

“What’s So Good About the News?”

Nehemiah 8: 1 – 3, 5 – 6, 8 – 10

Luke 4: 14 – 21

Rev. Wayne E. Gustafson, D.Min.

January 24, 2010

How many times have you heard the term “Good News” in your life in the church? Countless times I’m sure. Actually, you have probably heard the term in a variety of ways. As you may know, the word “Gospel” means good news. Also, the word evangelism, (you know, that word that we Congregationalists have so much trouble with), literally means Good Message, which easily translates into “Good News”. Some of the emphasis on good news comes from Jesus’ declaration of the purpose of his ministry. He borrows a passage from the prophet Isaiah in which he says that he has come “to bring good news to the poor.” He also goes on about the promises of bringing freedom, sight, and relief from oppression to those who are in need. We can generalize from this passage to say that all these references reflect aspects of the good news.

Our whole Christian tradition revolves around the idea of spreading the good news. It’s what we are supposed to do as committed Christians. We must, however, be clear about the nature of the good news we are called to share. The good news probably is not an offer to all of comfort, safety, power, and status. While those four might have their place in the political arena, they can also easily be related to narrow self-interest. Jesus, after all, during his time in the wilderness dealt with the potential temptations of comfort, safety, power, and status.

Many Christians believe that the Christian good news relates primarily to a theology of atonement: that we are condemned before God by virtue of our sin, but that Jesus has come to sacrifice himself so we can be redeemed from eternal punishment. From the perspective of this atonement theology, the good news then is primarily about the afterlife with little relevance to this earthly life. While it is important that people learn that their imperfection and fallibility will not keep them from God, Jesus begins delivering the message about God’s commitment to humanity very early in his ministry, and well before the time of the crucifixion.

Some Christians think that Atonement theology is the only explanation that can make sense of the crucifixion and resurrection. I disagree. There are several other meanings that are quite adequate to explain the crucifixion and resurrection. While there is little doubt that Jesus was executed, the executioner was the Roman Empire, not God. Jesus brought a message of good news that was so challenging to the power structures of the day that they moved to eliminate him. His preaching represents a magnificent gift to humanity of startling good news from God. And he was killed for delivering this message to a people ready to hear it and take it seriously. So, how then can we understand the resurrection? We can begin with two significant meanings. The first is that, even after his death, his influence was so strong that it was as if he still lived among them. I don’t mean to eliminate other possible meanings of resurrection by saying this. It was clear to so many of Jesus followers, and it has been clear to so many who have lived a life of faith since, that the Spirit of Jesus, also known as the Spirit of the Living Christ has continued to be present to them and to us. I would suggest that this good news is not primarily about the spirit of Jesus living in the individual, but that, even more so, the Spirit of the Living Christ lives in the midst of our relationships and in our communities. That spirit brings about the reality of the Realm of God.

When we look at the words Jesus borrows from Isaiah to announce the thrust of his ministry, we cannot avoid the conclusion that he expects the entire fabric of community to be changed by this message. He brings good news to the poor. That can only mean some kind of redistribution of whatever it is that the poor lack, not necessarily in terms of material goods, but in terms of the relationships between people associated either with the group known as the “haves” or the group known as the “have-nots”. When Jesus proclaims release to the prisoners, he is referring both to that which imprisons us and to those whom we imprison. Again it shakes up the social order that designates some people as deserving reward and others as deserving punishment. When Jesus proclaims recovery of sight for the blind, he is referring to a broadening of vision that moves beyond narrow self-interest. When vision broadens, it is good for the health of the community, but that developing vision makes it more difficult for the few to enrich themselves at the expense of the many. And when he promises freedom for those who have been broken and oppressed, he is referring to freeing the oppressed and oppressors alike. The quality of relationship will necessarily be transformed among these groups as they participate in the Realm of God.

I want to make clear what the Good News is not. It is not simply that those who were without will now have. It is not simply that those who were at the bottom of the social or economic structure will suddenly be at the top. It is more like a fundamental shift in the nature of the community so that no longer will the social concepts of bottom or top have any real meaning. The Realm of God changes all the rules, and human beings, then and now (yes, including us), tend to dig in their heels and resist the change.

It is easy to see that those previously known as poor, blind, imprisoned, or oppressed have a great deal to gain from this change of the rules. It is also easy to see that the haves and the oppressors also stand to lose much, at least in material terms. But in both cases, the gains or the losses are not what people expect. And the changes promise blessings.

Let me illustrate what I mean by a story. “Time before time, when the world was young, two brothers shared a field and a mill. Each night they divided evenly the grain they had ground together during the day. Now as it happened, one of the brothers lived alone; the other had a wife and a large family. One day, the single brother thought to himself: “It isn’t really fair that we divide the grain evenly. I have only myself to care for, but my brother has children to feed.” So each night he secretly took some of his grain to his brother’s granary to see that he was never without.

But the married brother said to himself one day, “It isn’t really fair that we divide the grain evenly because I have children to provide for me in my old age, but my brother has no one. What will he do when he is old?” So every night he secretly took some of *his* grain to his brother’s granary. As a result, both of them always found their supply of grain mysteriously replenished each morning.

Then one night the brothers met each other halfway between their two houses. They suddenly realized what had been happening, and they embraced each other in love. The story is told that God witnessed their meeting and proclaimed, “This is a holy place—a place of love—and here it is that my temple shall be built.” And so it was. The holy place, where God is made known, is

the place where human beings discover each other in love. (This ancient rabbinical story is found in a number of collections.)

It is easy for us to take in the meaning of the story, but then to look at our economic and social structures and conclude that there is nothing we can do to live out the rule of love according to the guidance of the Realm of God. Quite frankly, that was the reaction of the powerful people who heard the “Good News” from Jesus. It scandalized them and they reacted with brutality. That is because, on the surface, the news does not look so good. So how can we take this teaching seriously?

First of all, this is not a plea for some form of socialism. All “isms”, by definition, end up being imposed on others, so such ideas naturally run into great resistance. Furthermore, economic systems can only attempt to deal with fairness and justice in the most superficial of ways. The two brothers in the story are not motivated by a belief in a particular political platform. They are motivated by love. And by love I mean their most profound interest in the well-being of the other. So the good news to the poor is not that they will have more in their bank accounts. The good news is that love – that is, a profound caring for the well being of others – is the guiding light throughout the Realm of God. By the way, such news is also good for the rich. In the Realm of God, people do not have to amass great wealth to convince themselves that they matter or even as a guarantee that they will be taken care of. In the Realm of God, people look out for one another.

So, what’s so good about the good news?” you ask. It is this. This expression of divine love and its call for us to love one another transforms everything.