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Good Works  
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### Three Questions

Then Jesus, filled with the power of the Spirit, returned to Galilee, and a report about him spread through all the surrounding country. He began to teach in their synagogues and was praised by everyone. When he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, he went to the synagogue on the Sabbath day, as was his custom. He stood to read, and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written:

“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.”

And he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down. The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. Then he began to say to them, “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.”

Luke 4:14-21

#### *What is the Gospel?*

In his first public teaching recorded by Luke, Jesus says, “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor” (Luke 4:18). As a community that desires to follow Jesus, we must ask: What is the good news that Jesus is anointed to bring? Two other questions follow: Who are “the poor” that Jesus is referring to? And how did Jesus bring the Good News? I hope that through wrestling with these questions, we can better understand what it means for the Church of today to be faithful to Jesus. This is not an academic exercise. Rather, we are seeking to be true witnesses to Jesus Christ in our current context.

I believe that a tangible grasp of the Good News is our starting place. Knowing what the Gospel is will help us see who Jesus was bringing it to and how he did so. After Jesus spoke the words from Isaiah 61, he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, sat down and said, “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.” The Gospel is woven into a long story that is fulfilled by Jesus, who embodies the Good News. In telling this story, I will attempt to use

words that could be both spoken and understandable to someone who is not familiar with religious language.

The story begins with God, who lived before anything else. God was one person, but also three separate people. These different persons of God, named Father, Son and Spirit, were deep friends, constantly loving and submitting to each other. Out of their holy love, God created the abundance we know as life on earth. God formed a man and woman with the imprints of their creator deep inside them. Their names were Adam and Eve. God loved them, and invited them into God's friendship and the goodness of creation. God wanted them to be free, having the opportunity to trust God and choose a relationship with God. But Adam and Eve chose not to trust God, breaking their relationship. Their trust for God turned into fear. The man and woman began to blame and dominate each other, and act violently toward creation.

Even so, God reached out to these rebellious ones by calling certain descendents of theirs to know and love God. God gave these leaders children, and formed a relationship with this people. They were called the tribes of Israel. God gave the people just laws to follow and promised to bring goodness into not only their own lives, but the whole world if Israel followed God's ways of justice. Sometimes Israel was faithful in following God, but usually they rejected God's loving commands. Israel suffered for her disobedience, and God was merciful again and again. God gave the Israelites hope that at some point, God would send a special messenger to fulfill the people's yearnings for life that was not full of pain and oppression.

This is the point where we see Jesus in his home-town Jewish synagogue. He sits down after reading about the messenger who brings ultimate goodness and justice and says, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." God came through for the people of Israel in a very unexpected way. In willing submission to Father and Spirit, the person of God who was the

“Son” actually came to earth. Jesus was, believe it or not, all the way God and all the way human. Jesus came to restore people’s friendship with God in a new way because the system of laws was limited and flawed. God wanted to make his love for people able-to-be-touched and in doing so, extended his mercy to all people, beyond Israel.

Jesus came in vulnerability to fully experience human suffering, and to show us a new way of life. Jesus’ way of living was humble and peaceful. He confronted unjust religious, political, social and economic systems through his willingness to sacrifice in both life and death. Jesus gave his life with complete love and in doing this, disarmed all evil powers forever. Inside this far-reaching rescue of Jesus is his intimate saving of each of us. Following in the steps of Adam and Eve, we have all rejected God, doing evil against ourselves, others and the earth. Jesus sees our wrongness and brokenness and if we allow him to, forgives us and gives a new life. I see him saving us from pain, death and our own sin through his birth, life, teachings, suffering, death, resurrection, rising to heaven and sending us his Spirit to be with us. Jesus’ saving power flows into all aspects of life: our minds, hearts, and bodies, our families and communities, and the structures that affect us.

We are called to accept and actively respond to God’s mercy on our lives by following the way that Jesus lived. As disciples, we are invited to love and worship God with our total beings, love each other as Jesus has loved us, love people who are poor and forgotten, and love and forgive our enemies. Naturally, we will want more than anything to invite others into the new way of life Jesus has shown us. We do all this together with other people who are also following God, called the Church. God’s mercy helps us to live like this, so different than the world. We experience glimpses of the love Jesus showed us, but the world is still a broken place. Our deepest hope is that God is, even now, making a new heaven and new earth where God’s

reign of peace and wholeness flow in fullness forever. We believe this is coming soon! If we choose not to respond to God's love, we will be separated from all that is good for eternity.

*Who are the poor?*

Our second question focuses on the identity of "the poor" that Jesus says he is anointed to bring good news to. This is relevant to us because as the Church, we are Jesus' body and are commissioned to continue bringing the Good News through our very presence. I believe that God is intimately concerned with each person God created. Because certain people are weaker and more vulnerable than others, God's care for them stretches farther. To give an illustration: A father has two daughters, one who is strong and the other who has a broken arm. The father loves both equally, but he must show particular concern for the child who is hurt for her to be fully loved. The Catholic church has called this God's "preferential option for the poor".

