First United Methodist Church of Springboro

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Luke 4:14-21

“What Kind of Life?”

We are not only in the season of the Holy Spirit, but the season of Annual Conference. It was a very full conference this year with the extra work connected to General Conference, but it is always good to gather at Lakeside and remember who we are together in Jesus Christ and our mission and purpose as United Methodists. The teaching and worship is always inspiring. A highlight this year was the Tuesday morning worship with the message given by Dr. Kabamba Kiboko of Forest Chapel UMC. She is originally from the South Congo. She shared the powerful message, “It is in You, Rise.”

The question I hope you’ll ask in this moment is, what? What is in me that makes me rise? I would encourage you to go online to hear her powerful answer to this. But another way to describe that which is in us is the Spirit, or breath of God. The Hebrew word for it is ruach. It is described as a part of God sweeping over the waters in creation. It is the life breath breathed into Adam and Eve.

The Holy Spirit of God breathes physical life into us at our birth. It also breathes spiritual life into us. It anoints us and guides us as we live out the work of God in this world.

Jesus sends the Holy Spirit to us, but it is also a part of him. It connects us to him even as it connects him to God.

Jesus uses the words of Isaiah to describe his experience of God’s Spirit within him. He goes to his hometown church and as he stands to read the Scriptures, he says, “The Spirit of the Lord is on me to preach good news, freedom for the prisoners, recovery of sight to the blind, and to release the oppressed.”

This is shocking, scandalous….well not at first.

At first, it just seems like one of the young adults who has gone off to school and done well and come home and wants to serve as liturgist. And honestly they are so excited that he’s grown up and wants to be in church that he could say almost anything, choose almost any scripture and their response would be, “You read so well, do such a nice job. You’re a fine young man. What a lovely choice of reading…Isaiah and the mysterious suffering servant.”

It’s all good until he says, yes, but I mean it. This is who I am, what I will do, and the effect it will have. Then they drive him out of town and try to throw him over a cliff.

Often we have words that we know in our heads. We believe them in our hearts. But when it comes to living them out, well, we don’t always put them together in a way that impact our lives. They don’t always change our wants, our attitudes, the way we respond to injustice in our midst.

Because when they do, it’s scandalous. People sometimes want to throw us over a cliff.

Why? Did you notice who this good news that Isaiah talks about and Jesus comes to live out is for?

It’s not for the comfortable or the successful. It’s directed to those who are in need. It is only good news if you’re willing to admit what is hard in life, what you are lacking, what you find most difficult. It’s only good news if you stop acting like you have it all together and stop using all of your time and resources trying to look better, get fitter, appear younger, be more powerful and successful, to not need anyone or anything.

It is good news if you are, or identify with the poor, the prisoner, the sick, or the oppressed.

Jesus says, this is why I have come. The Spirit of the Lord is upon me to do this. This was his mission statement.

He did it, really, scandalously. It was so confronting that they had to stop him. They had to put him on the cross.

What if we did the same? We have the choice. We can be like those people in the synagogue that day who thought these were lovely words for someone in a faraway place a long time ago. Or we can be like Jesus and understand that the Spirit of the Lord is upon us, it is in us, and it has anointed us to be a part of this same work today, here and now.

It might be scandalous, but a good scandal, a Jesus scandal.

So let’s think about these areas that Jesus mentions just briefly. What do they mean for us and our life in the Spirit?

First, to preach good news to the poor and to live it means that we proclaim that life is more than possessions and money and status. We say we believe this, but then we go out and buy a few more things. We might want the Google watch. We might like the look of that new car. We might feel insecure because our neighbor or our coworker has better stuff than we do.

To share good news with the poor means that we trust that God will provide for us and it will be more than enough. We trust this so much that we share what we have in physical generosity and a generosity of spirit. We see God’s Spirit in them even as they have experienced it in us.

This is scandalous. Too often in our world the poor are blamed and judged or they are treated as less than, to be pitied. The Spirit guides us to be different. Instead of blaming and judging and pitying, we seek to relate to God’s spirit in them.

To proclaim freedom for prisoners means again that we understand and claim the value and worth of each person regardless of their choices, regardless of their actions. We are those who have been forgiven by God’s grace and so we, of all people, would not want to be defined by our worst mistake in life, one bad decision that we can never escape from.

So we first proclaim spiritual and emotional freedom. Jesus Christ sets us free. He breaks the power of cancelled sin. He sets the prisoner free.

But we also then apply this to real prisoners. We heard about several prison ministries that our Annual Conference is involved in and there is a new initiative and helps those who have been incarcerated as they are released to transition back into life after prison.

To proclaim the release of prisoners means we do these things and we care enough to let your hearts be broken by the statistics that tell us that something is broken in our prison system and our country. We incarcerate a higher percentage of citizens than any other western nation. We have less than 5% of the world’s population and a quarter of the world’s prisoners. Something is broken in our country, but the Spirit of the Lord is upon the church to change things. We will we cause a Jesus scandal?

Jesus’ then proclaims the recovery of sight to the blind. In this gospels we find that Jesus heals on two levels, spiritual and physical. They are often linked. Spiritually we have been healed. We say, “I was blind, but now I see.” Jesus opens our eyes, breaks through our hearts of stone, and heals us.

But this healing is not just spiritual. It is also a physical reality. This proclamation is also about trusting that God is not powerless in any situation, but that God has power over physical creation and all of our experiences. God does heal in very real and powerful ways. We don’t understand. We have some part in it through our prayers and our choices. But even in the time I have been in this congregation we have celebrated several wonderful miracles of healing. We are people are people who are confident that God can. So let us never lose hope. Let us proclaim God’s healing power.

Let’s cause a scandal, a Jesus scandal.

Finally he will release the oppressed. The oppressed are different than prisoners. They are held down not by their own actions, but by an unjust system or relationship, by hard hearted people. There are many layers of injustice and oppression from the interpersonal to the international.

The first thing we again remember is God’s stance. God abhors injustice and oppression. God calls us to seek justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with him. God sets his heart with the oppressed and suffers with them. And we are called to do the same.

There are many ways to help the oppressed. We work to change systems that oppress. We take a stand on justice issues such as human trafficking and terror. But we also love and accept the victim in their deep woundedness rather than blaming them. We give them a place to share their experience and to heal which doesn’t happen overnight. We let them help us to understand the problems and work toward a solution of peace and justice for all.

God’s Spirit is upon us. It is in us. Just as it was in Jesus, God’s Spirit anoints us to do the work of God in our world. We know it in our head, we believe it in our hearts, now let us go and live it out in our lives…and cause a Jesus scandal.