

Sight for the Blind

Isaiah 61:1-6 Luke 4:14-21

April 15, 2018

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Isaiah 61:1-6 (read responsively in worship)

The spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me,

because the LORD has anointed me;

he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed,

to bind up the broken-hearted,

to proclaim liberty to the captives,

and release to the prisoners;

to proclaim the year of the LORD's favour,

and the day of vengeance of our God;

to comfort all who mourn;

to provide for those who mourn in Zion—

to give them a garland instead of ashes,

the oil of gladness instead of mourning,

the mantle of praise instead of a faint spirit.

They will be called oaks of righteousness,

the planting of the LORD, to display his glory.

They shall build up the ancient ruins,

they shall raise up the former devastations;

they shall repair the ruined cities,

the devastations of many generations.

Strangers shall stand and feed your flocks,

foreigners shall till your land and dress your vines;

but you shall be called priests of the LORD,

you shall be named ministers of our God;

you shall enjoy the wealth of the nations,

and in their riches you shall glory.

Luke 4:14-21

Then Jesus, filled with the power of the Spirit, returned to Galilee, and a report about him spread through all the surrounding country. He began to teach in their synagogues and was praised by everyone.

When he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, he went to the synagogue on the sabbath day, as was his custom. He stood up to read, and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written:

‘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 favour.’

And he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down. The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. Then he began to say to them, ‘Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.’

When I began serving as a pastor in Atlanta, I got to know Richard. He didn't have a permanent place to stay, but he wasn't homeless. We might say he was on the couch-surfing side of the line between poverty and lower-middle class.

I was telling a friend of mine from seminary about the situation. Bill listened closely as I said, "I'm just not sure what I can tell Richard to encourage him! I just want to open his eyes to all that God has done for him, but I'm not sure what I should say! He has so many needs and I just don't know where to start."

And Bill said, "Why not ask Richard to tell you about what he does to strengthen his faith when he's bouncing from place to place. Or when he's trying to figure out where his next meal is coming from. You've never had to do any of that."

I was like, "Whoa!" It was so eye-opening! I had wanted so badly to open Richard's eyes up to what God was doing for him, but Bill helped me realize that my eyes also need to be opened really badly. And as unexpected as it felt to me, Richard could be the one to open them for me.

Looking back on it, I know Jesus used Bill and Richard to teach me that I wasn't some genius with my eyes wide open already to all of the answers—I was someone who needed my eyes opened just as badly as Richard needed his opened...and probably worse. I had something to offer, sure, but I also had a big need, too. I don't think I ever would have imagined that before my conversation with Bill.

Jesus' mission blows open our imaginations in all sorts of ways—his mission that goes back to our passage from Luke, when he stood up in the synagogue and read the scroll of Isaiah. Now you should know that any male in the Synagogue back in those days could be asked to stand up and read or preach at any synagogue service. Now you should also know that we are not planning to implement that practice here. We're planning to ask anyone at all, not just men, to read or preach at a moment's notice.

Anyway, Jesus is invited to read, and he reads a mash-up of Isaiah 61 (our Old Testament passage) and Isaiah 58—and these passages focus on what we understand as his mission to humankind:

To bring good news to the poor

To proclaim release to the captive

To recover sight to the blind

To let the oppressed go free

All to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor

Jesus reads all of these, and then when everyone is looking at him, says,

“Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.”

Jesus' ministry worked to fulfill that scripture during his life on earth, and Jesus is still at work fulfilling this scripture even now...in two distinct ways.

The first is that Jesus is calling us to connect with our neighbors by joining him in bringing good news to the poor, release to the captives, and sight to the

blind. This happens in all sorts of ways, but I want to focus now on just one experience I've had with this. When I was at that same church in Atlanta, we developed a relationship with a church in a village in Honduras which had been devastated by Hurricane Mitch.

One year an optometrist spent months collecting old eyeglasses from members of the congregation, and measuring them and marking what strength they were. Then on the trip, she tested residents' eyes, to see whether there were any pairs of glasses which could help them to see better. The looks on their faces as they saw again clearly, as for the first time, was amazing. These old frames—hopelessly out of style in some cases—placed on those who hadn't seen well for ages—was a modern-day example of Jesus' mission to return sight to the blind coming through us.

So that's the first way that Jesus continues to fulfill that scripture from Isaiah—when his mission comes through us. But the second way happens when we realize that Jesus' mission comes to us—that we receive his mission, too, from unexpected neighbors. Because sometimes we're the blind ones too.

We realized that in Honduras, too. Most of us who went on the trip were pretty sure that we had the skills and knowledge to improve the Hondurans' lives. There were architects certain they knew best how to build the cinder block houses we were constructing. Doctors who knew best about what to do with the patients they were seeing. Teachers who knew best about teaching the children and their mothers in Vacation Bible School.

But really, most of us were blind. Blind to what we were going to learn when we started interacting with these new friends, day after day after day.

- Watching pregnant women pass cinder blocks without gloves, in flip flops...never tiring, healing our blindness to show what it means to take pride in constructing your own house rather than letting someone else come and do it all for you.
- Seeing pastors who made next to nothing, living in shacks, working all day and all night to make sure that their flock felt cared for and loved...healing our blindness so we could see what it means to live sacrificially and love generously
- Getting a glimpse of pure joy among children, who lacked what we thought were so many basic necessities...healing our blindness so we could see what it means to focus on relationships rather than material goods to bring happiness.

Thank God, Jesus' mission to recover sight to the blind was a mission that came to us as well as came through us to someone else.

My sense is that our kind of people—the kind of people who make up this church—our kind of people have an easier time imagining that Jesus charges us to have his mission come through us to other people. It helps us feel good about ourselves to know we have something to offer and that we have an important role to play. In a lot of ways, that's the purpose of the auction we had last night, and the mission of the rummage sale that's coming up, and the role of the officers that we're ordaining today.

So my challenge for you this week as you connect with your neighbors is to consider how they might be bringing Jesus' mission to you. In what ways might Jesus be using your unexpected neighbors to free you from some oppression? to bring you good news? To help open your eyes?

What do you see?