

Sermon Notes for 10/4/15 (Pentecost 19 – but special readings)

Preached at Jehovah Lutheran – St. Paul, MN

Text: Luke 4:14-21

Theme: SENT TO PROCLAIM FREEDOM FOR PRISONERS

The Point: Our Lord's work "on the margins" encourages us to walk and to work with Him "on the margins" of our own society and community.

Introduction: God's work takes place, most often it seems, on the margins. Those who are on the margins are usually the least protected, the most exposed, the least able to defend themselves, the most vulnerable. Society marginalizes them. Who are they? The poor, the junkies, the revolutionaries, the AIDS victims, the unborn, the aged and dying, children, and others who have no voice. The justice system ignores them. Communities insulate themselves against them. Families write them off. No wonder God often acts on their behalf, in order to demonstrate His power in the face of human weakness and inability.

Our psalmody (from Psalm 146) says it eloquently: "He upholds the cause of the oppressed and gives food to the hungry. The Lord sets prisoners free, the Lord gives sight to the blind, the Lord lifts up those who are bowed down, the Lord loves the righteous. The Lord watches over the foreigner and sustains the fatherless and the widow, but he frustrates the ways of the wicked." The oppressed, the hungry, the prisoners, the blind, the bowed down, the foreigner, the fatherless, the widow – for these, our Lord is Champion. For these He extends His hand of help, health, sustenance, compassion. And He often does it through people who know themselves what it is to be on the margins. These are often people who know they need God's help.

Abraham was a marginal man. He left his family, his country, his homeland for a distant country where he lived for years and years as an immigrant and a wanderer. And yet God made him, by His promise, into a great and mighty nation, giving him countless numbers of descendants. Abraham believed those promises, even though he saw precious little result of them during his lifetime. God had in mind the redemption of all mankind, all creation, and to that end He used the marginal man, Abraham.

The wives of the patriarchs lived on the margin, too. Sarah, Rebekah, and Rachel all spent many fruitless, barren years before they were able to bear children. Their prayers and complaints before God and their husbands were agonizing and tortured. And yet their late-in-life children became, by God's design, fathers of the nation. And through that nation would come the Redeemer of the world.

Joseph spent many years on the margins. A dreamer who was hated by his brothers, sold into slavery, betrayed and imprisoned through no fault of his own – Joseph seemed to have nothing going for him. But God arranged things so that, according to the Lord's own time, this despised and forgotten prisoner became ruler of all Egypt, next in power to Pharaoh himself. And by his service, especially his service as dream-reader, Israel's clan was spared, fed and given a home during famine. That nation had to survive, in order to keep God's promises for a Savior to be born from an Israelite womb.

The ancient Israelites were on the margin, slaves in Egypt with no hope of bettering their situation. And yet God acted miraculously on their behalf, raised up Moses as a leader (himself a marginal character, being wanted on a warrant for murder), and led Israel to the Promised Land. When their supply of food and water was marginal, God opened up the rocks to give water and the heavens to provide manna. When their backs were up against the Red Sea, God opened the sea for them to pass through. The promised Messiah had to come through the line of Israel, and so God preserved this marginal nation.

Paul talked about living on the margins as he discussed his role as proclaimer of the Gospel. "For what we preach is not ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, and ourselves as your servants for Jesus' sake. . . But we

have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us.” Clay pots – that was his description of preachers and teachers of God’s Word. The very next verses after today’s Epistle read this way: “We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be made visible in our bodies.”

People who have been called from the strangest places to serve in the strangest places – these are God’s spokespersons. God’s people carry around the death of Jesus, undergoing suffering, displacement, sorrow, persecution “so that the life of Jesus may also be made visible in our bodies.” When we are not crushed by sorrow, not despairing in trouble, not utterly lonely in our agony, people notice. And we have the opportunity to bear witness to the saving power of our Savior in those times. The life of Jesus is seen in the way we respond to times of trouble, and we lift Him before the world as their Savior also.

This brings us to Jesus’ words in the Nazareth synagogue from today’s Gospel. This was doubtless the place where He had spent much time during His growing years. We are told that it “was his custom” to show up in that place of worship. (And if that was the case for our Lord, how much more ought it to be the pattern for His people to follow?)

Jesus’ fame had been spreading, and it would have reached ears in Nazareth as well. So as He came to the synagogue that Sabbath, it would have been natural for the synagogue leader to ask Him to read from the Scripture. First there would have been a reading from the Law (the five books of Moses), usually led by a group of readers. Then followed the reading from the Prophets. Jesus was handed the scroll of Isaiah the prophet. He would have read from the Hebrew, and if the group followed the usual practice, a translator would give the interpretation of that text, verse by verse, into the Aramaic, which would have been the familiar tongue for the people of Nazareth.

