

## Jesus' Manifesto

## Luke 4:14-30; 1 Corinthians 13:1-11

*Ute Molitor; First Congregational UCC Camden; February 3, 2019*

Barbara Brown Taylor, a theologian and writer, tells of an intriguing experience she had while attending a retreat.<sup>1</sup> Their very first assignment was to tell a story about someone who had shown the love of Christ to them. Several people spoke about friends who had come through for them while they were going through difficult times while other friends had seemed absent. Another participant talked about how his neighbor had stepped in to help his family when his own father had died. There was a tremendous spirit of gratitude in the room. As a matter of fact, the room started feeling like church in short order. All that care and love was being lifted up and allowed to soak in. All these stories are beautiful and good in their own right.

But then, a woman stood up and said: "Well, the first thing I thought about when I tried to think who had been Christ to me was, 'Who in my life has told me the truth so clearly that I wanted to kill him for it?'" Whoops. That woke everybody up in a hurry. This woman reminded everyone that Jesus sometimes speaks the truth even to the point, as Taylor puts it, "that we will do appalling things to make him shut up." Think for a moment, have you had this experience of someone speaking truth to you that first enraged or saddened you but actually made a difference in your life? I had the good fortune of being invited to one of the church supper groups that still meets and at one point we all responded to the question of what qualities we sought in a friend. Several people mentioned speaking the truth to us even when it is hard. People also mentioned that they hoped this would be done in a kind way.

In our story from Luke today, Jesus is in that unenviable position of speaking truth to the people he grew up with in Nazareth. This takes place right after his baptism and temptations in the desert. Maybe it is because Jesus just faced his own potential and maybe real demons in the wilderness that he cuts right to the chase, putting both feet into his mouth as he addresses the crowd. At first, however, Jesus is welcomed and invited to read in the synagogue. By the power of the Spirit, he reads a text from the prophet Isaiah that also lays out Jesus' own mission statement. I believe that we must take it seriously for our own time if we are serious about

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<sup>1</sup> Barbara Brown Taylor, *Home By Another Way*, "In the Company of Strangers" - Luke 4:21-32 (Cambridge, MA: Cowley Publications, 1999), 42-46.

wanting to walk with him. *“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.”* After reading, Jesus rolls up the scroll, sits down and says: *“Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.”* Curiously, Jesus leaves Isaiah 61:2b out of the quotation which promises vengeance against enemies.<sup>2</sup>

When his listeners first hear this, they seem to take some pride in the fact that one of their own can read so authoritatively and graciously. They speak well of him to each other during Jesus’ brief silence but are blind to the ways that they themselves may be imprisoned by their attitudes and expectations. Jesus suggests that they will want healings and miracles but only for themselves. They do not understand or embrace the breadth and depth of God’s offer of healing and liberation. Jesus even proceeds to remind them of how the revered prophets Elijah and Elisha were sent by God to help foreigners instead of insiders during times of crisis because the foreigners were more faithful and generous. For example, Elijah was sustained by the faithfulness and generosity of a poor and starving foreign widow when he was running away from the Jewish King Ahab and his wife Jezebel who wanted his head. Because the widow was willing to share her last rations with him during a time of famine, her oil jars and flour pots were wondrously and continuously refilled (I Kings 17:7-16).

It seems that complacency, an attitude of entitlement and/or exclusion, or seeking welfare only for yourself or your group of insiders just may get in the way of receiving God. God also has an annoying tendency to include the very people we would prefer to leave out. God’s love is huge and encompassing beyond our boundaries. This is as true today as it was back then and we keep getting this message in our text. This truth was more than the people listening to Jesus are willing to tolerate. The crowd gets so riled up that they even try to throw Jesus off a cliff, just as the women at the retreat described as a possible reaction. Except that she could embrace the challenge. The people listening to Jesus did not.

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<sup>2</sup> See also Ernest Hess in David Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, eds., *Feasting on the Word*, Year C, Vol. 1, (Westminster John Know: Louisville, 2009), 287.

It does seem that Jesus is being awfully tough on them. It's not like the people in Nazareth were without struggle. Beckmann suggests that when they heard Jesus talk about freedom from oppression and the year of the Lord's favor, they may have thought that their material fortunes would finally improve in relation to their southern country folk and rivals living in Judea who were habitually looking down on them.<sup>3</sup> The year of the Lord's favor refers to the Hebrew concept of the Jubilee (Leviticus 25:8-17), which proposes that after 49 years all debts would be forgiven, slaves freed, property returned, the land left to rest, and wealth was essentially redistributed. There is no evidence that this Jubilee was ever enacted but it contains a biblical vision Jesus embraced. We find echoes of it in attempts to forgive the debts of developing countries from loans with exorbitant interest rates, often given to unscrupulous corrupt politicians more intent on amassing their own wealth than improving the lives of their citizens.

