

So, first a story:

There once lived a wise woman, and it was clear to all who knew her that God spoke to her, and she spoke to God. But, she was a concern, and if the entire truth be told, a thorn in the side of the local bishop, who liked to think of himself as God's emissary and was jealous of the wise woman's power.

So, out of envy, the bishop tried to think of ways to reduce the wise woman's influence until the day finally came when he believed that he had discovered how to do this. He came to her and said, "Wise woman, I have heard that God speaks to you and you speak to God. I want you to prove it by asking God to reveal to you my innermost sins" — for being a bishop, he had many.

Without hesitation, the wise woman agreed that she would help the bishop with his request, since she did indeed speak to God, and God did indeed speak to her. So, on a day agreed upon for the wise woman to carry back God's response, the bishop returned to hear it. He asked the wise woman whether she had petitioned God for the names of his innermost sins. She replied that she had, and so the bishop asked her the further question, "And what did God say?"

Her answer was immediate. "God said, 'The bishops innermost sins? I'm sorry. Tell the bishop I forgot.'"

Drama is not always a strong part of the Gospel stories; but it is hard to miss it in this week's reading. Luke is telling the story of Jesus' return to his hometown with careful attention to detail.

He came to Nazareth. He went to the synagogue. He stood up to read. He unrolled the scroll. He found the place where it was written:

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because God has anointed me to preach good news to the poor, and has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovering of sight to those who are blind, to set a liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord.

The ordinary day in the synagogue becomes a very extraordinary day when Jesus comes to town. Ordinary synagogue worship practices included the following elements: 1. Reciting of the Shema (readings from Deuteronomy and Numbers); 2. Praying while facing Jerusalem; 3. The “amen” response from the gathered congregation; 4. Reading from sections of the scrolls of the Torah and of the Prophets; 5. A sermon; 6. Benediction. Any male could volunteer or be asked to pray or read the portions from the Torah or the Prophets. Likewise, any male could also be asked to give the sermon.

Some scholars say that what Jesus read was NOT the prescribed reading for the day—that it was not a coincidence. (Unlike our translation that says he was given the book of the prophet Isaiah) Perhaps he knew the passage and searched for it. Steeped in the scriptures, maybe he was aware that this prophecy of Isaiah spoke both to the heart of his tradition and to the longed for hope of his people: that a day would finally come when everything would be put right again for every one.

The Jewish people at the time of Jesus spoke Aramaic, so an explanation of sorts had to follow the reading of the Hebrew Scripture; it's kind of like our practice today of following Scripture

with a sermon. It seems that Jesus' sermon couldn't be much briefer; perhaps you yearn for that on some Sundays! It was just one line, "*Today, this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.*" But the text says, "*Then he began to say to them.*" So perhaps that line was only the beginning of the sermon, and we miss the rest. Makes you wonder about where he went with his message.

From the very beginning of Israel's creation was the profoundly human insight, that, things being as they are in the world, mistakes are made, crimes committed, debts incurred, things lost and people displaced until the unbearable finally comes to pass: that unjust balance of debts and assets between rich and poor, injured and innocent, powerful and weak out of which hatred brews and violence holds sway.

So, the concept of Jubilee was Israel's answer to that. Every 50th year, you shall stop the vicious cycle. You shall let the land lie fallow. You shall practice sabbath. You shall forgive debts. You shall free captives and proclaim liberty. You shall find out what belongs to whom and give it back. Things restored—wrongs righted. Forgiveness let back in.

Thing is, Israel never managed to honor that vision very well down through the centuries. Alternating crops was one thing—but forgiving debts, forgetting sins, letting prisoners and the oppressed go free?? This never became a regular religious practice. So the cycle we know so well continued. The imbalance kept growing until people like Isaiah began to protest: a day is surely coming when everything will be available and everyone will have everything he, she, or them needs.

Fast forward to today. Over a hundred million Americans, 1 in 3, struggles with the weight of medical debt. The United Church of

Christ has been partnering with an organization known as RIP Medical Debt to help alleviate that.

This organization uses data analytics to pinpoint the medical debt of those most in need of relief: households whose incomes are less than two times the federal poverty level guideline or with medical debt that represents at least 5% of gross income.

With donations to them, they buy debt in bundled portfolios, millions of dollars at a time at a fraction of the original cost. On average, whatever is donated has 100X the impact.

And the recipients receive a letter stating that their debt is gone, no taxes, no penalties. I think RIP is a reliable group, it recently received a 100/100 score from Charity Navigator.

In our denomination's latest buy, 20 churches of the Missouri Mid-South Conference have abolished \$3.9 million (to be specific \$3,911,172.62) in medical debt for families in Arkansas and Tennessee. Contributions totaling \$30,000 came from 19 Missouri congregations, one in Tennessee, and a national UCC ministry, United Church Funds.

I happened to run across an article about this written on January 10th of this year. It talked about a news conference which gathered clergy, a Tennessee senator, and participating reporters via Zoom.

Rev. Mary Nelson is the transitional Conference minister for Mid-South. She says: "This is a campaign for liberation. Medical debt is one of the significant factors contributing to ongoing poverty. Liberating families from medical debt brings them out from under the weight of guilt and shame, but also from under the weight of a credit report that keeps them from accessing better housing, or from under the weight of the multiple jobs they are working in order to pay off their debt."

I think the UCC debt buys now top \$75 million. Sounds like a modern day version of Jubilee, doesn't it??

Those old notions of who is in and who is out, who has it coming to them and who does not do not die easily. Jesus turned his people's tradition against them when he says, "Today...in your hearing." Because he means that, if you get it, there is no longer any reason to wait. No more excuses. No more exclusions. Everybody is in. No one is out. Today those changes for the poor and the wronged and the oppressed will occur if you are able to hear it.

The good news of Jubilee is meant for all, not just for some. And that is probably why the townspeople of Nazareth react so badly to this son of Joseph, and they become so incensed that they hustle him out of town and to the edge of a cliff. (And that is found in lectionary read for next week, Luke 4:21-30).

Carol Lakey Hess suggests that our Gospel story today provides us a kind of "plumb line of Jesus' teaching" that we might use as a measurement of our faithfulness. The Spirit of the Lord is upon us, too, and we too are anointed to bring good news to the world that God loves so well. Might even involve forgetting some sins and forgiving some debts.

Today...in your hearing.