



## Christ United Methodist Church

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**Date:** January 27, 2019

**Sermon:** In Our Poverty We Have Much to Give

**Text:** Luke 4:14-21

**Speaker:** Pastor Cheryl Arnold

Today's passage sums up Jesus' mission on earth in the gospel according to Luke. At least that's what professor David Eastman told our class on The Gospels at Course of Study a few years ago—and I've found that to be a helpful insight.

But I believe what's life-giving and life-changing about today's passage is realizing that the words Jesus read from Isaiah didn't only apply to the prophets of the Hebrew Bible, or to Jesus. As followers of Christ, they apply to us, too.

Here's our context. In Luke's last chapter, Jesus was baptized and the Holy Spirit rested on him. That same Spirit then led Jesus into the wilderness, where he was tempted for 40 days by the devil, who left defeated. Now Jesus, empowered by the Spirit, embarks on a speaking tour of Galilee—and he's the hottest ticket in town.

At least until he gets to Nazareth, where he grew up.

It's the Sabbath and Jesus, being an observant Jew, is at his usual place—the synagogue. He's handed the scroll of Isaiah. Jesus stands up, finds these words from Isaiah 61:1-2 and Isaiah 58:6, and reads them:

“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim liberty to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, and to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.” (ESV)

Then Jesus sits down, the standard teaching posture for rabbis. All eyes are upon him—waiting for this hometown boy to make good. Then Jesus says what no one expected to hear: “Today, this scripture has been fulfilled just as you heard it.”

And at first, the crowd is duly impressed. But as we'll see next week, things go downhill rather quickly—kind of like what happens between Palm Sunday and Good Friday.

But today let's focus on Jesus's understanding of his own mission as the fulfillment of prophecy.

When Jesus says, “The spirit of the Lord is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me,” he is announcing both that he’s filled with God’s Spirit and that he’s God’s anointed, or God’s chosen one. Now if you’ve read the gospels that’s old news—but right now, nobody else knows that. On this day, Jesus took these familiar words of Isaiah and gave them new meaning.

What’s Jesus say he’s been chosen to do? Depending on your translation, he’s been chosen to proclaim good news, freedom, release, healing, and liberty.

For whom? For the poor, the captives, the prisoners, the blind, and the oppressed. A phrase that’s present in the Isaiah text itself, but not in all our translations of Luke, is “to bind up the brokenhearted.” Personally, I hear that as summing up all the above—Jesus has been called to heal our shattered hearts.

So why is it that proclaiming good news to the poor gets top billing? Maybe because the prophets were always railing against the injustices suffered by the poor. Or maybe because of the “ripple effects” of poverty.

In Bible times, if you were unable to pay your debts, you might be put in prison, or enslaved as an indentured servant. An example of ripples today might be someone who can’t afford healthy food, medicine, or a safe place to live and winds up chronically sick and unable to work.

For the prophets, poverty wasn’t only about a lack of money. It was also about lacking social status. Consequently, the term “the poor” also covered women, immigrants, children, prisoners, the disabled, even the wealthy but hated tax collectors.

God’s concern for the poor appears throughout Holy Scripture.

In the Hebrew Bible, our OT, we see that much of Jewish law dealt with caring for the poor. For example, landowners were required to leave part of their fields and vineyards unharvested so that the poor could find food. And how often do we read that the people were to care for widows, orphans, and immigrants? In the NT book of Acts, new believers came together sharing their meals and their wealth so that everyone would have enough.

This scene from Jesus’ hometown synagogue also shows up in the gospels of Mark and Matthew, but only Luke records the prophecy that Jesus reads—likely because Luke’s gospel most clearly shows Jesus’ concern for the vulnerable.

As if the whole unwed pregnancy-born in a stable- invite the lowly shepherds nativity scene wasn’t enough, Luke tells us that for the purification ceremony after Jesus’s birth, his parents offered “a pair of turtle doves or two young pigeons.”

Why’s that matter? Because that was the sacrifice the Law allowed for those who couldn’t afford anything else.

