

Wicker Park Lutheran Church

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First and foremost, I want to congratulate you. You made an excellent choice coming to worship today. You have an advantage over everyone else in the year ahead. Not only are you making a commitment to self-care by caring for your spiritual life, but you're also getting a key insight into everything else that is to come.

You see, often people are confused about the gospels. Far too often, we mesh them all together, and with that we do a disservice to the Scriptures. Then, we get confused about what the author is trying to say about Jesus, God, and our world. But, for the rest of the year as we make our way through the gospel of Luke, you are set. Everyone else is going to think that Vicar and I are making political statements, but you all, you will know the truth.

The truth is that the Jesus in Luke's gospel lays it all out there in today's reading. The very first words of Jesus's ministry came from a conflation of a few verses from Isaiah (61:1-2a and 58:6). Jesus said, "the Spirit of the Lord is upon me," ... and remember, we heard about that last week in Jesus's baptism in Luke with the Holy Spirit descending upon him? He continues, "the Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor."

Ok, let's pause here. Professor Elizabeth Johnson reminds us that, "The word translated "poor" has to do with economic status as well as other factors that lowered one's status in the first-century world—factors such as gender, genealogy, education, occupation, sickness, disability, and degree of religious purity." The term poor goes beyond dollars in your pocket and numbers on your financial statement. Poor is something more holistic, it describes those who are

relegated to the margins of society.¹ And in case you miss that holistic sense, Jesus kept going and said, “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.” Next Sunday, we’re going to talk more about “the year of the Lord’s favor,” so stay tuned for that. But even without an understanding of that phrase, it’s clear that the Jesus found in Luke’s gospel has emphasized something here.

¹ <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/third-sunday-after-epiphany-3/commentary-on-luke-414-21-5>

You see, Jesus gave us a taste of what is to come. Jesus showed what God's presence looks like. Jesus revealed that these "outsiders"—these people who are poor, oppressed, and captive—it's *these* people who are the special focus of God's grace and mercy. Now, next week, we'll get the latter half of this narrative where the people of the synagogue react to Jesus. But, today, it's about Jesus. It's about the message that we will see throughout all of Luke's gospel.

But doesn't this message sometimes get old? Doesn't it get frustrating? Doesn't it feel like an assault to our already complex lives to hear it every week? Oftentimes preachers are reminded that the message is mostly the same every week, but our task is to use imperfect words in new ways to communicate God's favor for the those on the margins along with the expansive love of God that is so, well, predictable at this point. But that's because words only go so far. Words say something that actions reveal.

Just this last week I was in our conference meeting, which is a fancy way of saying our hyper local Lutheran congregations. As a conference, we're beginning a journey toward deeper engagement around diversity, inclusion, and belonging (or DIBs for short). During the introduction to this work, it was emphasized that relationships are the key. That embodiment and action come from relationships. That the heart of DIBs and antiracism work is found in relationships.

That's perhaps the most difficult part of this work. Ultimately, our credit or debit card cannot do the work. Rather, it requires us to show up. It needs an embodied commitment to openly, honestly, and humbly be engaged with those who are different. It's converting words and knowledge into embodied action. And, throughout the rest of Luke's gospel we'll see that come alive. We'll see Jesus welcome the outsiders—those who are different in terms of religion, gender, and ethnic origin. We'll notice that Jesus speaks about justice *and* physically acts to make his orbit more just. We'll see Jesus literally die by the hands of violence to embody God's non-violence and love.

You see, this is the reason that we Lutherans don't just act or just speak. Rather, we speak and act. We talk about justice and then we advocate for justice with decision-makers. We look for the places and people who are labeled as the "poor" in our society and then we talk *and* act. We make statements like, "Immigrant or AMMPARO Welcoming Congregation," or that we are "Reconciling in Christ" to welcome and include all people of diverse sexual orientations and gender identities. Then, we act—we share our pronouns, we transform our bathrooms to

be gender-neutral, we advocate for humane treatment, and we create safe space for those on the margins to live within the center.

Today, we have an opportunity to take our words and pair them with our actions. The White House is asking for public comment on ending the family separation policy that tore over 5,500 children away from their parents. Church World Service, which our denomination is a member of, has made it easy to share your comments. This is your opportunity to tell the U.S. government what it must do to take accountability for family separation and bring justice to the families who suffered under this horrific policy. Using [this link](#), you're invited to take words and put them into action. The important part is that the comment period ends Tuesday! So, now is the time to act. It is an opportunity to follow in the footsteps of our Lutheran tradition that see God's law and gospel proclaimed in both word and deed. It's the reminder that in our baptism we, like Jesus, have been anointed with the Holy Spirit. We have been sent forth to follow in Jesus's footsteps and to be reflections of Christ's embodiment of including those on the margins in what we say and what we do.

So friends, again, congratulations! You have the important insider knowledge that everything that Jesus will do in Luke's gospel is centered in bringing good news to the poor—that is, to those without the privilege of being at the center of the social structure. Then, we have the opportunity to hear how God includes us, God loves us, and God empowers us to follow in Christ's footsteps in both word and deed. Amen.