

Sermon for the Third Sunday After The Epiphany: Luke 4:14-21

The Rev. Brooks A. Cato

Growing up splitting my time between cattle fields, a vet clinic, and the big city streets of Harrison, Arkansas, I thought I was a pretty worldly kid. I understood being poor, because I was. But I also understood not being poor, to a degree, because life at my dad's place was something different. I knew how to hang with the kids that didn't have much. I was better at that, more comfortable. But I could also make it work with the kids that had a lot more. Thanks to living in a couple of worlds at different times, I knew how to move from one class to another and back again. As a kid, I thought I did this pretty seamlessly. But when I think back now, I recognize some signs that maybe I wasn't quite so good at it as I thought I was.

The rich kids noticed when I finally got the right shoes but it was a year too late -- and a year cheaper. The poor kids noticed when my mom remarried, and suddenly I didn't have jeans with the hems let out of the bottoms to gain another month or two of wear.

The rich kids noticed when I'd break open my lunchbox and brag about the deals on cinnamon bread we got at the Day Old Bread Store. I made a pair of errors on that one. First, thanks to my mother's southern pronunciation, I heard Day Old as Day-O, like the song, so it seemed like a fun place. I didn't know that we were buying discounted cast offs. And second, thanks to my mother's necessary frugality, I was raised to hunt for sales. I didn't know that bragging about sales was something people with a lot of money didn't need to do.

But the poor kids noticed when I joined a traveling soccer team, thinking that must've meant we had gobs of money. They knew that my teammates wore the same leather cleats the pros wore. They didn't know that I wore cheap, knock-off baseball shoes with the undesirable rubber toe cleat whittled down by a pocketknife.

And the rich kids noticed, on those out-of-town soccer trips, when there were options for hotels, we wouldn't always stay where the team stayed. Sometimes we'd stay just across the street, where a big neon sign with prices and vacancies advertised just how different we were. They also noticed when our hotel room got broken into, and all but my game jersey got stolen. I had to borrow shorts and socks, and my mom was devastated when another well-meaning parent asked, "why don't you just go buy some clothes to get you through the day?" It was never that simple.

And it's still not. Thanks be to God, I don't rely on "Day-O" bread stores these days, and if I need a new pair of shoes, I don't have to worry about the paycheck-to-paycheck math. Now, I still love a good sale, and I will brag to high heaven if I find a real good deal. The difference is, these days, I don't depend on real good deals. I don't tell you these things to make you feel bad for me or to make you feel better for me now. I tell you these things, because we need the reminder. We need the reminder that not all inequalities make the news. The reminder that inequalities stick with us, and we carry their weight, even if we've gotten out from under them.

Lately, inequalities we usually don't see -- or if we do see 'em, we don't talk about 'em-- lately, inequalities have been showing their hands. While government workers lamented going without pay, members of that same government suggested haggling with cashiers at the grocery store or taking out loans to pay for those groceries. Some even chastised workers for going to food banks, since food banks are for people with "real need." Now, I'm gonna be generous here and imagine that those making the unhelpful suggestions were actually trying to be helpful. Maybe they just live in a world so different from the rest of us, that they assume this is how things work because this is how things work for them. But my more cynical side suspects such generosity is undeserved. The whole last week has had a few too many echoes of "let them eat cake."

But it doesn't stop there. Seems like everyday we're seeing inequalities in regards to race, gender, geographic location, level of education, political party, to name a handful. There are too many to list here, and as someone who hopes to stand in the middle, that is a hard and painful thing. Because, as much as I hate to admit it, the middle isn't always the right place to be. See, we Anglicans like the Middle Way. It's in our DNA, going all the way back to Elizabeth I knitting England's Protestants and Catholics back together. We value keeping the Body together and making space for everyone.

But there's a problem, and it's a problem of inequality. See, bodies like to be comfortable. And bodies also have a hard time overcoming momentum. It's easier to stay in a warm bed on a chilly morning than it is to get up. We get cozy in the status quo, especially when the status quo favors us. And some get so cozy in that status quo, that they can't even see how destructive it can be: bed sores, atrophied muscles, not to mention soiled sheets and foul breath. It's a body broken by its own unwillingness to change.

And this is where the Middle Way can get twisted. Momentum and history have shaped the status quo to be what it is today. And if we only commit to occupying that middle, then we shift with the wiles of the world. "Middle" today is defined by extremes leaning one way or another. You see, I think we've lost sight of where the true middle actually is.

Standing in the middle of the synagogue, Jesus says, "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." It's not just that Jesus brings good news and drops it there. He doesn't proclaim release without following through. He doesn't free the oppressed in word alone. He is the fulfillment of good news, the fulfillment of freedom, the fulfillment of God's favor. And that's the "Middle" of our Middle Way. Society pulls one or many directions, far from what God has made for us, and through Jesus, we pull against the extremes of society. Being in the Middle isn't about everybody getting along. Being in the Middle is about everybody getting Jesus.

Look, the rich have what they need, and mostly have what they want. Giving them more isn't "Middle", it's injustice. Same could be said about any of those inequalities we've been seeing. Fellas, I'm sorry to say, the way things are, we are not bringing a lot of good news to women. White folks, the way things are, we are not bringing a lot of good news to people of color. Straight, cisgendered folks, we are not bringing a lot of good news to those we've held captive in the closet. And yes, Christians, we are not bringing a lot of good news to people outside of our cozy places.

Truth is, uncomfortable as it makes us, Jesus picks sides. Where there is inequality, Jesus positions himself with those that are underfoot. And these days, Paul says, we are Christ's hands, Christ's feet, Christ's eyes, Christ's Body. It oughta be pretty clear where our Middle should be. But here's where it gets complicated again, and maybe where we more privileged folk need to lend our ears.

Paul says, "The members of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, and those members of the body that we think less honorable we clothe with greater honor, and our less respectable members are treated with greater respect; whereas our more respectable members do not need this. But God has so arranged the body, giving the greater honor to the inferior member, that there may be no dissension within the body, but the members may have the same care for one another."

The Middle that Jesus fulfilled and Paul described isn't a Middle where everyone gets the same respect or honor. It's only the Middle because there's a leveling in Christ. And it is only in a leveled, truly Middle-d Body that we find no dissension.

Can you imagine *that* middle? There wouldn't be more Day Old Bread Stores so poor folks could have better access to cheap food, there would be none because the need would be erased.

There wouldn't be fewer racially motivated attacks, there would be none because this entire Body would see all races as God-given, God-blessed, and God-loved.

There wouldn't be fewer suicides in the trans community -- or murders of trans people -- there would be none because we would all know that they are created in God's image and treated as such.

When Jesus finished speaking to the people in the synagogue, he rolled up the scroll and sat down. He'd just said the world is going to be turned upside down through him and then dropped the Biblical mic. "Today," he said, "Today, this scripture has been fulfilled." I wish I could say the same, that Christ's Body today has achieved that Middle. But it hasn't. We haven't. So we still have work to do. And what Jesus reads in the synagogue, that's our to-do list. That's our Middle.

Proclaim the year of God's favor. That's Jubilee, the year when all debts are forgiven. Can you imagine? Let the oppressed go free. Can you imagine? Give sight to the blind. Release to the captives. Good news to the poor. Can you imagine?

That's the work of the Body of Christ. "And you are the Body of Christ and individually members of it. ... Now strive for these greater gifts" so that one day we can sit down and say, "Today, this scripture has been fulfilled." But today? This day? We are not there. So today, this day, we strive.