

**IT IS GOOD: Jesus' First Sermon**  
Luke 4:14-21

Kelly Boyte Brill  
Avon Lake UCC  
23 January 2022

She has a constant tape playing in her head, a cash register tape, to be precise. She starts each day with a reminder of how much money she has. \$17.50. One trip to the convenience store for something to eat, and the number is down to \$13.20. When her young daughter sees a small toy she just has to have, and the mother in her can't bear to tell this little girl "no", she's down to \$8.10. She never stops thinking about it. She thinks about it as she swings her daughter at the playground, as she drives to work, dreading to look at the gas gauge. When she loses a day's work cleaning houses because her daughter's sick, it leaves her completely broke, and they spend one night in the transit station. This is what it's like to be poor, and it's depicted in everyday gritty detail in the Netflix mini-series called "Maid," based on the memoir of the same name by Stephanie Land. Being poor means being afraid. Being poor means spending all day trying to negotiate a variety of social service programs, each of them with a long list of prerequisites and requirements, some of which contradict each other.

"Maid" is the most realistic view of poverty I've ever seen depicted; I highly recommend it. It caused me to look closely at these two lives - mother and daughter. They do not deserve to live such difficult, precarious lives. Stephanie, the mother, is not perfect; she makes some bad decisions...but who hasn't? Mostly she is a loving mother, a hard worker, someone desperate to create a better future for her child.

When I studied the words of Jesus' first sermon this past week, I kept thinking of Stephanie. Jesus came to bring good news to people like her, people like her daughter.

Jesus came to bring good news to people who are left out, left behind, overlooked. People who just can't catch a break. People with no other safety net.

Jesus is 30 years old when he stands up in his hometown synagogue that Saturday. It's a small town, everyone knows him. He's barely left town in 30 years. Probably no one except his parents remember what happened when he was 12. They traveled to Jerusalem, part of a large group. On the way home, they thought he was lost, but they found him back in the temple, asking questions of the rabbis. Mary and Joseph remember that, but why would anyone else? That was 18 years ago. Maybe people have observed, from time to time — that Jesus likes to spend time by himself, doesn't he? Is that him, wandering around in the hills again? Maybe they noticed him being particularly kind, especially to children and to the elders.

But no one knows what his inner life has been like, not even his parents. He seeks out John and asks to be baptized. He spends 40 days in the wilderness, battling demons, learning who he is and what he's made of, and listening to God's call on his life.

A few of the people in town have heard that he's been traveling recently, visiting other synagogues in the region. Some are probably curious, but some are skeptical. Do you know what it's like when you hear good news about someone else? Or about someone else's child? There's a part of you that is happy for them, but if you're honest, there's also a part of you that thinks, "Who does he think he is? What makes him think he's good enough to become a traveling rabbi? He's just Joseph's kid."

Jesus stands up, unrolls the scroll, and reads from the prophet Isaiah, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me. He has sent me to preach good news to the poor, to proclaim release to the prisoners and recovery of sight to the blind, to liberate the oppressed, and to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." He rolls up the scroll

and sits down. Everyone in the room continues to look at him. He explains to them, “Today this scripture has been fulfilled just as you heard it.”

The time for good news has come. The time for good news is here and now, in this place. Because we who bear the name of Jesus also share his calling. All of the Stephanies of this country, and all of their children have been left out, left behind, overlooked. In other parts of the world, it’s far worse. According to Unicef, the degree of suffering in Afghanistan is nearly unprecedented, and children are especially vulnerable. They lack food, water, warm shelter, health care, education, and they have been traumatized. I’m so grateful that this congregation has received an Afghan family and that so many of us have had the opportunity to meet them and help them settle here successfully.

The time for good news has come. Let us use whatever platform we have, whatever sphere of influence, and proclaim, with the confidence of Jesus that day in Nazareth, “We will no longer live this way. We will no longer accept a world of violence, famine, prejudice and devastation to God’s beloved planet and all its creatures. As long as we have life and breath, we will pay attention and do what we can to be part of the solution.”

