

Learning to Love and Live like Jesus

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1 Corinthians 12:12-18; Luke 4:14-21

I had a dear aunt, Aunt Catherine, who cared for her dying husband with the kind of devotion that inspires awe. Whenever someone would ask, “How long does he have?” Aunt Catherine would always answer, “We have as long as we’ve ever had. We have today.”

According to Luke’s gospel, the first word Jesus utters in his inaugural sermon is that same word, a word teeming with urgency and meaning: *Today*. “*Today* this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing” (Luke 4:21). Because for Jesus; scripture was not just ancient, revered words to be learned and revered. To Jesus, scripture was to be lived. And not just someday, but *today*, right here and right now.

And the scripture Jesus chose to read was as revealing as his electrifying opening line; because he chose a selection from the prophet Isaiah that proclaimed the “year of Jubilee.” According to Leviticus, chapter 25--and for everyone who thinks there is nothing worth reading in Leviticus, take a look at *this*--every fifty years, all debts were forgiven and the land reverted to its original owners. The year of Jubilee was to be a time of divine right-sizing of the economy and a

great leveling of the “haves” and the “have nots.” Little wonder Isaiah and Jesus called this liberation “good news to the poor!”

Now historians quibble about whether the year of Jubilee ever actually happened. It may well have been one of those quaint laws on the books no one has the inclination or courage to enforce.

But how revealing that Jesus chose *this* text and *this* page from Israel’s play book to kick off his kingdom movement, the force of which was to turn this world into the domain of justice and love, liberation and life, God always meant it to be.

Now this is when a lot of folks start getting uncomfortable, starting with me; because what may be good news to the poor, may not be good news for me. What if God’s declaration of “liberty and justice *for all*” means I have to give something up. Facing hard questions and deeply felt anxieties like these is what leads us to line up and take sides in all the predictable ways: Republican/ Democrats, privileged/poor, conservative/liberal, winners/losers.

But what if Jesus is after bigger game than that? What if the person who needs to be liberated is *me*? What if the blind folk who need their eyes opened are *us*? What if the good news Jesus brings is that we don’t have to worry and fear so much because God’s bounty is big enough for all?

With his usual wit and wisdom, Frederick Buechner writes, “To worship God means to serve God,” he writes. “Basically there are two ways to do it. One way is to do things for God that *God* needs to have done — run errands for God, carry messages for God, fight on God's side, and feed God's lambs, and so on.

“The other way is to do things for God that *you* need to do — sing songs for God, create beautiful things for God, give things up for God, tell God what's on your mind and in your heart, in general rejoice in God and make a fool of yourself for God the way lovers have always made fools of themselves for the one they love.”

I like the second way: making a fool of yourself for the One you love. Because the greatest commandment, according to Jesus, is to love God, and the second is to love your neighbor as yourself. That's the kind of love that results in service that is joyous and free. And that's the kind of joyous, Jubilee work I see at Knollwood: people doing their best to make this world more fully God's world, not because they *have* to, but because they *want* to.

From one of our grandmas, here at Knollwood, comes this story. She was driving her eight-year-old granddaughter, Grace, home from school when an ambulance raced by with lights flashing and sirens blaring.

Grace said, "Granny, we should pray for those people."

Granny agreed and was about to offer a prayer when Grace, said, "No, I'd like to do it." Then in a soft, small, innocent voice, she prayed "Dear God, please take care of the person in the ambulance. If they are not a Christian, please let this be an opportunity for them to trust you."

"Wow," grandma wrote in her email to me, which is the cyberspace equivalent of an awestruck "Amen!"

"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me," cries Jesus. This is the preface of everything that comes after. Neither Jesus nor we can be and do what we are called to be and do until the Spirit of God indwells us and sets us free.

And that is why the kneeling bench presented during Children's Time, lovingly crafted by a member of our church, is the beginning of the revolution Jesus comes to bring. Because we can't begin to change the world until we let God's Spirit go to work changing us.

The Spirit of the Lord anoints Jesus -- and those who follow him -- to "bring good news to the poor, to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, and to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."

So what does it look like in our place and time to see that scripture fulfilled? There is no one right answer, but a lot of different ways I see Knollwoodians responding to this call.

Our missional support team has just published a remarkable resource called *Missions and Service at Knollwood Baptist Church*. Among the many missions initiatives detailed here are our church's refugee resettlement ministry, helping refugees find and make a home in this new land; and helping to host, feed, and staff the overflow homeless shelter for women during the four coldest months of the year, in partnership with St. Tim's; and Kids Café, where more than twenty members of our church spend each Tuesday evening tutoring at-risk children so they can thrive in school. Because that is one way to help end the crushing cycle of poverty and help set these children, and their families, free.

