

A sermon delivered by the Rev. Timothy C. Ahrens, senior minister at First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, Lent II, March 8, 2009, dedicated to my beautiful daughter, Sarah Ruth Sitler Ahrens, who was baptized on this day 11 years ago, and always to glory of God!

“Jesus and Good News”

Luke 4:16-21

**(Part III of VIII in the sermon series
“Jesus Before and AFTER
Christianity”)**

+++++

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of each one of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our rock and our salvation. Amen.

+++++

In my first sermon, “Jesus and Catastrophe,” I raised the question: What did Jesus hope to achieve? We looked at his decisions and his choices, particularly his choice to follow John the Baptist to the water of baptism. In the second sermon, “Jesus and Praxis,” we asked what did Jesus do about the catastrophe he saw before him? He answered himself by reaching out to people, especially the poor and oppressed as he healed and forgave others. Today, in “Jesus and Good News,” we ask how did he embody the God’s kingdom of good news for people?

He was a religious Jew in late his 20s who was known to the Scheol in Nazareth. One day, he walked into his hometown synagogue, carefully rolled the scroll of the prophets open to Isaiah

and read this words aloud:

*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 (Isaiah 61:1-2).*

He respectfully rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant and sat down. Once seated, he said, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." The good news of God's liberating love had just been unleashed into this world. The captives, blind, and oppressed – joined with the deaf, mute, lame, broken-hearted and downtrodden about whom Jesus would soon be quoting from Isaiah – were about to receive the promises of God's liberating actions – healing, restoring sight, hearing and speech, receiving joy, freedom, liberty, favor and good news!

This was GREAT "good news!" The verb used by both the prophet Isaiah and Jesus was "*euaggelizontai*" or "*evangelize*," which translates into "good news." We call something "news" when it tells of a new event, and event that has recently taken place *or* an event that will taken place in the near future. We call it "good news" when the news is hopeful and encouraging, when it tends to make people happy.

While we don't often associate "good news" with our daily news, Ben Marrison, editor of the Columbus Dispatch, makes the case in today's paper that there is good news everyday in the Dispatch. It may be hard to spot sometimes, but it is there.

I want you to think of the days of your life when you received "good news." The birth of a new baby for you or someone you love, the finalization of adoption for you or someone you love, the news of graduation, a new job, completing this job and retiring on your terms, moving into your first home, the announcement of marriage or the covenant partnership, the "all clear" on cancer you or someone you

love has battled, the achievement of a lifelong dream - all good news! Celebrating all of this and more for your children and grandchildren! Good news!

Now, imagine you have lived your life in poverty. You have had nothing. No one has believed in you. No one has given you credit for anything you have accomplished. No one said anything encouraging to you. No one brought any hopeful words to you. Your chances for achieving anything in life were zero – crushed down by abuse, neglect, a family whose sucked life out of you (if there was any family at all), and there were no encouraging words anywhere within hearing distance.

Along comes Jesus. He tells you that you are beautiful! He tells you that you are blessed AND you are a blessing to others. He tells you that you are God's hope embodied in human form. He tells you that even though you are hungry now, you shall be satisfied. He tells you even though you weep now, you shall smile and you shall laugh – maybe for the first time in your life! He tells you even though you are miserable now, you shall be lifted up! He says, even though you are sad and depressed now, you shall be comforted. Even though you are meek, you are crushed down now, you shall inherit the earth! Most important, because he said it first of all, even though you are poor, you need to know this essential truth: the Kingdom of Heaven (or God!) belongs to YOU!

Something awakens in you! It is hope. It is, no less than the Kingdom of God, awakening within your heart, mind and soul and it gives you strength to rise.

So what is this Kingdom of God?

The Kingdom of God or The Kingdom of Heaven were both words used by Gospel writers – Luke: Kingdom of God; and Matthew: Kingdom of Heaven. In Jesus' time, "heaven" was synonymous with God. The kingdom of "heaven" meant the kingdom of "God." Having rewards and treasures in heaven meant being in the good books of

God!