Interestingly, the first word Luke reports, the place that Jesus finds to read, is the opening of Isaiah 61, part of the Servant Song of the prophet. And those words out of Jesus’ mouth are a Trinitarian announcement. “The Spirit of the Lord is upon Me.” Spirit – Yahweh – Messiah is the essence of the Holy Trinity embedded in the Old Testament. “Messiah” or “Christ” is anointed one, and this is one of the places where that concept is most clear: “The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me.” The anointing of God’s Messiah is not just an oil anointing. It is the full anointing, the full outpouring of God’s own Spirit for this Messiah’s preaching and ministry. Jesus had experienced that anointing when He stood in the Jordan River and was baptized by John. The Spirit descended on Him in the visible form of a dove, and the Father spoke His words of approval and commission. “You are my Son, whom I love; with You I am well pleased.”

For what reason has Jesus been anointed? Jesus announces the goal of His anointing, in these words of Isaiah: “to proclaim good news to the poor . . . to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to set the oppressed free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.” Jesus came to the margins and brought hope and life to people living on the margins.

The Good News that can grasp the hearts of the prisoners and the oppressed and the powerless is the same Good News that comes to you and me. It is God’s Word of forgiveness, life and hope found always and only in Jesus, God’s Son. Prisoners need to know freedom. That comes, not just through the action of parole boards, who can allow prisoners to walk outside prison walls again. Real freedom comes, as many a prisoner has testified, through the removal of the guilt and the fear and the burdens of conscience under which we so often live. Freedom is found in Christ’s forgiving love.

One man has written a book called *The Gutter: Where Life is Meant to Be Lived*. By that the author did

NOT intend that we ought to become addicted and jobless, homeless and friendless, so that we are forced to live on the margins. He was instead making the point that God's people, if they are to follow their Lord and Master, will find their way, with Jesus, to the gutter, to the margins, where the most hopeless and desperate people may be found. They find their way to those places to bring Christ and hope to people.

Today we recognize the labor of love that has been carried on in the margins by our brother and our friend, Jim Seeman. He has found his way to the gutter where Christ is. For some 40 years, he has walked behind walls that few of us have braved. He knows the insides of more prisons than Al Capone knew. And he has been there voluntarily. During Bible class today, he will tell us some of the stories that have been brought into being by the work of God's Spirit through the testimony and work of those who labor to speak the Good News to prisoners. Don't miss that! Jim has braved the margins in order to serve those who have been marginalized – and often forgotten! – by the society that they have offended by their actions. He may even have ministered to those who were in prison unjustly – those also exist and need to know that God has not forgotten them.

Jim has also been concerned – and for him that means, he acts on his convictions – concerned for the ex-offenders, who often have a very difficult time re-entering society. So he is working on ways to assist those ex-felons in finding jobs, housing and acceptance (even in the Church). I will let him tell you more about that – the story is a compelling one, and a necessary one in our neighborhood as well as throughout our society.

An LCMS scholar (A. Just, in *Luke 1:1-9:50*) has this to say about the “release” spoken of in today's Gospel: “The word for ‘release’ (*aphesis*) is often translated ‘forgiveness,’ and indeed in its three other occurrences in Luke (1:77, 3:3; 24:47), it specifically means the forgiveness of sins. Here it is rendered with the more general term ‘release,’ meaning liberation from the bondage of sin, sickness, and Satan. At times this will involve physical healing, exorcism, and rebuking destructive forces of nature, in addition to forgiving sins.” Our Lord is in the business of bringing release. He wants to release you from your own burden of guilt and fear and uneasiness about the future. He wants to bring you full freedom from the horrors that your own sins have perpetrated. He wants to free you to live, really to live.

And that sort of life involves serving others, especially those who are on the margins of our lives. Phillips Brooks has said, “No man in this world attains to freedom from any slavery except by entrance into some higher servitude. There is no such thing as an entirely free man conceivable” (Brooks, 1835- 1893, *Perennials*). So our freedom is found only in being bound to Christ and bound to life in unity with Him and His people.

In a prayer before the U.S. Senate, Peter Marshall spoke to God in these words: “Teach us that liberty is not only to be loved but also to be lived. Liberty is too precious a thing to be buried in books. It costs too much to be hoarded. Help us see that our liberty is not the right to do as we please, but the opportunity to please to do what is right.” When the Spirit of the Lord Jesus inhabits our hearts, He creates in us that pleasure of doing what is right. And that changes everything!

Conclusion: Our Lord's work “on the margins” of our world transforms lives and brings them hope and spirit and life. That work also encourages you and me to live and to walk and to work with Him “on the margins” of our own society and community. Who are the marginalized that you will touch this week? Those who are sidelined through illness or age? Children on the autism spectrum? Family members in broken relationships with others? People struggling with recovery from brain injuries? Women caught up in destructive relationships? Those who are alienated from family and friends for whatever reason? People who have been ostracized from churches? Church friends who have given up on Jesus because of past hurts? People dying from AIDS or other illnesses? You are the hands and feet and tongue of the Savior to

those who are on the margins. He empowers you today through His body and blood to be active in serving them during the days ahead. You who have been found on the margins of life by the life-giving Savior now have the privilege of walking with Him on the margins to bring His hope, forgiveness, life to all those whom you meet. May that be your joy and your direction in these coming days, to Jesus' glory! AMEN!