One of our church's signature ministries in recent years has been a partnership with Bolton elementary, a nearby school where 90% of the children receive a free and reduced lunch.

This partnership began when a member of our church was moved by the plight of the many impoverished children at Bolton. One was a little boy, normally well-behaved, who was unusually angry and mean one day in school. When his teacher pulled him aside to ask what was wrong, he gave an honest, if heartbreaking answer: "It wasn't my turn to eat last night."

Out of such encounters sprang our Bolton backpack program, providing a backpack of food each week to help hungry students get through the weekend.

More recently, this commitment to feed hungry children has morphed into the Bolton food pantry, a ministry we share with two other churches. Twice a month, Bolton families are invited to receive nutritious food for their families, including fresh produce. So now, we are not just helping feed individual children for the weekend, but their families for the week.

But Knollwoodians are not just feeding the poor, as important as that is. Many are also asking *why* people are poor and what can be done to help. For example, what are the educational investments and improvements that must be made if under-served children are to gain the skills they need to thrive in this economy? Because that's what it takes, not just to feed the poor, but as Jesus said it, to let the oppressed go free.

As Archbishop Oscar Romero observed, “When I feed the poor, they call me a saint. But when I ask *why* people poor are poor, they call me a communist.” Sometimes, asking the hard questions is what it takes to follow Jesus. Or as our own mission’s booklet challenges us, *doing with* those in need is far more likely to bring lasting change than just *doing for* them.

But as proud as I am of Knollwood’s many missional initiatives, Jesus’ manifesto is much too sweeping and comprehensive for us to tackle it alone. That’s why we support a whole slew of mission’s partners, from *Habitat for Humanity*, working to provide decent, affordable housing for those who need it most, to *Imprints Cares*, an early childhood education non-profit that works with both children *and* their parents. Each summer, *Imprints Cares* brings several dozen, mostly under-served children, to have their summer camp on our campus, another expression of our thriving partnership.

The apostle Paul reminds us, “There are many members, but one body.” And this refers not just to the individuals within a congregation, but to all the congregations and missions partners who are doing the work of Christ in the world. And that is why 10%, or a tithe, of all the money our church receives goes to our missions partners.

Yes, there is *one body* of Christ, but many members, many congregations, many partners, doing their part.

Last fall, Diane and I sat with two staff people from World Relief, the refugee resettlement agency with whom we work. They were updating us on the changing face of refugee resettlement work in America. In the course of that conversation, they mentioned that World Relief national had a large sum of money needing to be dispersed to hurricane relief in eastern North Carolina.

Well, Diane who happens to serve on the Missions Council of the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship, another of our mission’s partners, set about connecting the dots. And soon, \$81,000 from World Relief was flowing through CBF missions personnel to help refugees, and other underserved populations, in the New Bern area displaced by Hurricane Florence.

And even better, this cooperation birthed yet another emerging partnership between six refugee congregations who united to respond to the crisis. Further, pastors from differing ethnic and denominational backgrounds are now working together to provide trauma and grief counseling.

And all this happened because of a chance conversation in a Knollwood church office or better said; chance to *us* but providence to *God!*

“The part I love,” Diane wrote, “is that Knollwood's committed partnerships to two distinct groups led to a big infusion of support for extremely vulnerable and hard-hit people. We've stayed engaged with CBF, and we've stayed steady and invested with World Relief, so we got to be the bridge. So, Yay for partnerships and Yay for trust!”

Yes, there is one body but many members. Thank God, we don't have to answer Jesus' stirring summons alone, but only in partnership with others eager to do their part in proclaiming good news to the poor and setting the captives free.

Nor do we have to do it perfectly. Rather, as our church's mission statement frankly admits, we are *Learning* to Love and Live like Jesus. There's a lot of humility in that word, “learning.” It means we haven't gotten everything figured out and we aren't doing everything right. But under God, we're trying to *Learn to Love and Live like Jesus*; and not because we *have* to; but, because for the love of God, we *want* to.

A shy little girl was having trouble with her fractions. Seeing her discomfort, her teacher went over to help. Patiently, the teacher helped the student solve the problem. The child responded with a radiant, relieved smile.

“Now don't be slow to ask questions,” the teacher said in parting. “That's one of the reasons I'm here.”

The little girl looked up wide-eyed and asked, “What's the *other* reason?”

Maybe your answer to that question is Jesus' answer: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me. And the Spirit has anointed me to bring good news to the poor, to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, and to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."

Pray God, that liberating, life-giving summons might ever be true of Knollwood. And pray God it might ever be true . . . of you.

Gracious God, thank you for the enormous privilege of being on mission with you in the world. And thank you that in power of the Holy Spirit, even ordinary mortals like us can learn to love and live more like Jesus.

In His name we gather and pray and hope to live. Amen.