All of us who are worshiping together - whether in this room or in our own homes - have our basic needs met. We have food, water, and shelter. Because we are worshiping together, we also have a sense of community. Beyond those basic needs, what humans most need is not happiness or entertainment or pleasure. Our deepest desire is for meaning, a sense that our lives are counting for something...and Jesus has good news for us.

Jesus' first sermon lays out his agenda for his ministry, and describes the purpose of the church. In his steps and in his name, we are now called upon to bring good news to the poor. We now are called upon to proclaim release to the captives - and think for a moment about that word captive, and about how many people you know who are held in some kind of prison. How can we help free those who are held captive to depression, anxiety, fearfulness, loneliness? How can we help free those who are held captive to consumerism, the belief that just one more shopping trip, one new car, one vacation will make them truly happy? How can we help free those who are held captive to addictions? We now are called upon to bring recovery of sight to the blind and to let the oppressed go free. The time for good news has come.

The beauty of Jesus' sermon is that it's good news for everyone. When we are bringing good news to the poor, we find that our own lives become more meaningful. We experience a depth of joy we could never find any other way.

One of our members last week took several of our Afghan friends shopping. They went for the first time to a market in Cleveland that stocks food from Afghanistan. It had been a long time since the family members had seen food they recognized and loved from home, and it was a thrill for them. They prepared a meal for four of our church members and were so happy to be able to share their own hospitality. Eddie DiFiore and his three children delivered a remote controlled car to the family. Turns out children don't have to speak the same language to enjoy playing with each other. Katie Schulz brought a teacher-sized tub full of educational materials over, Marlene Calabrese donated a U.S. map puzzle, and everyone was on the floor putting it together. Our members have been showing up with food and driving the family shopping. Every day is one more delightful story of international friendship and barriers tumbling down. It's all good news! We are

making a difference for good - is there any other way for us to spend our time, our money, our lives?

Good news to the poor is good news for all of us, because we're all connected. We are called to celebrate each other's successes. When one rises, we all rise. It's how God created this good world to be.

We don't have to wander around the self-help book aisle at Barnes and Noble, hoping to find the one volume that will lead us towards peace of mind. We don't have to listen to podcast after podcast hoping to hear the voice of a guru who has all the answers, who can help us make sense of this strange time in which we live. We can free ourselves from the burden of thinking that a lifestyle change will somehow trigger a whole new life. It's already been done for us and given to us - an agenda for a meaningful life.

When you leave here today, notice the people who seem unnoticed. Love the people who are unloved. Lift up the people whose spirits have been stomped on. Pay attention to the needs that present themselves to you and respond with wholehearted generosity. It's the way Jesus lived. He didn't just preach it; he practiced it. It led him towards God and it led him towards joy. The gospels portray our teacher Jesus as a person who loved a good party, a person to whom other people were attracted, a person whose very presence sparked joy.

There are so many stereotypes out in the world about what the Christian life is like. "Christians are judgmental," some people say, and that image persists for good and sad reasons. "Christians don't have fun," other people say; they think the Christian life is all about what you can't or shouldn't do.

Friends, the time has come for us to tell a different story. To people who are rejecting the church of their childhood, or to those who **have been** rejected, let's tell the

good news of a church where truly all people are welcome, regardless of skin color, political party, gender identity, sexual preference, regardless of age or income or education. To people who find the world today to be a hopeless place, let's tell the good news of a church that is making a difference, one person, one family, one act of kindness at a time. To people who believe they wouldn't belong here because of the mistakes they've made in the past, to people who don't know the Old Testament from the New, to people who are far from ready to claim any faith as their own, let's tell the good news of a church that welcomes people wherever they are on their journey. Let's tell of a God who overflows with grace and unconditional love, a God who forgives even before we ask.

I know you know someone who doesn't believe there could be news this good. Perhaps that person is you.

Let us pray. Thank you for the good news, embodied in Jesus - that your love is unconditional, your grace is amazing, your forgiveness is a gift. may we embrace it, live it, and share it. Amen.