

Luke 4:14-21  
January 24, 2016

“Leaving Exile Requires Grace”

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President Abraham Lincoln stunned the country in his second inaugural address, when on March 4<sup>th</sup>, 1865 he did something no president had ever done before – speak in critical terms of the nation – in order to name the evil of Slavery, the toll it had exacted in human flesh and warfare, and the need to stay the course and resolve the cause.

Picture a time before mass media, 30-40 thousand people, many African American, gathered outside the nation’s capital on a stormy day near the end of a war where 600,000 soldiers from north and south lost their lives. Both John Wilkes Booth, who would shoot Lincoln forty days later, and Frederick Douglass, who said approvingly that “the Address sounded more like a sermon than a state paper,” were within sight of Lincoln during the ceremony.

Many newspapers criticized the speech, calling it a collection of “glittering generalities,” and complaining the religious language “smacked . . . of the dark ages.” But Charles Francis Adams, Jr., who fought at Gettysburg, called the speech the “historical keynote of this war,” and Lincoln considered it to be among his best work. As the address’s several Biblical quotations suggested, Lincoln sought to illuminate the moral and spiritual significance of the moment. His words reflected a nation’s struggle, as well as a personal struggle with the overwhelming human costs and the relationship between the war and slavery.

151 years later most of us would agree Lincoln’s speech was anointed. We may not describe it with that word because we aren’t sure what ‘anointed’ means, but when President Lincoln closed his inaugural address saying, “With malice toward none; with charity for all; with firmness in the right as God gives us to see the right, let us strive on to finish the work we are in; to bind up the nation’s wounds; to care for him who shall have borne the battle and for his widow and his orphan, to do all which may achieve and cherish a just, and lasting peace, among ourselves, and with all nations.” Lincoln captured an inspired snapshot of American History as the cultural foundations were shifting.

Today in Luke’s gospel we hear Jesus’ inaugural address, here in the middle of Chapter 4 is the first time we hear Jesus’ voice in Luke, and he is reading scripture from Isaiah.

The Spirit of the Lord is Upon me  
Because (God) 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  
To proclaim the year of the LORD’s favor!

Our Wednesday morning bible study resumed again after a three week break. And a delightful question arose, “What does it mean to be anointed? Can we all be anointed?”

We may hear misuse of this word “anointed” suggesting one with special insight others are not privy too, that’s not the situation with Jesus. He is reading from the very texts those in his hometown synagogue would have studied repeatedly.

Sometimes “anointed” suggest one with exclusive information reserved only for those who find themselves huddled in a compound together trying to separate from the outside world. Not Jesus, he has selected an all access reading that calls for his followers’ engagement in the world with the fullness of our baptismal power. Jesus speaks familiar words of faith to his cousins, aunts, uncles, friends and neighbors... and to us.

Jesus is experiencing a moment of clarity about his life’s work and purpose, one which surely was incubating as he was being tempted in the wilderness for 40 days. One metaphor may help describe the anointing of the Spirit, it’s when “God’s heart touches another person’s heart, through your heart.”

And so we hear in the story, “Filled with the Power of the Holy Spirit, Jesus...”

How would you finish this sentence?

...Healed me? Taught me true love? Accompanied me through a deep valley? Showed me how my actions unknowingly hurt others? Increased my commitment to care for creation? Reconciled myself to a friend from whom I become separated? Called me to prophetic work? Helped me experience true hospitality? Gifted me to care for others? Revealed the joy of extravagant generosity?

Well our story doesn’t begin quite so dramatically. “Filled with the Holy Spirit Jesus...,” went to his hometown. He was bringing this ancient message, he would claim as his mission statement, calling for, as one scholar puts it, “a right-side-upping of life.”

Following the destruction of the temple life changed in the ancient world. Old patterns and familiar structures were failing. The people following Jesus felt the world had become meaningless and incoherent.

I think today we live in a similar time. Parents for the first time realize the possibility their children will not do better than they. We are aware of our country’s vulnerability to terror from within and outside our borders. We are learning the US is NOT, as we liked to think, God’s gift to the world.

And as Christians the marketplace ideology of produce, consume and save continues to take a firmer hold, making Christian Virtues of hospitality, forgiveness and generosity ever more difficult to live day in and day out. We may not have the cross hanging around our neck ripped

from us, but when we try to live Christian virtues it is clear we have become strangers in our homeland.

The first and primary word of advice from Professor Walter Brueggemann to exiles living in their homeland... Maintain your identity. Maintain our baptismal identity and its public implications through your words, actions, commitments, and relationships. Exiles are tempted to yearn to submit to the identity the powers are seeking to impose upon them.

Brueggemann is calling Jesus' disciples to "Claim our Spiritual Anointing." The only part of Jesus' sermon we have recorded following his reading of Isaiah is his words, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." This anointing calls us to give and receive radical grace.

As Jesus articulates the heart of his mission from Isaiah, he omits a line about the day of vengeance of our God toward a whole host of enemies and oppressors. In other words Jesus' inaugural address calls for radical compassion; God's grace for everyone.

As we enter another election season we might ask? Have the poor paid their fair share of taxes that they can now receive government assistance, Unlikely – this is Grace. Have the captives been speaking their truth without fear of retribution by authorities? Not likely – when it happens it is Grace. Have the spiritually blind been committed to the faithful life? Not by definition – But Grace welcomes them into faithful community. Do the oppressed sense opportunity for real freedom? Probably not but Grace makes it possible. Is there human value beyond production and consumption? Grace says YES!

Like Lincoln our Christian faith calls us to proclaim the radical nature of God's grace. A grace and love for all people, not some. A grace and love for those who look like they don't deserve it. A grace and love that makes no one an exile any longer. A grace and love for all of us, because when we look closely at ourselves, we realize we don't deserve it either.

Amen