Jesus knew what it was like to be poor. By the end of his life, Jesus would also know what it was like to be a refugee, to be homeless, and to be a prisoner. But Jesus also knew—as did the prophets before him—that poverty, captivity, blindness, and oppression are within each one of us.

How does it feel to be trapped in addiction—or in an affair? How does it feel to be imprisoned, whether by bars, by your body, or by an abusive relationship? How does it feel to be jobless—or to be stuck in a job that is sucking the life out of you? How does it feel to know you need to forgive, or seek forgiveness, but can't—or won't?

Healing the brokenhearted was Jesus' calling, and as his followers, it's our calling as well.

When I think about all the ministries we have going on here at Christ Church—and all the ministries you are involved with on your own—it gives me hope that we, too, can help heal the broken hearts. Here's a sampling of what we do. If you want more details, or want to get involved, get on our website or talk with me, Don, or the people around you.

This past fall, our youth collected and assembled Flood Buckets that would be distributed by UMCOR, the United Methodist Committee on Relief, to victims of recent hurricanes. In December, our youth shopped for Secret Santa families right here in Washington County.

Our congregation collected clothing for local students through Tabby's Clothesline and the Hat and Mitten tree at Christmas. We also have ongoing fabric ministries, where people sew sleeping bags for the homeless and dresses and shorts for children overseas.

In our Education wing, we collect yarn that Noble County prison inmates use to knit hats and blankets for premature infants—babies they'll never see.

We help with Kairos, where teams bring Christ—and thousands of homemade cookies—into the St. Mary's Correctional Facility of WV. Jesus overwhelmed people with an unearned sense of forgiveness, and so does this ministry.

Our United Methodist Women fund mission work directly with their offerings, and their programs of study highlight issues that disproportionately affect the vulnerable.

Right now, our Missions and Outreach committee is collecting hygiene kits for local food pantries, providing necessities like shampoo and toothpaste that can't be bought with food stamps—the list of items has been in your bulletins these last few weeks.

Our Ukulele Choir brings together people of all faiths and of no faith to play throughout the community, including at various nursing facilities—where we're always a hit. More than simply making music together, we've become a place of healing and belonging for those who need to know they're not alone.

When it comes to belonging and food, our Free Meal crews provide a hot lunch to anyone on the first Friday of every month. If you can fit it into your day, come and see what it's all

about! We have people who set up, cook, serve and clean up—but also people who sit with our guests, sharing meals together, like Jesus did.

Part of that food is provided by Harvest of Hope—remember when that ministry began here at Christ? This effort is now community wide, with volunteers collecting food that would otherwise be wasted and distributing it to pantries, churches, and other locations spread across the Mid-Ohio Valley.

HOH feeds tens of thousands of people—perhaps an example of what Jesus meant when he told his followers that they would do even greater things than he would.

After School is in our 17th consecutive year of providing academic and emotional mentoring to first, second and third graders selected from Washington Elementary. When parents and grandparents recognize me or our volunteers, they'll show us pictures on their phones and update us on their kids' lives. It's amazing and humbling to be part of a ministry that people fondly recall from 5, 10, even 15 years ago.

One of my favorite celebrations here at Christ is Laity Sunday, which we always hold on the first Sunday of September. During Sunday School, we gather in Fellowship Hall and share about the ways we're in ministry through church and in the community.

What people say over and over again is that yes, we give our time, our money, and our energy to share God's love with others...but we get so much more in return.

In some ways, Jesus was poor—and yet, he gave people everything. We're not that different.

We are all poor in one way or another... and yet we all have so much to give.

Instead of dwelling on feelings of poverty and hopelessness, let's remember that God's Spirit is upon us, choosing us to proclaim good news to the poor, the imprisoned, the blind and the oppressed through our church, our communities, and our very lives.

And in so doing, we will find that the good news of Jesus Christ is proclaimed to us as well.

Loving God, thank you for this chance to worship you, and for filling us, your church, with your Holy Spirit. Forgive us when we're only concerned about our own needs and when we're blind to our own poverty. Help us live the way Jesus lived, taking seriously your call on our lives to love and care for the poor, the captive, the blind, and the oppressed.

And now we join our voices as one, praying Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory forever, Amen.