UCC theologian Walter Brueggemann calls the biblical jubilee: "... the most difficult, most demanding, most outrageous requirement of biblical faith... [given] our deep practices of accumulation and our intense yearning to have ours and keep ours and make it grow."<sup>4</sup> He further writes, "you cannot have a viable, peaceable, safe (urban) community when deep poverty must live alongside huge wealth, when high privilege is visible alongside endless disadvantage in health and housing and education." The concept of Jubilee also counters a fundamental lie, which Julie Porter describes with these words: *"This is the big lie the world tells us: that the universe is connected by trade agreements, electronic banking, computer networks, shipping lanes, and the seeking of profit — nothing else. Whereas this is the truth of God: all creation is one holy web of relationships, and gifts meant for all; that creation vibrates with the pain of all its parts, because its true destiny is joy."*<sup>5</sup>

The problem with Jesus' hometown crowd is not that they might have desired the Year of Jubilee but that they do not seem to understand that this Jubilee is not intended to give them a

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<sup>3</sup> Quoting Kate Huey from i.ucc.org: "Kim L. Beckmann draws on the work of Caleb Rosado (from his book, *Significance of Galilee to the Mission of the Church*), to help us understand that the Judeans would have seen the Galileans as "peasants," "common people," "unwashed people of the land" with an accent that betrayed their region's long history of a rich mix of cultures and races."

<sup>4</sup> Quoted by Kate Huey from a Brueggemann sermon listed in *Inscribing the Text*.

<sup>5</sup> Quoted as an additional resource on the i.ucc.org lectionary commentary but without a detailed source.

privileged and entitled step up in the race for survival. Their problem is that they do not comprehend or desire that this jubilee is for the healing of the whole world, including those they might consider to be their enemies. Their horizon for love is too narrow! We see plenty of evidence of this attitude in our day.

I imagine that one of the ways Jesus would admonish us today is to pay attention to how our own lives contribute to injustice as we participate in our so-called global economy and in “practices of accumulation and our intense yearning to have ours and keep ours and make it grow,” especially when that comes at great cost to the greater good. What do we do about it? It is easy to despair in the face of the disparities and injustices in our world. I would like to highlight one seemingly small way in which we can contribute to greater prospects to people who have been disadvantaged. I give great thanks to Mimi Benedict, Julie Clement, Mary Wells (and I know Andi Hamalainen was part of the conversation) to offer us a conscious choice of supporting small farmers, cooperatives and local businesses by using fair trade products.

Some of the products served as part of Holy Grounds - like tea and coco - come to us through the UCC’s Equal Exchange program which ensures a supply chain for small farmers. By getting fair prices, people like Fatima in Nicaragua and Angelica in Colombia can stay invested in their own community and improve its well-being. They can feed their families and make sure their children go to school. The farmers and cooperatives involved also use practices that protect our fragile planet. Cristina Liberati, whose last name speaks of the work of liberation, describes how Equal Exchange also offers grants to cooperatives. They ask the farmers what they need to grow and innovate and then provide logistical and technical support to improve production quality and sustainability.

The coffee we are serving right now comes from a family owned company from Maine who roast their beans locally and are currently most affordable as we step into this mission. Other options can always be considered. This company is now “B” certified which means that their business practices address social and environmental problems while providing accountability to all they work with. They have also been identified by the State of Maine as an environmental leader and participate in the Governor’s Carbon Challenge. They recycle chaff and grounds with

the help of farmers and gardeners. Proceeds from burlap coffee sacks benefit the Mid Coast Hunger Prevention Project (Brunswick). They also support community education and children's programming.

The company purchase coffee from farmers and cooperatives in Africa, Asia and Latin America at a steady \$1.40 a lb. even though the market has dropped to \$0.94lb. This provides farmers an opportunity to maintain a sustainable economic future. One of the partner organizations is COMSA in Honduras. Some of you may know that the Maine Conference UCC has a long-standing partnership with a church in Honduras. COMSA provides health and nutrition training for farmers as well. We might say this is just a drop on a hot stone but it is more than that. We are participating in processes whose ripple effects empower people in vulnerable places where the local efforts of the poor have sometimes been actively suppressed.

There are many more examples of how we are and could be about Jesus' platform or manifesto of our shared mission. Jesus' challenge to free captives, bring good news to the poor and liberate people imprisoned, including through unfair policies and practices, remains. It behooves us to keep asking the question of how else people can feel imprisoned or are suffering in their lives, how we ourselves might be trapped in our assumptions and expectation, as we try to honor that, "All creation is one holy web of relationships, and gifts meant for all; that creation vibrates with the pain of all its parts, because its true destiny is joy." We can reject this truth and be left standing at the edge of a cliff of our own making or enter into a deeper joy in company with the one who was willing to lay down his life for the sake of others. All thanks be to God, Creator, Christ and Holy Spirit. Amen.