class, gender or however they were born – can sit down together at the table of the Lord.

And it is this that many people today seek, good people, good people who often do not go to church, and especially the generation coming into adulthood now, the Millennials. Every fourth Friday of the month under my wife’s direction we feed homeless men down at the Pacific Street shelter. We’ve been doing it for over twenty years now. I used to go a lot. But these days our twentysomethings do it. I’m not needed anymore. Because that’s what twentysomethings do. They may not always make it here on Sunday mornings, but they’ll make it there on Friday evenings. They act. They’re tired of talking, or maybe they’re tired of listening. But what they have is a heart for the poor, a heart for the oppressed, marginalized and dispirited. And so they seek in church a community that embodies God’s love in practical, healing, inclusive ways. What they ask of church is more, not less.

All along of course this has been the mission of Jesus – to preach good news to the poor, the brokenhearted, the captives, the blind and the oppressed. “The Lord,” the Psalmist says (146:9), “watches over the alien and sustains the fatherless and the widows.” But if we do this, if we take on Jesus’ mission as our own, we will meet resistance. There are many people – both inside and outside the church – who do not want to hear this.

If we read on in Luke 4, the people in Nazareth didn’t like it, not when they really saw what Jesus was saying. They didn’t like the way Jesus interpreted Scripture. What he said sounded good at first. “All spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that

came from his lips,” the text says in verse 22. But he went on (in verses 25-27) to draw out the implications of his mission, saying: “I assure you that there were many widows in Israel in Elijah’s time, when the sky was shut for three and a half years and there was a severe famine throughout the land. Yet Elijah was not sent to any of them, but to a widow in Zarephath in the region of Sidon [in the land of the enemy]. And there were many in Israel with leprosy in the time of Elisha the prophet, yet not one of them was cleansed – only Naaman the Syrian [again a commander in an enemy army].” What Jesus came announcing was deliverance, but not national deliverance. His gracious words were for everyone. All people are people. His was a future for all, and so it was a future all could trust.

And so, as the radical inclusiveness of Jesus’ announcement became clear to the people of Nazareth, it made them angry. Really angry. They had their boundaries. God’s good news, they thought, was only for people like them. Gracious words were only for them. Enraged, they tried to drive Jesus out of town and throw him off a cliff, but he walked right through the crowd and went on his way.

This response pattern becomes clearer and clearer in the gospel of Luke. It will lead to the crucifixion of Jesus. The grace Jesus offers so scandalizes us that often we are unable to receive it. Jesus could do nothing for his own townspeople because of the boundaries they had erected around themselves. How much more might God be able to do with us if we were ready to transcend the limits we ourselves have set for our love! If we could only overcome these boundaries. Around our faith. Around our hearts. Around our minds. Around what we see and what we don’t see.

It’s to this mission, this life task, that we are all called: to be a church with an evident heart for the poor; to take care of the poor, the oppressed and the marginalized in our towns; and to insist on national leaders that care for the poor. I know that political leaders can honestly and honorably differ in their policies on this. But what they all must do is care. And in our hearts we know whether they do or not. We can hear it in their voice. We know the ones who care and we know the ones that do not care – who, in fact, are sent to Hartford or Albany or Washington specifically to look out for the interests of those who are not poor. At the expense of the poor. We know these things.

It begins, however, with us. A new world in the morning depends on us caring in word and especially in action for the poor, the brokenhearted, the captives, the blind and the oppressed.

– Dale Pauls