

There's one word at my family gatherings that makes me cringe. It's a word that outsiders like to use to describe my generation. The word also comes in to play in the polarization of democrats and republicans views of social programs. Entitlement. (Cringes) Just the way it's naturally pronounced communicates disdain - in'tīdlmənt. It sneers. It shames. Entitlement programs. Entitled generations. / Millennials have received the brunt of this "entitled" label: the generation where people hate to work, a generation that doesn't take responsibly, and the age group that just wants everything given to them.¹

One scholar thinks Jesus comes across a little entitled today. Jesus gets up in front of the synagogue and reads the scroll. He reads from Isaiah 61 where it describes a Jubilee year. He's reading about that time when debts would be forgiven and captives will be set free. Where injustices are turned back and equity is finally reset. In some biblical communities this Jubilee year is in reference to the coming Messiah. After reading that passage, those in the synagogue were all

¹ <http://aspeneducation.crchealth.com/articles/article-entitlement/>

worked up and ready to hear a rousing sermon on that text. You know, just like today after I read the gospel.

In all seriousness, they're intrigued by what Jesus has to say. But instead, he takes a seat. People are looking at him seemingly saying, "What's going on here?" So Jesus says, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." Or in other words, "yeah, that Messiah you're waiting on? Here I am!" I imagine the response *that* got in the synagogue. I'm sure they called him entitled and out of his mind. After all, he was a refugee fleeing from Bethlehem after his birth; he is a bastard child; his adopted father was a carpenter, which is far from a priest; we have no record of his theological training; his mother was a rebel rouser; he's from a politically-resistant territory of Galilee and not from Jerusalem; he probably had dark skin, dark eyes, and dark hair; and he's thirty years old. *This* doesn't seem like a description of the Messiah; in fact it sounds

more like an ISIS leader. He'd fit in with those entitled Millennials thinking they are wonderful and must have the very best.

Then, if that isn't bad enough, he's affirming the lowliest of society: the poor, the captive, the blind, and the oppressed. From our seat here in Wicker Park, this kind of favor is nonsensical. As one scholar puts it, "the evidence demonstrates that God's favor rests on those who prosper. Why would Jesus announce that he has come to do the opposite, especially when the opposite could potentially upset the favor the powerful already enjoy?"²

The answer to this question can be more easily found in our epistle reading from 1 Corinthians. To the church in Corinth, Paul admonishes the powerful members to honor the weaker members for *their own* sake. It's "for their own sake" because we're all in it together. To explain this, Paul uses the common metaphor of his day

² <http://www.christiancentury.org/article/2015-12/january-24-third-sunday-after-epiphany>

– the human body- but he gives the metaphor a twist. You see, in many ancient writings the image of the body was used to pacify those on the lowest social and political levels. Those servants were reminded that it was their duty to serve those who were naturally superior. The superiors were the brains of the body and the servants were the limbs and torso.

However, Paul has a new interpretation. He says the weak are indispensable, those that are dishonored we should honor, and those who are less respected we should treat with greater respect. He says that the hand would be nothing without the brain, and the brain couldn't do anything without the hand. Paul goes on to say that we honor and respect the least of these because, well, they need it more.³ This is powerful and enlightening for me. When I read that verse I thought of the “Black Lives Matter” movement.

³ <http://www.christiancentury.org/article/2015-12/january-24-third-sunday-after-epiphany>

Back in 2014 we as a church had a banner outside that read “Black Lives Matter.” I would have to say that the one criticism I heard most often was that we should say “All Lives Matter.” Yet, Paul’s voice here responds to that. Here Paul says we honor those without honor and we respect those with the least respect - why? Because they need it most. We say, “black lives matter” because, they need to hear that more than us white folks do.

Here’s another great analogy, “When you see a house on fire and direct the firefighters to the house, you’re not saying that all the other houses in the neighborhood don’t matter; you’re saying that this house *especially* matters most because it’s on fire.”⁴

So when Jesus and Isaiah both emphasize the poor, the down trodden, those on the margins, those diseased, those widowed, those forgotten ones, it’s because they need it the most. In this country, those who are black, Asian, Latino, middle eastern, gay, lesbian,

⁴ <http://www.davidlose.net/2016/01/epiphany-3-c-a-peculiar-power/>

queer, transgendered, female, poor, differently-abled, widowed, old, young, unemployed, addicted, and all those on the margins, they are *not* more valuable, *but* they sure as hell need to hear that they are respected, loved, honored, and important more than those of us who inherently know that to be true already.