Although it is hard for us to conceive in our worldview, the thought of people floating into the heavens above after death were not entertained in Jesus' time. Everyone was believed to go to "*sheol*" which was the underworld or the grave. The virtuous were in the bosom of Abraham in *sheol* and the great chasm that separated them from the wicked was in another part of *sheol*. The Christian belief in heaven originated after the death of Jesus and formation of the early church. When Jesus ascended to heaven and "the right hand of God" in Luke and Acts, we have our first taste of a world beyond the skies (paraphrased from Albert Nolan, *Jesus Before Christianity*, p.58).

But, the good news of God's kingdom coming was good news *on earth* for the poor, the hungry, and the oppressed. To say "thy kingdom come" was the same as saying, "*Thy will be done ON EARTH, as it is in heaven*" (Nolan). It is a here and now reality.

Many of us as Christians have been misled for centuries about the nature of God's "kingdom" by a well-known mistranslation of Luke 17:21, "the kingdom of God is *within* you." Today, all scholars and serious translators agree that it should read, "The Kingdom of God is *among* you or *in your midst*." The Greek word, *entos*, can mean "within" or "among," but to translate it as *within* in Luke 17:20 would mean that Jesus was saying to them the Kingdom of God was already revealed *within* them. This would contradict everything else Jesus had ever said about the "kingdom" or the Pharisees. So, the Kingdom of God is something *within which* a person can live. (Nolan, p.59).

So much can be said about the kingdom of God. Jesus spoke of people entering into the kingdom, eating and drinking in it, going through the door or gate into it, having keys to the kingdom, knocking and entering into it. It is a household, a temple, a city, a community, and it is a thoroughly political notion. It is ruled by a monarch (read God!). It is not to be confused with kingdoms people know today, in which God is not the ruler (though in some places the monarchs are treated like gods or act like them)!

In fact, Jesus makes no bones about it: the current kingdoms he was looking at – the kingdoms of the world – were ruled not by God, but by Satan. The evidence for this was the tremendous suffering and oppression of the poor at the hands of the political powers, the heartlessness and cruelty of religious leaders and the merciless avarice and oppression of the ruling classes. Those who ruled with might and oppressive force were not heirs to the kingdom of God, but rulers in the kingdom of Satan. The coming of God’s kingdom will replace the Satan and the spirit of God will prevail on earth (Nolan, p. 60).

The difference between the kingdom of God and the kingdom of Satan can be seen in the structures of power. In God’s kingdom, power is shared. Not so in the kingdom of Satan.

The values between the two kingdoms are different as night and day. The Gospels make no bones about it. In God’s kingdom, money is a means to an end. Money is used to support and help others. In the kingdom of Satan, money is collected and held for self and/or a small inner circle. “Jesus says you cannot worship money and God. You have to make a choice. You cannot love and serve two masters. No compromise is possible” (Nolan). He says this is Mt. 6:24 and Mk. 4:19.

As North American Christians, we tend to water down Jesus’ sayings about money. But Jesus’ sayings are hard and clear. Riches will not help you in God’s kingdom. It is the heart that helps you. Where one’s heart is, that is where one can find one’s treasure.

In these times, we struggle with mightily with money and finance and values around them. Our economy is in deep trouble. Our children are aware of this as well as we are. The other day, I was tutoring a very bright 6th-grader as he shared the plot, character study and meaning of his 500-page book to me.

As we finished, I asked if he had any questions for me. He answered, “Just one. We’ve been reading about the economy and the

decline is the stock markets, I want to know who has all the money and where they are hiding it.” That is THE question! In God’s kingdom, we know who has the money and it is not hidden!

In Jesus’ time, prestige was even more important than money. The society was so structured that everyone was on a social ladder and everyone knew their place on it! You didn’t move up the ladder. You might move down the ladder. To insult an equal on the ladder was so humiliating that life became almost impossible. No one ever dared challenge someone above them on the ladder. Your status and prestige was based on ancestry, wealth, authority, education and virtue. Status within the religious community was like that in the rest of society – shaped by ancestry, wealth, authority, education and virtue.