While many prefer to spiritualize the term "the poor", I believe that Luke's writing actually refers to people who struggle with poverty in a physical sense. People who are poor lack access to basic resources for life such as food, shelter, clothing and safety. Others that Jesus refers to in this passage are people described as captives, blind, and oppressed. Isaiah 61 that Jesus quotes in Luke 4 also includes those who are broken hearted and mourning. To translate these words into our contemporary understanding, I would use the following parallels: the poor (economic need), the blind (physical disability or illness), the captive (being enslaved or bound by something or someone), the oppressed (subjugation or degradation), the broken-hearted (those in a difficult emotional state), the mourning (those experiencing great personal loss). Scripture also repeatedly refers to the orphan (at-risk child), widow (person without sustaining relationships) and stranger (someone who is homeless, undocumented or otherwise disintegrated from society). These groups of people are those God is calling the Church to bring good news to.

Notice here how God's concern is particular; God names and includes people who are experiencing specific troubles. I believe this is significant. While there are times when every person experiences such hardship, some are living in the reality of this in a much more severe or compounded way. The fact that all of us are weak in one manner or another should not dilute the call to bring good news to people who face these particular circumstances.

I must also make the question "who are the poor" specific to my life. From my experience, the poor are more than 10 percent of the world's population that are malnourished. They are the rice farmers in Northeast Thailand whose survival depends on each harvest. The poor are women reduced to selling their bodies to live, who then live with HIV and die of AIDS and shame. But the poor are also my neighbors here in rural Ohio. Jesus is specifically concerned about those here who have enough to eat but wrestle constantly for decent housing, adequate transportation, medical care, healthy food, meaningful work and a supportive community.

As I seek genuine relationships with people struggling with poverty and oppression, the poor are not far away for me to observe and categorize. "The poor" are people with faces and names, history and stories. "The poor" are friends! They are us, among us. A few years ago, I remember being shocked at scriptures that commanded me to share my food with the hungry. How could I do this? It seemed harsh and impossible. But then, I got to know people who had friends who were struggling with poverty. Ron, the crazy pastor-to-be who loved his neighbors introduced me to many delightful people who were in some way poor, including all the "drunks" in his neighborhood. As I hung out with Ron and his church buddies, I got to know Sam, who lived in the half-renovated community center we worked in. All of us shared freshly-picked veggies in the dingy kitchen that consisted of a propane burner. Suddenly Jesus' "commands" seemed natural, and almost silly. Of course we should share our food with people who are

hungry! We must seek to embrace the new reality of God's kingdom wholly rather than dissecting the scriptures to find out what our minimum contribution should be. So, who are the poor? Go and meet them. Then you will know!

*How do we bring it?*

On the most foundational level, I believe that we bring the good news of Jesus in the way that Jesus brought it to us. Jesus humbled himself and lived with the people he was seeking to lead. In the same way, I believe the most compelling witness to Christ is through our daily lives: what we do, how we speak, who our friends are, where we live, and what we aspire to. Jesus located himself within humanity as a vulnerable child with refugee parents, in the backward town of Nazareth, among a people whose land was occupied by their enemies. I see Jesus choosing to identify himself, bodily, with people who are suffering. Further, his response to violence was that of submission. He was not defeated through his humility but instead subversive, triumphant, glorified, resurrected! Through Jesus' weakness, the power and glory of God were revealed.

I believe that God has called me to live among people who are struggling with poverty as a way to bring the good news. I will admit that I don't really know what this will look like in my life. I am hesitant to generalize and say this is correct for all people in all times and places, but I do think it is one way to be a faithful witness to Jesus. I believe that people who are rich, powerful and in control need relationships with people who are poor, weak and vulnerable in order to recognize and receive the good news of Christ's reign.

In addition, I believe that Christian community is essential in bringing the good news. The Gospel means reconciliation between people who are separated from God and each other. So as we seek to bring the good news to others, we demonstrate it through loving, forgiving and

truthful relationships with each other. New followers are then invited into these God-honoring relationships. We call this moving, growing, loving group of people the Church.

Throughout history, the identity of the Church has formed around specific practices that nourish people with God's grace. People learning to know Jesus are able to receive the good news as explained, experienced and enjoyed in these ways. Confession and forgiveness, baptism, being filled with the Holy Spirit, celebrating the Eucharist, and healing are specific manners in which the Church recognizes God's saving and transforming presence. The Church brings the good news by practicing these habits that define its identity and then offering a context for people on the margins to be invited into this way of life. Like a channel, the habits allow the good news of God's grace to be given and received.

It is necessary, however, for the habits and lifestyle of the Church to be comprehensible to the people it seeks to invite in. The Church must learn to speak the "heart-language" of each culture that we enter. What does this mean for me, for us, here in Athens County? I am still only beginning to discover this. From my limited perspective, one manner in which the Church brings the good news to this place is through modeling and inviting people into healthy, respectful, family-like relationships. Amidst a culture where people respond to conflict with anger, silence, violence and bitterness, the church shows us how Jesus restores our relationships. The Good News becomes tangible when real people practice real habits of open communication, confession and forgiveness. In my every day life, this means that I must work hard at mending offenses with my community and those I seek to love. I must also accept opportunities for God to use me in enabling others to be reconciled, despite any sacrifice on my part. This is but one way the Church can embody and share good news to people who are poor here in Athens County. I am confident there are many others.