

“We Are the Heart, Hands, and Voice of Jesus Christ”

Luke 4:14-21 and 1 Corinthians 12:12-31

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Preached January 21, 2007 at San José, Costa Rica

I have never been accused of being a shrinking violet. In a letter of recommendation I once requested, my reference noted that I was not one to “suffer fools gladly.” Fortunately no one on that search committee held that against me! Some of you may know that Spanish idiomatic expression which Flora’s family has never been shy about applying to me: “El no tiene pelos en la lengua,” literally, “he has no hairs on the tongue,” meaning he will say just about anything, or tell it like it is. Like head, like tongue, I suppose. Indeed, I remember once as an eighth grader commenting on the driving skills of the father of one of my friends by asking him, from the back seat, if his insurance premiums were paid up. But even I, in my most verbally reckless days, would not have had the audacity to do what Jesus does at his coming out party: to appropriate the very mission of God for himself.

You will remember that prior to this derring-do at his debut, Jesus has been baptized in the Jordan, visited by the Holy Spirit, and tempted unsuccessfully by the devil. Luke has made it clear that he is good and ready to fulfill the purposes for which he has come, and the early reviews are pretty good. He has been praised by everyone in the synagogues in which he taught on the outskirts of his hometown. But then comes this moment of truth, this chance to show his own

community that he has done them proud. He could have served up a nice, self-effacing, grateful sounding piece of humble pie, a “thank you very much for all your support” kind of message. But not this Jesus. Instead he goes straight for the spiritual jugular vein, announcing that in the hearing of the words he has just quoted from Isaiah, that centuries of prophecy have come true. “Today, this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.” I’m your man, Jesus says, and I’m comin’ at ya, and so is the reign of God. Jesus makes my precociousness look tame.

There is a great deal of deliberation built into the way Luke tells this story. We have described for us a very calculating Jesus who unrolled the scroll and *found* the place where these words from Isaiah were written. And when he was finished with the scroll, he rolled it up and gave it to the attendant, and sat down, as was the custom of one about to teach in the synagogue. The tension was mounting. All eyes were fixed upon him. What would he say next after pulling out such a juicy text? Perhaps they expected him to say that God’s promises were still valid, that even though the Romans still occupy their land, God would one day prevail. Maybe they thought he would predict for them who would be their leader, since he had been earning a reputation as a prophet. But instead, Jesus has the audacity to say that it begins and ends with himself, that he is the one anointed by God for the awesome task of bringing liberation, and freedom, and the long promised shalom. “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, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." Whoa!

Now, the crafters of the lectionary are very sneaky, leaving us hanging at this point, for they know that once we get into talking about how Jesus' kinfolk reacted to what he said, we forget what it is he actually said. And so next week, perhaps we'll take up what happens when one opens one's mouth in the company of an unreceptive audience. But for today, we must be confronted with the powerful words Jesus has quoted and the words he has spoken of himself. They were powerful and loaded words then and they still are today, even when we are so far away from them, in both years and culture. With these words, Jesus is outlining his ministry, and Luke in turn is outlining the ministry of the church. In a sense, Jesus is speaking aloud the mission statement of God, and Luke the mission statement of the church.

You see, the things Jesus announces he has been anointed for, called to do, are the very things that God wants for us, and for all people. When one child of God is poor, we are all impoverished. When one child of God is in prison, we are all held hostage. When one child of God is blind, none of us can truly see. And when even one child of God is oppressed, none of us are free. The "year of the Lord's favor" is a reference to the year of jubilee, that part of the Mosaic law that stipulates a rest for the land and equity for its people, but it is also a sort of code

for the fulfillment of God's intentions in each of us and for all of us. There is nothing God wants for us more than for all people to live in that favor, this year, and forevermore. Jesus sees this clearly and has the audacity to label it, to claim it, to lead it, and finally to suffer for it.

It is important to remember that in Luke's understanding of God's plan and God's imprint on history, the mission of God did not begin with Jesus. God was active in the world and in the history of Israel since Adam. But Luke is also clear that the mission of God did not end with Jesus, but rather it was bequeathed to the Church, to the followers and disciples of Jesus who were empowered at Pentecost with the same Holy Spirit which empowered Jesus in the River Jordan. And friends, that Church empowered by the Holy Spirit in the Book of Acts is the same church empowered by the Holy Spirit today. But God did not empower the early church to sit content with fond memories of their dead leader, but rather to continue to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor, and to do so with the same audacity, and fervor, and passion. And if we claim to be the church now, we must have that same audacity to proclaim the same message which Jesus proclaimed! Jesus Christ, in his life, ministry, death, and resurrection, has given us access to this claim since we now are his body. Yes, the body of Christ is a metaphor, but what better metaphor to illustrate the purpose of the incarnation of God in Jesus Christ.