Knowing one’s place in the precisely ordered hierarchy of the community was of absolute importance. Jesus roundly contradicted this. He dared to hope for a “kingdom” in which these values and distinctions had no place. He said, “Blessed are you when people hate you, drive you out, abuse you, denounce your name as criminal.” (Luke 6:22), and, “Woe to you when the world speaks well of you.” (Luke 6:26). (Nolan, p. 68).

The penultimate example of how Jesus turned the world of prestige on its head was the way he treated children and women. Children and women were treated like dirt. Children were not to be seen or heard. The woman’s role was sex and motherhood. For Jesus, these understandings were abusive and wrong. When the disciples tried to stop the children from coming to him, he said, “Let the children come unto me and DO NOT STOP them, because the kingdom of God is theirs! If you do not become like a child, you will NEVER enter the kingdom of God!” (Luke 12:36). He says it is the children who are the wise ones in this world. That was an absolutely radical concept.

Jesus treated women with the same dignity, respect and value with which he treated men. I could offer many examples. But this is a

belief that carried into the early church for the first 50 years. The patriarchy of the church came later. Nothing makes me madder than the mistreatment and lack of equality for women in the church because that was never a part of Jesus' plan. It is appalling what Christians have said and done to women in the name of Jesus! I get angry thinking about it!

Ultimately, Jesus believed people were people and all were to be treated with respect, equality, and dignity. Years ago, when we formed the BREAD organization, I was so proud of the choice of words, which in my mind reflected Jesus' values for the kingdom of God! BREAD, as you know, stands for Building Respect Equality And Dignity. These are kingdom of God values. These are values that are good news to all!

Albert Nolan summarizes this best in *Jesus Before Christianity*:

The "kingdom" of God then, will be a society in which there will be no prestige, and no status, no division of people into inferior or superior. Everyone will be loved and respected, not because one's education or wealth or ancestry or authority or rank or virtue or other achievements, but because one like everybody else is a person.

Some will find it very difficult to imagine what such a life would be like but the 'babes' who never had any privileges of status and those who have not valued it will find it very easy to appreciate the fulfillment that life in such a society would bring. (Nolan, pp.71-72).

It was six-and-a-half years ago today that our congregation voted to become Open and Affirming. On September 8, 2002, we said that our commitment and desire was to reach out and welcome all those in need of searching for God's love. Each Sunday since then these words have been a silent sentinel keeping watch over us. I want us all to read aloud our Open and Affirming Statement. We find it on the back cover of our bulletin this morning. I believe this statement represents the best kingdom of God values for which Jesus lived, died and was risen.

Dr. John Siddall, a lay person of this congregation, penned most of these words. He humbly wrote them on a piece of scrap paper and brought them to me as we were approaching the end of our study process. I was blown away. It was as if the Kingdom of God came to life through his spirit!

Let us read together:

We believe that we are all created in God's image, female and male, and we are called to love our neighbors as Jesus loves us. We believe we are many members, but one body in Christ, and called to unite all people in God's love. We welcome and affirm all people. We invite those who are seeking God's presence in their lives to join us on our common journey. Our faith community seeks to unite persons of all ages, races, nationalities, ethnicities, sexual orientations, mental and physical abilities, socioeconomic levels and political and theological backgrounds. Together in our diversity, and being empowered and directed by the Holy Spirit, we will "do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with our God. (Micah 6:8)."

This statement is our community's attempt to bring good news to people in uncertain times. We are far from perfect. Years ago, Billy Graham said, "If you are looking for the perfect church and you join it, remember, it will no longer be perfect at that time." I know that happened here, the day in March 2000 when I joined this perfect church. (You are welcome!)

So much more could be said about the good news of Jesus. Jesus' view of solidarity with all people and his beliefs about sharing power in the kingdom of God became radical concepts for a new structure in society.

In Jesus of Nazareth, good news was born that day in the synagogue when he opened the scrolls and helped people realize God's will and way were only a breath away. May it be said of us, that we hear, see and live into the "good news" kingdom values that God has

given us at First Church! Amen.

Copyright 2009, First Congregational Church, UCC