8. Liberation (Sermon)

Alongla Aier

Not long ago, I visited a cousin in her beautiful garden. A little boy came running towards us... I noticed his bright, alert eyes but also his scarred face and arms... "Oh there's more," said my cousin and, lifting his shirt, showed his back covered with scars - zig-zag lines like someone was trying to play tic tac toe with a razor, and then small round scars eaten deep into the flesh... "Cigarette buds," said my cousin. Appalled, I asked, "Who did this?" Then she told his story. His stepfather did it. He was only two when his mother remarried after the boy's father died. For two years he was tortured until he found his new home. Cousin continued, "We've adopted him, named him Joshua... now he even makes up songs: "You are Jesus, mama and papa." This is his way of saying you love me, you're like Jesus.

Little Joshua, now five, has been set free! His spirit can soar as he finds love and acceptance in the home of a family that has embraced him fully.

"The Spirit of the Lord is on me," Jesus read from the Hebrew Scriptures in a synagogue one day. "He has anointed me to preach the good news... He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed" (Luke 4:18).

Filled with the power of the Spirit, Jesus was purpose-driven that day in Nazareth; he knew exactly what he was doing. Luke writes that everyone's eyes were focused on him, waiting in suspense - and he declared simply, "Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing."
Centuries of waiting have ended. Jesus claims that he is indeed the anointed one, the liberating king, the one scripture foretold! This is the Good News! This good news would totally transform the history of all humankind. Jesus says that the poor, the captives, the oppressed and the blind in particular are the ones to be addressed.

For the people listening to Jesus that day, reference to the poor was not a surprise. The poor were always with them. How were the poor trapped in the vicious cycle of poverty? The main cause was mounting debts! Taxes, tributes, and tolls put heavy pressure on their resources leading to more borrowing, often leading to the poor becoming sharecroppers on their own lands. But God recognizes the poor! The Lord defends the weak and the fatherless and upholds the cause of the poor and the oppressed, defending their rights. It would be foolish to despise the poor, for God is on their side!

Yet, it’s not just the economic poor that Jesus was talking about. It is for the pious poor as well. The recognition of one’s spiritual poverty is indeed good news. “Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God” (Luke 6:20).

Jesus continues reading: “He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners.” Liberation is the main thrust of this good news. For the people listening to Jesus that day, this was no small matter. Memories were awakened and stories were recalled of the struggle of their forefathers and mothers. How could they ever forget Egypt, the years of captivity, the wars that took place over the years, the warnings of captivity, and then the nightmare as women and children, the best of the young men, were taken as captives to alien places. These were awful, painful memories.¹

“So set the captives free?” That touched a sensitive, still a raw wound for the people listening that day. Weren’t they captives of the Romans whose debtors’ prison, structures, systems and ideologies had made them servants/slaves in their own land? Oh! To throw off the yoke of Roman rule!

¹ See Amos 7:11, I Samuel 30:3, 2 Kings 17:23.
Those listening to Jesus are drawn in, and the Lord keeps reading, “The blind will see!” The folks listening to Jesus hadn’t seen anything yet! A quick look at Jesus’ ministry and we find that many blind were healed; healing the blind became like a trademark of Jesus’ ministry. 2

They would hear Bartimaeus the blind beggar answer, when Jesus asked, “What do you want me to do for you?” The answer seemed so obvious but Bartimaeus replied in earnestness, “Rabbi, I want to see.” And he began to see immediately (Mark 10:46-52).

Jesus takes the opportunity to draw attention to a radical truth — that blindness went beyond the merely physical. Blindness of the heart and mind are more serious. It represents a hardened heart against God, a stumbling block to God’s kingdom. No wonder Jesus said to the Pharisees, “Woe to you blind guides, you blind fools” (Matthew 23: 16-24).

Liberation! The blind will see! Jesus the light of the world has said, “Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life” (John 8:12).

“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me ... to release the oppressed.” To the slave, the exploited and downtrodden Jesus declares, “I have come to set you free!”

God upholds the cause of the oppressed (Psalm 146:7). God’s justice and righteousness are with them. Did he not say, “I have indeed seen the misery of my people, I have heard them crying out because of their slave drivers... So I have come down to rescue them” (Exodus 3:7-8).

Again Jesus is alluding here to more than a literal release from prison. The release he refers to has holistic implications and carries eternal significance. Jesus the Anointed One is here to set prisoners free from all forms of bondage and oppression by sin!

Madesh was only eight when he was sent to work in a brick kiln. His family was too poor. The work was grueling and dangerous: his task was to mix the clay with his bare feet into a soft paste; he’d get hurt at times – the clay contained broken pieces of glass. For this work Madesh received just a few cents a day for food. He was never allowed to leave the kiln; physically abused, he never experienced the joy of childhood. You see, Madesh was one of twenty-seven million slaves worldwide. For fifteen years he remained trapped in slavery. But the impossible happened. He was released! Thanks to the efforts of a Christian justice group, Madesh and his family are free today. With a little help from others, Madesh has his own brick kiln and now employs people from the community and pays them all fair wages. God in Jesus is always moved by the cries of the oppressed and He rescues them.

Coming closer home, how shall we respond to Jesus and His incredible mission? The kingdom work that Jesus declared that day remains unfinished. What can we do? The answer is simple. Get involved! Look around you. More than ever, creation groans for deliverance. The cry of the poor, the blind, the captive and the oppressed is so loud, God’s children cannot and should not keep silent! We dare not watch a child die for lack of a cup of powdered milk when even a fraction of our wealth can save millions of children from starvation.

We dare not simply sit and watch the growing millions of displaced people who, like animals, are chased out of their own beloved land. They are not just “refugees.” They, too, are made in the image of God and they need help.

We dare not turn a blind eye to the abused, trafficked girls - two million exploited in commercial sex trade each year - when we can lobby, network and influence the powers that are to stop this horror.

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We dare not remain silent and say “no” to the ministry of reconciliation when brothers and sisters of the same faith and race kill each other. Conflicts escalate and the poor, the captives and the oppressed increase in the land!

The challenges are staggering. But there’s an underlying challenge that is often ignored or understated. This challenge is to the “non-poor” and the “non-captive.” In Jesus’ time, the perpetrators remained silent. They sustained the status quo because they benefited from the systems and structures that were in operation.

A tough question to ask ourselves is this: In our position and context, do we, in any way, sustain the status quo that prevents the flow of liberation and justice and keeps the captives still imprisoned? It is said that Christians today have a total annual income of more than one trillion dollars. According to the United Nations, it would cost only $30 - $40 billion per year to provide all people in developing countries with basic education, health care, and clean water. This is the same amount spent on golf every year!

The point is: we have the capacity. If we so decide and act, we can make a difference in our lifetime! How shall we respond?

It is true that the global Baptist family is recognized. We are there, sometimes the first, in crisis situations, in mission and evangelism all over the world. But we are needed more at the cutting edge, for greater challenges for God’s Kingdom here on earth!

Do you hear the Spirit? Listen! The same Jesus of Nazareth is here with us, pleading, “Be my hands, my feet, my eyes, and my mouth.” Christ has no body on earth. We are his body. By the enabling power and grace of God in Christ, may we respond “YES, in Jesus’ name!” Amen.