

Who Are “We”?  
Sermon Preached by Maureen Smith  
Central Presbyterian Church  
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Scripture: Luke 4:14-21

Jesus was the home town boy, and the people of Nazareth were proud of him, at least at first. He was preaching in the synagogues around Galilee—word about him was spreading—

and Luke tells us that he was “praised by everyone.”

Going to the synagogue on the Sabbath was his custom—he was a faithful Jew—and when he came to the synagogue in Nazareth he was given the honor of reading from the scripture and commenting on it. The passage was from Isaiah, about bringing good news to the poor. After he read it, Jesus sat down—in those days people stood to read from scripture and sat down to teach—and he clearly identified himself with the prophetic message: “today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.”

In Luke’s gospel the words spoken at the synagogue in Nazareth are Jesus’ first public words, which give them great importance. Jesus is telling the people—and telling us, all these centuries later—what he stands for, what he is all about. Listen again:

“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.”

Jesus was on the side of the poor. His words echo something we have already heard in the gospel of Luke, from Mary, when her joy at learning she will be the mother of Jesus is combined with fierce words of justice—bringing down the powerful from their thrones and lifting up the lowly, filling the hungry with good things and sending the rich away empty. Jesus was very much his mother’s son, and faithful to his Jewish tradition, in this regard.

A few verses later we are told that the people in Nazareth became enraged with Jesus, drove him out of town, and threatened to throw him off a cliff. But this wasn’t because of what he said about bringing good news to the poor. They were with him on that. Nor was it because he boldly identified himself as the anointed one. Right after

that, we are told, “all spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his mouth.”

What was it that infuriated them? I’ll get to that, but for now I want to talk about bringing good news to the poor. If that was so important to Jesus—and we hear again and again in the gospels that it was—he must want us to follow him in being on the side of the poor. How are we doing?

As I talked about with the children, I think we at Central are doing pretty well. In November we turn our church dining room into a shelter for homeless families with children through Project Home. Martha’s Closet offers professional clothing for low-income women. Our FIRE classes help immigrants improve their English, to give them a better chance to live successful lives in Minnesota. I have seen the volunteers in all of these ministries, and I believe they—you, we—are motivated by more than charity. We could do more—to move even more beyond charity to justice and love—but I believe we are on the side of the poor.

For the first time in years I was sad to miss the Martin Luther King breakfast this year, but I watched on TV, and I heard Dr. Joseph Lowery talk about the difference between charity and love. Charity will give a man a fish sandwich, he said. Love will teach him how to fish. And love will check the water to make sure it isn’t polluted. I take that to be both literally and metaphorically.

How is the water? How much that we hear these days is good news for the poor? I read in last week’s Newsweek that the gap between rich and poor in the United States is greater than in any other country in the developed world. As for the church, many congregations are doing wonderful work, but in the church as a whole the message sometimes seems to be: save your soul and embrace the status quo.

In recent years some preachers have taken this to a new level, in what is called the prosperity gospel. God wants us to be rich, these preachers say, and if we are rich it is a sign of God’s favor. And if we’re poor? You do the math. Bad news for the poor, good news for the rich.

A few weeks ago I saw on CNN online that some of these preachers have added a new twist. Jesus himself must have been rich, they claim. Here’s a quote: “the poor will follow the rich, the rich will follow the rich, but the rich will never follow the poor.” I’m stunned by the logic of that. Don’t these people know that God in Jesus was turning the world upside down, or rightside up?

Luke Timothy Johnson, New Testament professor at Emory University in Atlanta, says these claims that Jesus was rich are a distortion of history and a threat to one of Christianity’s core teachings—God’s identification with the poor. “If Jesus reveals God, there is something powerful about God appearing and working through the poor.”

Johnson goes on: “Jesus’ lifestyle is not of one in a gated community or a corporate office. You don’t have to go through a security gate to get to Jesus. People touch him. He reached out and touched children. His accessibility is one of the most powerful messages of Christianity. In Jesus, God is with us, and the majority of us are poor.”

When Johnson says the majority of us are poor, he must be defining “us” to include all the people in the world.

Now let’s go back to the synagogue in Nazareth. What turned the people against Jesus? I suggest that you read the rest of the chapter to see how it plays out, but in a nutshell the problem was that Jesus was saying liberation wasn’t just for the Jews but for non-Jews as well.

It’s easy to be critical of the narrowness of the Jews of the 1st century, but how much narrowness have we seen in the centuries from then until now? How much narrowness do we see today? How often do we think in terms of “us” and “them”? Who do we include when we say “we”? I’ve been thinking a lot lately about how broadly we define “we” or “us.”

