

Bring Good News to the Poor

Luke 4:14-21, James 2:14-17

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“Please, Mom, please, please, please, can I have a puppy? He’s sooo cute! I promise I will take good care of him. I will feed him and play with him every day, I will train him and clean up after him, and I will take him for walks. You won’t have to do a thing. I promise, I promise. Please, can I have a puppy?”

“Molly, that’s a big responsibility, even for someone your age. I don’t think you understand what you are promising, and I can’t do it all for you. If we get a puppy, you will really have to change how you spend your time in the morning and after school and in the evening. Are you really willing to do that every single day?”

“Yes, Mommy! I want him so much! Please can I take him home?”

So, they get the puppy, who is really cute. And Molly feeds him some mornings, when she remembers it, and she loves playing with him in the afternoons when she doesn’t have Scouts or soccer or a friend who wants to visit. But somehow all the other parts of puppy care – the house training, the walks, cleaning up after puppy messes – they fall off Molly’s To Do list, and Mom ends up with all the extra work. You knew it would happen, right? Mom knew it would happen before she agreed to bring the puppy home. It’s a classic!

It is so easy to theoretically accept responsibility for this new relationship in the household, and so hard to actually do the work day after day after day. We can be truly committed to the idea of this new responsibility and still feel shocked (shocked!) that it requires us to do something new and to do it every single day.

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Now, we have come back around to the Gospel of Luke this spring, and the story of Molly and her puppy is relevant here. So, let’s review briefly the difference between the Gospel of Luke and, say, the Gospel of John. These are actually my two favorite gospels, but they are very, very different from one another.

The Gospel of John presents this beautiful image of Jesus as the Word of God, who has existed from the Creation, who spoke worlds into being, who became flesh and camped among us, full of grace and truth. I love that! According to John, meeting Jesus provokes a choice in each of us. If we recognize him as God’s presence here on earth, we will naturally choose to walk in the light. We will be born again as children of God, and we will receive eternal life – not later, but right now. On the other hand, if we meet Jesus and don’t recognize God there, then we will walk in darkness. It is our choice, according to John, and eternal life depends entirely on something that happens inside us, in our mind or in our heart. Many of you were probably taught as a child that salvation comes when we accept the Lord Jesus Christ into our hearts. That is straight from the Gospel of John. So, in John, our response to Jesus is something that happens inside us, something that the people around us might not even see.

The Gospel of Luke, on the other hand, tells us over and over and over again that God is on the side of people who are downtrodden in this world, and we had better be on their side, too. It all begins with this passage that Cindi just read, Jesus’ first recorded sermon, the one that sets the tone for his whole ministry on earth. Jesus goes to the synagogue in Nazareth and is invited to preach from the scroll of Isaiah. He reads, “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, for 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 set free those who are oppressed, and to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." The Kingdom of God is here, Jesus is saying, and that means that God is putting a thumb on the scale in favor of those who need it most.

Interestingly, Jesus leaves out an important phrase from the text in Isaiah that he is reading. The original says, "to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor and the day of God's vengeance." But when Jesus reads it, there is no vengeance at all, only mercy, only release, only new sight. And if we are to be part of the in-breaking of the Kingdom of God on this earth, if we want to be on God's side, then according to Luke, we had better be about the business of helping people who are poor or hungry or oppressed.

Think of the story of the Good Samaritan. That's only in the Gospel of Luke. Jesus says we are to love our neighbors as ourselves, and the one who is a good neighbor to an injured man is not the one who remains ritually clean by walking on the other side of the road, but the one who actually gets down in the dirt and helps him – binds his wounds and takes him to a place where he can recover from his injuries, and the Samaritan does this at some cost to himself. According to Luke, being on God's side is not about what we believe, but about what we do. It is about meeting the desperate needs of desperate people. Or, as James says, "What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if someone claims to have faith but does not have works? Surely faith cannot save, can it? If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food, and one of you says, "Go in peace; keep warm and eat your fill," and yet you do not supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that? So, faith, by itself, if it has no works, is dead.

Now, people aren't puppies. Luke is about something much more serious, more sacred, than a commitment to feed and walk and care for a dog. But the story of Molly and her puppy is a reminder that we can't just be loving in theory. We have to show God's love in action, and we have to do it every single day. We can't just know in our hearts that those people over there need food, we have to feed them. We can't just be internally committed to building a nation with fair systems for those who work the hardest and have the least, we have to actually roll up our sleeves and get to work.

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Please, God, please, please, please can we have a world where people have enough to eat? A world where people can rebuild their lives, even after hurricanes and fires? A world where children are safe from violence? Please? We want that so much. It would be so beautiful! We'll take care of it. We promise! Can we have it? Please, please, please?

And God says, "That is a big responsibility, even for my children who are as loving as you are. You can't just want a world that looks like my kingdom. You have to build it with me. I can't do it all for you. You would really have to change how you spend your time and your money. Are you ready to do that, and do it every single day? That is a big commitment."

May God make us worthy of joining in God's work. May God keep us always committed to helping those who need us the most.

Amen