

Sermon
Third Sunday after Epiphany
January 23, 2022

Nehemiah 8:1-3,5-6,8-10

Luke 4:14-21

If you could choose the words that might encapsulate who you are, the only words that would communicate the essence of yourself, your life, your commitments, what would they be? What would be the words that could sum you up? How much are you willing to reveal about yourself, to the world, to others, even to yourself? At some point along the way of your life you may have had to write an essay about who you are or it might have been part of the exercise of creating a resume. Maybe a short bio, a paragraph for an organization you are going to volunteer for, or as a new board member. Not easy an easy task and, at least for me, often not very clear. And what does it mean to be “this” me is communities.

A few years ago I bought a small book titled Made for Goodness – And Why this Makes All the Difference. The authors are the late Archbishop Desmond Tutu and his youngest daughter Mpho Tutu, also an Episcopal priest. In this book he speaks of his life, work in South African, around the world and the people along the way. He tells stories of incredible horror, hatred and violence. There are, however, also the stories of people who acted, in spite of great odds and risks, to help individuals and change horrible conditions and situations for people. He tells

many stories of the journey from brokenness to goodness, through forgiveness and reconciliation.

In the readings this morning the thrust of the messages is learning to claim goodness, God's goodness, in who we are as God's people, as individuals and as communities. We can put "goodness" in our resumes, in our bios. Because we are made that way, we are God's and that's really joy-filled.

In the reading from Nehemiah all the people gathered together, God's chosen people. All the people listened attentively as Ezra reads. All the people stood up. They listened for hours! All the people answered, "Amen, Amen." Ezra, the priest, proclaims God's word, the Law of Moses, in the public square and offers radical inclusion: "Both men and women and all who could hear with understanding", which likely included children, were in attendance. We witness a ragged and tired remnant, returning from exile and experiencing generational grief. The people were united in their grief and tears. Maybe they were responding to both the conditions of; "What a mess we've made of things! When things got tough we ignored God's Laws." As well as; "How good it is to hear the words of Moses and the Law given to us by our God!" They needed to hear and be reminded that they are God's people. And God's creation, people included, is created "good". Ezra also gave them permission to rejoice and to celebrate, inviting the people to embrace subversive joy—that is, joy in the midst of tragedy and hardship. Go back to your places, eat the richest food and the best wine you have! Share portions of what you have with those who are poor and those who are foreigners

to us. Celebrate that we are God's people and we are good. He encouraged them with the words "The joy of the LORD is your strength".

Last week we heard about another joy-filled event, in John's gospel Jesus is at a wedding in Cana. During the celebrations Mary, Jesus' mother tells him that there's no wine. His first miracle is addressing this problem by providing wine from plain old water. And this is not everyday wine, but the best, the sweetest wine. Celebration wine!

Now in Luke Jesus first public act is a sermon preached in his hometown of Nazareth. In his travel through the communities of the region Jesus is beginning to reveal who he is and what he's about.

People were flocking to hear Jesus as he traveled the region. He is newly embarked on his ministry and his messages are exciting. He is saying things that the crowds are yearning to hear. Finally he has arrived in his hometown, the hero at this point. It's not a big or prestigious place but it is home and the people are excited to see Mary's boy, now a learned man fresh from the big city of Jerusalem, and to hear what he has to say in their own synagogue. This crowd, these people living under Roman occupation do not have an easy life, there is always a threat, but when someone comes along and talks so clearly about the holy scriptures, plus he is so kind and open to everyone. Well, they want to pay attention. After all, last week at the wedding he miraculously made wine from water – and good wine at that!

So other than Mary's and Joseph's boy, the little guy who popped into the neighbours' house with his buddies for a snack, who played with the friendlier dogs that ran wild, explored the countryside with his pals, who took out the garbage for his mom, learned the skills of carpentry alongside his dad, who precociously learned to read the scriptures from the local scribes, who gave his folks a fright when they couldn't find him and he was just in the temple learning even more, who is this man who magnetically draws in the people and speaks with such authority?

Again, here is this short and concise sermon; really the sermon is one line at the end and the reading from Isaiah, an ancient text, is who Jesus is, his mission and mandate.

Jesus stands to read the scripture from Isaiah.

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
and recovery of sight to the blind,
to let the oppressed go free,
¹⁹to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.”

Jesus sits to give his sermon.

“Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.”

These are bold words. Here is who I am and why I am here? No fancy language or hidden meanings. What if Jesus really means what he says because it says who he is? He is about goodness, goodness that is real and present.

Jesus is given by God to care for the poor, bring release those who are captive, to heal the sick and end oppression. In other words, Jesus is proclaiming his mission and mandate of turning the status quo upside down. It rings of the Magnificat, his mother's song that we listened to the fourth Sunday of Advent.

He has brought down the
powerful from their thrones,
and lifted up the lowly;
he has filled the hungry with good things,
And sent the rich away empty.

And in his one liner of interpretation; "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing" the community who is hearing is included. Jesus is about that work in his ministry but it will not come without the whole body, the whole community, the body of Christ. Today the crowds laud him and are thrilled – tomorrow, they are not so pleased as we well know.

Among us are the prophets, wise priests, teachers, activists, and leaders across time and distance. People like Archbishop Tutu and Mpho Tutu. But it is truly in the midst of communities that are made up of people like you and me where the work gets done. The work of actually providing food, housing and safety,

friendship and compassion, and challenging the systems that oppress. We each have gifts and roles as we heard from Paul's letter to the Corinthians. We are made for good, each in our own ways, as the body of Christ.

Again and again, through exile and rebuilding of God's people God reminds us who and whose we are and what that means. We are made for goodness; we are good – God created good. And in goodness there is joy.

So who are you? What words would describe your life's mission and mandate? Within the body of Christ we are good, not called to be good, we are good, created good. So each of us can include good in our short bios, it may take work to acknowledge that, to see it in ourselves. However, the joy of the Lord is your strength, for today the scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.

Amen