

Perseverance in Restorative Action, Part 2

Luke 4:16-19

This morning's message is a follow-up to last week's message about living restoratively, doing justice. And as part of our message today we'll be hearing from Jennifer Sereda, who is our One Parish One Prisoner (OPOP) team facilitator. She will share about OPOP and about her experience in this ministry, and our growing relationship with Dan Anderson.

OPOP is a terrific example of how we, as a church, through this team, are "doing justice, loving mercy, and walking humbly with God" (as it says in Micah 6:8). This is restorative action that we are taking. And, as our team is learning, it is requiring *perseverance* on our part! Working with the prison system requires it.

Luke 4:16-19

16 When he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, he went to the synagogue on the sabbath day, as was his custom. He stood up to read,¹⁷ and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written (this is Isaiah 61:1-3):

¹⁸ '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 (literally,
prisoners)

and recovery of sight to the blind,
to let the oppressed go free,

¹⁹ to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.'

This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God!

Last week I made the point that the social gospel is the gospel; the gospel is social. They aren't separate things, or mutually exclusive—salvation of souls, *or* social action. And I recommended the book “The Hole in Our Gospel” by Richard Stearns. In talking about the gospel and the social aspect of it, he puts it this way: “...being a Christian, or a follower of Jesus Christ, requires much more than just having a *personal* and transforming relationship with *God*. It also entails a *public* and transforming relationship with the *world*. If your personal faith in Christ has no positive outward expression, then your faith—and mine—has a hole in it.” Hence the title of the book.

The gospel is not simply a private transaction between us and God. Or, as Thomas Merton put it, “my personal salvation project.” It's a working out of our salvation *in the world* by doing justice, loving mercy, and walking humbly with God (Micah 6:8).

Our text from Luke this morning illustrates this beautifully from the life of Jesus. Jesus had just been baptized (we could call this a personal and transformative event for him, as he heard the Father's voice of approval), then he was drawn into the wilderness and had now just emerged from his 40 days in the wilderness (his *personal* time with God alone; also very transformative), and now he steps out onto the stage of *the world* and declares his intentions about how he

will live and lead, in the world. And in doing so, he invites his followers to be part of the same mission to the world, which is a mission of justice and relationship with the poor and marginalized of society.

This is Jesus' first public ministry appearance. In a way, he is giving his inaugural speech, or his first sermon. And like any newly elected official, or newly installed pastor, the first speech, the first sermon, always contains the priorities and plans of this new leader. They are indicating what they are going to be about, what they are going to do, and where they are going to lead people, and what they want the people to be and do. So, this first public utterance is really important! Everyone is listening intently, Luke will tell us a little later on in the passage. They are eager to hear what he has to say.

And what does Jesus say will be his priority, his mission, where and how he will lead his followers? His priority, he says, is the work of liberation; of freedom; a mission to the *least of these* in society. It's a mission to fulfill Micah 6:8, to the poor, the prisoners, the blind, and the oppressed.

I'd like to take a moment and reflect: who comes to mind for you when you hear these people spoken out by Jesus: the poor... the prisoners... the blind (literally and figuratively; think 'lost' or wayward) ... the oppressed. Who are those people, in your eyes? There are no right or wrong answers here. This isn't

a trick question. I just want us to picture them. And then imagine Jesus calling you to follow him as he goes to seek these people out and develop a relationship with them. A restorative relationship.

Our focus this morning is on “release to the captives” (literally, prisoners; your Bible at home may use that word instead). Now, in hearing this, I know what you might be thinking: release of prisoners? Really? Why would Jesus come to release prisoners? I mean, armed robbers? Drug dealers? Violent criminals who assault people? Jesus wants to let these people loose on society?!?

No; those aren't the prisoners Jesus is talking about in that societal context. The main thing you went to prison for in those days was unpaid debt. If you had unpaid debt you could get thrown into prison until you paid it off. This makes sense of some of Jesus' parables and teachings where he describes peoples' relationship to each other, and their and our relationship to God, in terms of indebtedness. The parable of the unforgiving servant in Matthew 18 is probably the best example of this, where the characters in the story who have debt are threatened with the reality of doing time in prison until they can pay off their debt. There is forgiveness of one person's debt, and then he goes out and struggles to forgive the debt of a someone who owes him a lot less. It illustrates

the reality in their world at the time of unpaid debt potentially leading to prison time. It made for a relevant sermon illustration for Jesus about forgiveness.

Jesus also uses that phrase in the Lord's Prayer (in Matthew's version), "forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors."

So, indebtedness, and potentially going to prison for it, was a stark reality of that time. But here's the rub: those with unpaid debt were always poor people, often servants or slaves, who were typically taken advantage of. A business owner or wealthy lender would loan money to one of their employees, or someone in need, and charge exorbitant interest rates, or would sell them land on a loan, then the lender could arbitrarily raise the interest rate or demand accelerated payments, either of those making it difficult if not impossible to pay back the debt. Or the borrower might have lost their job or gotten sick and therefore lost their ability to pay the loan.

Their system of justice in those days wasn't really just, because a lender could drag them to a judge, who was usually in bed with landowners and wealthy folks, and say "this guy owes me money and isn't paying it back" and that poor person would get thrown into prison w/o consideration of his situation. The wealthy lender would get their payment, often by the poor person selling one of their children or spouse into slavery or something equally horrible, or by giving up

whatever bit of land they may have owned. So the wealthy person gets their money (with interest), while the poor person ends up worse off than before. It was a classic situation of the rich get richer and the poor get poorer.