After the earthquake in Haiti, our Presbyterian denomination posted a beautiful prayer on its web site, including the reminder that “when one or your children suffers, we all suffer.” Without a doubt the suffering of the people of Haiti has touched the hearts of many, many people, and the outpouring of support has been phenomenal.

At the same time—and we saw this with Hurricane Katrina, too—some people have been more ready to blame the people of Haiti than to stand in solidarity with them. I don’t even want to quote Pat Robertson, who said it was a “true fact” that they made a pact with the devil years ago. There I just did, and I think he has gotten way too much attention. But it’s more than that.

So much of the coverage has been focused on Haiti’s problems, not the progress it was making before the earthquake, and we have seen scenes on TV that show the people of Haiti in a bad light. Yes, there has been some looting. Yes, there are some lawless people in Haiti, and some people who have acted in desperation. And there are many, many people who have faced their terrible situation with courage and generosity and grace and faith. Those qualities are harder to capture in pictures on TV, although we have seen some touching scenes of Haitians helping Haitians and of people spontaneously singing hymns.

I’d encourage us each to examine our own hearts. Do we see the people of Haiti as “us” or “them”? Do we see them as people who share our common humanity and in many cases our Christian faith, or do we just see them as poor and black and hopeless? It makes a huge difference.

Jesus wasn't rich. Jesus also wasn't white—he was probably brown and Middle Eastern looking—but he is portrayed in so much of our art as fair-skinned and European looking. I will never forget going to Ethiopia on a mission trip 20 years ago and seeing one of those pictures of a fair-skinned, light-haired Jesus on the wall of a shop we stopped at. I remember something else from that trip, and I think there is a connection.

We were talking with a beautiful young Ethiopian woman when she put her arm next to the arm of a young woman in our group and said, "I wish my skin were light like yours." Here she was living in Ethiopia, where almost everyone had skin the color of hers, and she somehow got the message that white was better. The messages we send out, in words and pictures, do make a difference.

As Americans and Minnesotans, who do we have in mind when we say "we"? What does an American look like? What does a Minnesotan look like? Recently at my book group at House of Hope we had Kalia Yang, the young Hmong writer from St. Paul who wrote *The Latehomecomer*, as our guest. She came here when she was 6, she is an American citizen, she thinks of herself as a Minnesotan and is proud to be known as a Minnesota writer. She is a lovely, gentle person with the heart of a poet, and she is grateful to churches and teachers and everyone who has helped the Hmong people in Minnesota, and book groups who have read her book. But she also told one story that horrified me.

She was in Northfield, where she went to Carleton College, and when a car drew up near her she went over to see if she could help with directions. Instead they threw McDonald's hamburgers at her and shouted at her, "Go home!"

Go home. But she was home. Minnesota is her home, America is her home. As she said, the Hmong people were an ethnic minority wherever they lived—they fought on the American side in the Vietnamese War—and they came to America looking for a home. Minnesota is richer because Kalia calls Minnesota home.

Then what about Central? Who feels at home here? Who do we mean when we say "we"?

One of the things I love about Central is its diversity. We have members and their children born in at least ten different countries on four continents, as well as African Americans and Asian Americans. Our cross-cultural celebration last weekend was intended to build on that strength. We were looking at this question: are we a truly multicultural church, or are we a predominantly white church that is happy to have people of other cultures and ethnicities with us as long as we can keep doing things our way?

We divided into small groups for conversation—with a great group of people from Central as well as members of Stephen Ndumbe's extended family who joined us and added so much—and at least in the conversations I heard, people said we have quite a

ways to go before we are truly multicultural. We'll be talking more about how we might move in that direction, and I'm not standing up here with answers. It isn't easy, and it can be scary.

People shared hopes and fears, written anonymously on cards. The fears were real: fear of saying something to offend, fear of stirring up tensions needlessly, fear of change, fear of not liking the food.

But I was touched and inspired by the hopes, not only on the cards but even more in conversation. People expressed a great desire to get to know each other better, to form true friendships across cultural lines, to be enriched by learning about other cultures, to be a more inclusive church.

It was encouraging, too, to hear people tell us—our own newer members as well as our Cameroonian guests—that they felt genuinely welcomed the first time they walked in our door, and have continued to feel that welcome. Moses Kimani remembered how Rod Durner used to welcome him every week. We miss Rod—he's doing well, in his late 90s, but he isn't here at Central any more. Still, other people are carrying on the welcome, and we need to keep working at it.

We aren't where we want to be yet. We have work to do and a ways to go. Our hope—our goal—our prayer—is to be a church where everyone can feel welcomed and at home, where everyone will know that they are who we are talking about—you are who we are talking about—when we say “we.”