

1 Corinthians 12: 12-31
Luke 4:14-21
January 27, 2013
Hamilton Union Presbyterian Church

On this day when we celebrate the mission and ministry of Jesus Christ in us and through us, it is appropriate that we hear these passages from Paul and Luke. The two form one message. It is a three part message. Part one might be called, "How Great is Our Calling." We might term part two: "How Great are the Resources to Fulfill This Calling." Part three I will term, "How Great is the Challenge to Put the resources in Service of the Calling."

We hear part one of the message from the Gospel according to Luke. Jesus comes to his hometown of Nazareth and is invited to read the scripture. He seeks and finds the passage from Isaiah 61, a text which addresses the people who have returned from Babylon and who are overwhelmed by the task of rebuilding Jerusalem. Interestingly this passage says nothing about great building projects. Rather God through Isaiah announces good news to the poor, the captives, the blind and the oppressed. He announces the year of God's jubilee—the inauguration of a new relationship between God and God's people.

Who is the "me" who is called to announce this great new era? The answer for centuries had been obscure. Two thousand years of Christian interpretation of this passage make it obvious to us. The "me" is Jesus. Yet at the time that Jesus reads the passage there is no such clarity. Indeed it is important to note that when Jesus speaks following the reading he does not say, "The scripture is fulfilled *in me*." Instead he says, "Today the scripture is fulfilled *in your hearing*."

This morning I suggest that we have spent too long identifying the message of Isaiah with Jesus the messiah. It is too easy to say that the ministry of good news is Jesus' job. I do not argue that bringing good news to the poor, bringing sight to the blind, feeding the captives and lifting the yoke of oppression is not Jesus' job. I suggest that it is not exclusively his job. Or, more accurately, Jesus came to create a people who are inspired by the Holy Spirit to carry out the great vision of good news in all of its forms.

This is now our great calling. We are called to bring good news. This good news is that in and through Jesus Christ God has established a new standard of relationship between God and humanity. This new relationship is not to grant a special relationship to a few select individuals who believe the right things or somehow have a better Holy Spirit receiver than the rest of us. Nor is it a set of socially progressive programs to bring relief to people we identify with the poor and oppressed. If serving at the City Mission has taught me anything it is that the so-called poor do not need my charity or pity. To the extent that I experience a calling to be with the people of the City Mission community it is just that: to be *with them as a sign that we are one people of God*. Our great calling is to be converted to the good news that there is no distinction in God's sight between the poor and wealthy, slave or free, male or female, educated, uneducated, young or old, gay or straight, pro life or pro choice, conservative or liberal. We are all children of God. We are one community of humanity equally needy of the good news and equally deserving of it.

The calling of the community of faith is not to preach the Good News but to *be* Good News. It is to be a community which when someone encounters it, they *experience* the God's favor, God's grace, God's new relationship with humanity. *How great is our calling!*

The apostle Paul links us directly with Jesus' message. He announces that we are the body of Christ. This is more than a flowery metaphor. For Paul we are the visible presence of the messiah. It is through us and the hundreds of thousands of other Christian communities that the spirit which anointed Jesus to announce good news is known in the world. Yet as two thousand years of history demonstrate all too painfully, the poor, the captive and oppressed are no closer to liberation on this plane of life than they were in Jesus' day. We easily get discouraged when we are exposed to all the horror in the world. We begin to take on individually responsibility for all the world's ills. And so it happens we become a collection of individual people in despair all asking, "What can one person do?"

Yet I believe deeply that it is not our great calling to confront all of the world's crushing problems. We are called to be and become more completely and authentically, the Body of Christ—the living breathing loving presence of Jesus in the world. If we acknowledge that is our great calling, then we are blessed with great *resources* to fulfill our calling. There are two great resources which are in fact one and the same: the Holy Spirit and each other.

Remember that the passage from Isaiah which Jesus read begins: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me because he has anointed me to bring good news..." Jesus acknowledges his utter dependence on the Holy Spirit of God for the work he has been called to do. The great tragedy of ministry is that we take it on assuming that we alone are responsible for doing the mission of Jesus. This is desperately *wrong, misguided and even deluded*. Such an attitude leads to despair and burn out. It is why so many communities of faith find it more manageable to focus on maintaining the institution of the church rather than the great spiritual mission of the Kingdom

of God. If Jesus recognized at the very beginning of his ministry that he was powerless apart from God's Holy Spirit, who are we to neglect so great a resource?

But, you ask, where do we find this Spirit? We find it in, among other places, *each other*. Paul tells the Corinthians that we are the Body of Christ *together!* The body of Christ is not an accidental collection of individuals. It is a collective witness where everyone has a part. In the community of faith there is no unimportant work. There is no ministry that, in God's sight, is more valuable than another. Therefore there is no room for jealousy or feelings of inadequacy or inferiority. There is no room for, "I don't do anything, I only..."

Friends as impressive as this year's annual report is it does not begin to capture the fullness of the ministry of compassion and service that originates in the heart of God and passes through the body of Christ through each and every member of the body, whether you are formal members or not. This does not include all the work you do in the community beyond the life of the congregation and your ministry as families, and in your jobs. God sees all this. God know that by the Holy Spirit we are inspired to engage the despair of the world with hope.

How great are our resources!

Yet you may well ask, "Stewart this sounds great and when I am here I get it and my heart is lifted up. But then I leave here and I am back to feeling overwhelmed and isolated and alone. How do I access the spiritual resources which sustain this great calling? To this ask you to remember that the great calling is not upon you individually. It is first upon Jesus and then upon the body of Christ of which we are a small but important part. It will be a wonderful day when each of us says not, "How do I carry out the ministry of the Gospel" but, ""How do we fulfill the

great calling of being the body of Christ?" None of us is alone in this work. At any point we have only to admit our need for help and we will get it.

But most importantly, listen again to Jesus' words after he finished reading the scripture. "Today, this scripture has been fulfilled *in your hearing.*" These last three words are the key to fulfilling our great calling. It is our *hearing* the Good News individually and, most importantly, *together*. When Jesus uses the word "hear" he does not mean merely the experience of sound waves hitting our auditory nerves such that we hear somebody say something. For Jesus to hear is to experience the Holy Spirit resonating in our minds and hearts, our fingers and toes. When we *hear* the Gospel we cannot *but* respond! When we truly *hear* the Gospel and respond, we are in fact receiving the very resources which empower or witness and service. We are fulfilling this purpose which is our great calling. Amen.