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1 Corinthians 12:4-20

Luke 4:14-21

## A GENEROUS SPIRIT

I'm ready to do something a little audacious today and if you are willing, I invite you to join me in the exercise. It has to do with evaluating God, not in everything God has done and is doing, but just in the area of carrying out ministry in our world. It would be rather brazen to give God a letter grade in the related areas of competency, as if we are the instructors and God is the student. However, we can talk about how well we think God is doing, with the hope that divine patience doesn't run short.

First of all, let's look at the vision for the ministry God has chosen. In the Gospel of Luke, we hear it stated by Jesus in five phrases in his home synagogue as he reads from Isaiah: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor." (There are plenty of people poor or outcast who not only need to hear good news, but who need to have it brought to them.) Jesus continues: "He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives;" (there are exiles and refugees, those who are in prison, as well as those in abusive relationships or who are caught in addiction or captivated in sinfulness, like we are.) "He has sent me to proclaim recovery of sight to the blind;" (Truly a vision statement, there are more than just those who could use the services of an optometrist, among them many who are unable to see that God's proposed way of living with love and grace is such a good way to live. There are the visually impaired who see some people as nothing more than objects. Others close their eyes to the truth staring them in the face.) Another phrase: "He has sent me to let the oppressed go free;" (Many are oppressed politically or economically or by social bias; God's good intent seems to be for us all to live free.) And the last phrase: "He has sent me to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." (That's not the Lord's curse or wrath that some want to proclaim. The Lord's favor, goodness, generosity – the essence of good news is to be proclaimed in word and deed).

That is quite a large agenda. God certainly is big enough for such a job and in the person of Jesus, the divine work was undertaken in amazing, awe-inspiring ways. The strategy for accomplishing that mission in the person of Jesus – that was excellent as well. He really transformed the lives of those with whom he came in touch. He found brokenness and made it whole. He found systems in which rigor mortis had set in and he showed the way to new life. He reflected heavenly love and justice in all that he said and did.

But then his physical presence with us came to an end. And this is where God's methodology seems to be lacking. For when Jesus ascended into heaven, the divine strategy morphed into working through what is called the body of Christ. That may sound good on paper, but the body is made up of followers of Jesus who frankly don't have his same deep relationship with God, who don't have the same level of commitment or powers or insights that he did. So what I'm questioning is not the focus of the mission in a 7.7 billion-person world of need. I'm challenging the strategy of the partners through whom God is now working to carry out the mission. Because those partners are, well, just people like you and me.

We're pretty good folks, and in this congregation we've got great ruling elders and deacons as leaders, but I think the ocean of need into which God has been leading us is definitely over our heads. When we ordain and install our congregational officers, one of our Presbyterian ordination questions: "Will you in your own life seek to follow the Lord Jesus Christ, love your neighbors, and work for the reconciliation of the world?" O.K., on my to-do list: an oil change for the car – check; a run by the grocery store – check; and working for the reconciliation of the world - checkmate. We are lacking the capacity to carry out the expansive ministry to which God calls us. The mission that Jesus had and that continues for us today is not easy as one, two, three, in part because we are not the Trinity. Perhaps we could say that God's plan takes such limitations into consideration, with the Holy Spirit being given to buoy us. That is supposed to happen by the Spirit unifying us and enabling us to be engaged in the ministry through a variety of gifts, as we heard in our reading from First Corinthians. None of us has to do all of what Jesus could do. We simply are called to make use of the talents and abilities God places within each one of us. God gathers us as a diverse group on purpose, so that there will be a

variety of gifts in different ones of us to be used for the common good. However, we're not very good at that 'common good' thing. In part, it is because we haven't fully bought into the vision Jesus articulates.

The idea of bringing good news to the poor would be fine if we could deliver it and go back to our separate lives, but it doesn't work that way. To proclaim release to the captives sounds good, but those who think they benefit from the current system don't appreciate our liberation efforts. Recovery of sight for the blind is visionary, but in the process of bringing light to others, we might recognize our own visual impairment including some things we're not really wanting to see very clearly. Letting the oppressed go free might result in our having to continue to deal with those who bear wounds and scars from their oppression. Proclaiming God's favor in the face of what all is going on in the world is going to be demanding. We'd just as soon simply focus on divine favor for ourselves.

We also have to admit that even though the needs are urgent, we get bogged down on trivial matters. We don't always respect the gifts others have been given. We don't have confidence in our own gifts. There are jealousies that can drive us apart. Our lack of coordination trips us up. If God were wise – wait, let me be careful here - a wise strategy needs to take into consideration the weaknesses of one's partners. And when the going gets tough, we would just as soon simply stand back and watch God do it all without us. We'd be glad to cheer as spectators. I'm quite confident that God could do it all much better than depending on working through us. Would you agree with me about that?

But for some reason, in spite of all the problems, God has chosen to work through people like us. I guess a spirit can't actually be called hard-headed – maybe God is just deeply committed to such a model of ministry. Evidently, God wants to take things to the next level. We sense God's loving presence now and then, but God desires for us to embody divine love. We have experienced heavenly grace, but God wants us to become a means of grace. We have been touched so often by God's generosity that we ought to be able to bear witness to it. This heavenly method that uses human partners seems to be part of the mission – transforming others, but also transforming us in the process.

I'm still not sure this is the best plan, but since God seems so committed to it, what we're going to need is a generous dose of the Holy Spirit to empower and unify us as the body of Christ. We're going to need boldness and commitment. We're going to need God to help us focus less on our reservations and more on our prayers. If we might be so bold, we might suggest all of that as God's to-do list. Somehow, I can imagine God going over such a to-do list – check, check, check, checkmate. That doesn't mean we lose. Somehow, God's win is our win is the world's win – somehow by God's generous Spirit.