This metaphor, of course, is one employed by the Apostle Paul in our reading from 1 Corinthians. While elsewhere Paul reminds us that Christ is “the head over all things for the church, which is his body,” here he concentrates on the relationship between the parts of that body, concluding with the important reminder that “if one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it.” It would seem that we rise and fall, this body of Christ of ours, together. It would seem that we are at our best when each part works to the best of its ability, in harmony with the other members, without envy of the gifts of others, without jealousy for the greater visibility of some. It would seem that we are stuck with one another as we try to be, today, as audacious for God’s purposes as Christ was when he read from Isaiah and announced his intentions to the world.

Paul has as his specific purpose promoting harmony in listing the body parts he does in 1 Corinthians, and even if that emphasis is more helpful for understanding how we should relate to one another, it nevertheless offers us the chance to reflect more on our role as Christ’s body today and how it should be used for God’s purposes. From that reflection, and from Jesus’ own announcement of his mission in Luke 4, comes a self-understanding for our humble church, that idea you’ve been hearing about that we are “the heart, hands, and voice of Jesus Christ to Costa Rica’s English-speaking community.” This is our own unique way of stating how we are carrying on the mission Jesus

announced. You see, when we look at Jesus' announcement, we can see these three elements at work: his heart full of compassion for those whom only God seems to love, his hands touching those in need of healing and grace, his voice proclaiming God and God's intentions for God's good creation. As he took his place in front of those gathered in Jerusalem that day, we can almost hear his heart beating to the same rhythm as God's, and his hands unfurling God's Word, and his voice giving it life. In our own journeys of faith, we have experienced Christ's heart opening itself to us in hope and forgiveness, Christ's hands in the hospitality we have received from others, Christ's voice in the church's cries for justice, prophecy that has helped set people free. St. Teresa of Avila famously and rightly said, "Christ has no body now on earth but yours, no hands but yours, no feet but yours." How else will the world know Christ, and experience his grace and mercy, if not by us employing our hearts, hands, and voices?

It is not evidence of the failure of Jesus mission that there are still the poor to whom good news must be brought, nor captives that still need release, nor blind needing sight, nor oppressed freedom. It is not that the year of the Lord's favor has come and gone. Rather, the need to continue Jesus' mission persists because in every age we human beings persist in believing that God has anointed others to serve us, rather than the other way around. The need for Christ's ministry persists because the ears say to the feet, what have I to do with you? The need for Christ's ministry persists because we have not had the audacity to claim that ministry with

the authority God has given us. The need persists because we have not truly seen ourselves as Christ's compassionate heart, his healing hands, his prophetic voice, and put them to the service of those he called "the least of these," or in the language of the Anglican church, "the least, the lost, and the lonely."

The good news of the Gospel is that we are not condemned for not having eliminated poverty and oppression and despair and hopelessness. The odds are surely against us and God still gives us another chance to minister every morning. But if we are to be judged, it will not be because we were not successful. It will not be because we didn't try hard enough. It will be because we failed to coordinate our hearts, hands, and voices, leaving the body of Christ at cross purposes with itself. It will be because the hand said, "because I am not a heart, I do not belong to the body," and the good works of the hand will be lesser for the absence of compassion in its labors. It will be because the voice said to the hand, "I have no need of you," and thus its words thus rang hollow. It will be because the heart thought the hands and voice to be weaker and less honorable and treated them as such. It will be because we will have forgotten that "If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it." And while we would be standing in judgment, those we are called to serve would remain in misery, and conflict, and despair, and continue to be the least, the lost, and the lonely.

I do not wish to end on a note of judgment, for surely that is not the point of Jesus' announcement, nor Paul's elegant words. Indeed, Paul has it right when he reminds us that each is called to strive for his or her gift and that the pursuit of those gifts leads to love, what he calls the "still more excellent way." It is love that binds the heart, hands, and voice together and helps them to be in balance and in harmony, and helps them to be blessings they are intended to be. It is love that motivates us and animates us, Christ's love for us which led him to announce his mission, and bequeath it to us, that we might find life in the bringing of life. May God bless ECF as we bring life by being Christ's heart, hands, and voice in Costa Rica's English-speaking community. Amen.