So here in Wicker Park we might sneer at Jesus who wants us to respect the bus driver, or to honor the cleaning staff, or to care about that single mother with three kids and no job. Yet remember, Jesus was one of them. Jesus was in Nazareth and these people in Nazareth *are* the poor, they are the captives, they are the oppressed. These are the occupied people, they are the starved, they are the controlled, and they are the ones enslaved. These people hear Jesus read from Isaiah, and to them it's no shock that the Messiah would bring these things – they *need* to hear it. / However *this* person, of all people, says these things? Does *he* really think he's the Messiah? No, he's just entitled.

I wonder if that's what we need on occasion – a bit of entitlement. When we're not entitled to much in life, when we're pushed to the edges, when we've lost out on the luck of our birth, when we're fleeing as a refugee, when we're ruled over and beaten down - maybe in those times what we *do* need is a feeling of entitlement - a feeling that we've got something going for us in life. But who am *I* to say that to be true? Perhaps a perspective on this text coming from the experiences of an impoverished person in Central America might speak to us. He offers this insight: "Just by announcing liberation [Jesus] was already fulfilling the prophecy. And just by saying 'today this prophecy is fulfilled' he was announcing liberation." When we interpret this story through this man's voice I think this statement opens up new meaning. Jesus wasn't merely challenging the powerful in today's reading; Jesus was also provoking the least

among us to claim liberation.⁵ Jesus was announcing that those on the outside are entitled to justice.

And let's be honest for a moment. You're in Wicker Park. Just sitting here brings with itself entitlement. You're not left out today though. So, if you're feeling pretty content, if you're thinking things are generally going well, and if you're feeling generally centered in life today this passage speaks to you too. For remember what Paul said: what affects one part of the body has an impact on the whole body. We are empowered to honor and respect those on the margins, because they need it and because it impacts us. Paul reminds us to share our privilege and to share our entitlement. Share our wealth. Share our power. Share our time. Share our gifts for the good of the whole body. Share our thanks. Share our goodwill. Share. Share. Share.

⁵ <http://www.christiancentury.org/article/2015-12/january-24-third-sunday-after-epiphany>

Last Friday it was with great sadness I learned that due to the over seven-month budget impasse here in Illinois, Lutheran Social Services of Illinois, or LSSI for short, would need to make cuts.⁶ LSSI is the largest statewide provider of social services, and we've supported them for many years. Now 750 people will become unemployed with layoffs, which is 43% of their total employees. 4,700 people will no longer receive services since LSSI cannot continue to provide services without reimbursement.

Unfortunately, the programs with the largest cuts were those on the margins – our seniors, who need home care, case management, protective services, and day care. Community-based mental health counseling took a substantial hit as well.⁷ It's a disgrace to those we are to respect, honor, and support.

⁶ <http://www.prnewswire.com/news-releases/illinois-budget-impasse-forces-program-closures-staffing-cuts-at-lutheran-social-services-of-illinois-300208617.html>

⁷ <http://www.prnewswire.com/news-releases/illinois-budget-impasse-forces-program-closures-staffing-cuts-at-lutheran-social-services-of-illinois-300208617.html>

Here from our seat of privilege, entitlement, and power we can have an impact. It's time to write your representatives again; it's time to use our collective power; it's time to stand up and remind the weak that we suffer when they suffer; it's time to honor the less honorable; and it's time to respect the least respected. Friends, I implore you to visit the website printed in the bulletin's announcements (www.is.gd/LSSIbudget - this is case sensitive).

So, this is the good news from our God today: if you're feeling lost and forgotten, or if you're feeling pretty good about life, God's word is here for you today. First, you are loved, you are a part of the body of Christ, and we gather together at a holy meal. If you're feeling forgotten, God brings you a meal of a little extra support and entitlement today. If you're feeling full, we're reminded to share – share our gifts, our thanks, and share our time to lift up those cast down. May you *claim* your entitlement or *use* your entitlement this day knowing God's love and grace. Amen.