This type of practice is not foreign to us today, really. We have predatory lending that goes on (think payday loan companies) which don't necessarily send people to prison but imprison them in ongoing debt. And prisoners today incur loads of debt while they're in prison with interest accruing on their debt, with little or no way to pay it off until they are released; and even when they're on the outside, it's difficult to find good jobs and get transportation to work and so forth.

Btw, this is why OPOP is such a great ministry, because when Dan is released, we will come alongside him and help him transition into society, part of which is helping him get a driver's license, and possibly helping him with what he owes.

This is all to say that, by announcing release for the prisoners, Jesus was basically proclaiming justice for the poor. He wasn't talking about release of dangerous criminals onto the streets, but freedom and justice for those who had been taken advantage of.

Here is some interesting (and brief) history of prisons; or, the evolution of the prison system. It's important for us to know at least a little bit of how we got to where we are today in our prison system and mass incarceration.

For most of history, imprisonment was *not* used as a way of punishing criminals. Instead, prisons served principally as holding tanks where offenders could be detained prior to trial or to the carrying out of the sentence of the court.

The use of long-term incarceration as method of legal *punishment* is a relatively modern idea, stemming only from late 18th century. The emergence of an institutionalized prison system at *that* time was intended as a humanitarian improvement to the existing jail system. Prison was considered a more humane alternative to capital punishment or banishment or public humiliation (think stocks in the public square), as well as a potential means for reforming criminals so they could be returned to society as good citizens.

Prisons were built throughout Western Europe and America with the intention not just of incarcerating but of *improving* prisoners through a mixture of work, discipline, and personal reflection.

It is worth noting that Christianity provided a significant impetus in this direction. In one sense the modern prison system could be called a Christian invention. "Penitentiaries" were devised by American Quakers to provide a means

of encouraging “penitence” by offenders (hence the word ‘penitentiary’—a place to do penitence). Prisoners were to spend long periods in isolation, to give them time to reflect on their misdeeds and come to contrition.

The use of single cells and solitary confinement in these prisons drew upon practices employed in medieval monasteries for disciplining lazy and wayward monks. The concept of a prison “cell” comes from medieval monasteries where monks lived, in their cells. And so, undergirding the whole system was a Christian theology that believed in the power of penitence, and the potential of harsh treatment to encourage it—because of a view of God as the great Judge, the cosmic magistrate issuing harsh sentences on wrongdoers, and requiring penitence.

The intention there was positive, even if it was misguided. You know, if it worked for medieval monks it must work for everyone else in more modern times. But as we have come to know, social isolation does not automatically make a person a saint. Whether they’re in prison or in lockdown during covid19! In fact, solitary confinement creates mental trauma and is used now as a harsh punishment, not as a corrective measure for reflection and penitence.

Anyway, what began as a humanitarian effort (prisons) has since become one of the most violent and inhumane institutions in modern society. For

example, twice as much physical assault and sexual assault takes place inside U.S. prisons as outside in society. Confining people for long periods of time, depriving them of autonomy and responsibility and self-respect, causes further trauma, not healing and restoration. It has proven to be both inhumane and counter-productive. And, racially biased.

The 13th amendment to our constitution abolished slavery in 1864, *except* as punishment for crime. The amendment reads: "*Neither slavery nor involuntary servitude, except as a punishment for crime whereof the party shall have been duly convicted, shall exist within the United States, or any place subject to their jurisdiction.*"

So, what did people who wanted slavery to continue do? They pounced on that exception, and they created any and every reason to arrest black persons, convict them of a crime, and make them slaves again. So they created arbitrary laws that allowed police to arrest black people for anything from loitering to looking at a woman improperly, to crossing a street. As Bryan Stephenson has said, slavery hasn't gone away; it has evolved. We have created an industrial prison system that profits large corporations at the expense of the poor/prison labor, and largely of poor black and Latino persons.

Right now in the U.S., 38% of the incarcerated are black, even though only 14% of the population is black. 30% of incarcerated are Latino, even though Latinos are only 12% of the population. Things need to change, in a big way, and we have the opportunity before us as a society, like never before, to do more learning and understanding and acting restoratively, so that long needed change can happen.

So, what do we do with all of this? We join Jesus in his mission to proclaim good news to the poor, release to the captives, recovery of sight to the blind, and freedom to the oppressed! In our text this morning, after Jesus gives his first sermon, he goes out and starts calling people to follow him. “Here’s what I’m about... you, come follow me... you, come follow me... you, come follow me...

Just as he called people then to join with him in his mission to the disenfranchised, Jesus invites us into his mission today. We can each play a part in this restorative mission.

And I am so glad that we as a church *are* partnering with Jesus in this mission; that we are acting in restorative ways as a body. We’re doing this in a couple ways at least. One, through deacons’ funds—which are actually funds that you have provided; there is a report for you this morning that tells you how the deacons have distributed funds to meet the needs in our community this month.

And the priority that deacons have set is that the funds go to organizations in our area that are helping the poor and marginalized in restorative ways, to get back on their feet in sustainable ways. Everett Gospel Mission is one, Domestic Violence Services is another. Thank you for your giving to the deacons fund!

Second, we are partnering with Jesus through One Parish, One Prisoner. And this is where I'll hand it off to Jennifer Sereda, to talk a bit more about OPOP and her experience with it and introduce you further to our friend Dan Anderson.