

Rev. Karen Graham – Church of the Redeemer  
January 24, 2010  
Nehemiah 8: 1-10; I Corinthians 12: 12-31a; Luke 4: 14-21

“Isn’t it strange?”, The Rev. Beth Lyon asks her congregation. “Week after week all over this nation, preacher climbs into pulpits and take out their notes, say a prayer, take a deep breath and preach. Each one of us is supposed to be bringing a word from the Lord. But nobody gets tense or worried. Nobody tries to throw us out or hush us up. Instead, we calmly settle in, read the announcements in the bulletin, yawn, and maybe take a peek at our watches. We’re expecting a sermon, but are we expecting a word from the Lord?” (Lectionary Homiletics, Vol. XXI, Number 1, p. 70).

I’ll admit that there are weeks when I don’t know what else to say. I look back over recent sermons, and all the big stuff has been talked about. For example, just this month, I shared my dreams with you on the first Sunday, my wishes on the Epiphany Star for community, for generosity, and for our light to shine. The next Sunday I reminded us that we are Baptized, Blessed, and Beloved. Last Sunday we celebrated Confirmation, and I spoke to you about God taking delight in us, and as those who have been gifted by the Holy Spirit we are to use our gifts in the church for the common good. So our life together as a church has been explored this whole month from a variety of angles, and we have turned to each week’s Scripture lessons for illumination and inspiration. Community. Mission. Stewardship. Participation. Evangelism. Holy Communion. Baptism. Confirmation. We’ve covered them all.

Has any of it been heard, however, as a word from the Lord? Has any of it mattered from week to week – in how we have lived, in what we’ve done, in how we’ve carried out our purpose, in who we’ve reached?

So, listen up now, because this is all I am going to say today:

“When he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, he went to the synagogue on the Sabbath day, as was his custom. He stood up to read, and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written: ‘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’. And he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down. The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. Then he began to say to them, ‘Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing’”.

This is what Jesus is all about. And so therefore this is what we also are to be all about. We can have our church discussions about all kinds of things. We can complain about how things are done or not done. We can worry about this, and we can get frustrated about that. We can turn out numbers and our financial totals in again for another year and be told yet again how we’ve fallen short. Okay. We can make sure we’ve followed the United Methodist Book of Discipline. We can make sure we have

carried out our own local church procedures and policies, too. Okay. We can attend workshops and training sessions. We can raise more money. We can make more cuts in our budget. Okay.

I get all that. You get all that. But the word from the Lord for us today is about proclaiming good news. And that's what I want us to care most about, and that's what I want us to put into action.

I am not going to dedicate our 2010 leadership team just so I can put names on the leadership directory that the North Coast District and East Ohio Conference need from me. I am not spending time with prospective new members just so we can have more numbers to report. Nor do I invite you over and over again to participate in our church's ministry and mission just for the heck of it. The point of it all is to proclaim, to live, to share, to take part in God's good news – to be about those things that turn people's lives around, and to make a way where there once was no way.

When I look over this list (leadership roster), I see one opportunity after another to proclaim the good news of Jesus Christ. We teach the good news in Sunday School and Bible Studies. We sing and pray and preach the good news in our worship. We share good news in hospitals and nursing homes and when we visit the sick, the shut-in, the bereaved and the lonely. We nurture the good news in times of fellowship and in small groups. We help support the good news through our financial giving – to the church – to mission offerings, to disaster relief. We give the good news a place to occur through the use and maintenance of our building. We communicate and advertise the good news in mailings, in hand-outs, on the internet. We provide a welcoming place for those who need good news through our acts of hospitality. We even cook it – as we serve the good news to people hungry to receive it.

But we can do more. I believe that. And if we commit ourselves to proclaiming the good news to the poor, the oppressed, and the hurting all around us, the other stuff we worry about won't seem as important. Because if we really care, I mean really care, about changing people's lives through our work as a church, then the money will be there, and the numbers will improve, and instead of saying "we're struggling" when we are asked about our church, we'll say, "we're thriving". We'll say "God is using us to deliver God's good news". We'll say, "God is using us – all of us – those whose names are on our leadership roster and every one else who takes part in their own way – to make a difference in people's lives. We'll say that through our collective efforts, for the common good, with all parts working together, we are bringing hope and healing to those who hurt. We are feeding the hungry. We are offering the lost a sense of direction. We are comforting those who mourn and consoling those who despair. We are welcoming all of God's children. We are restoring the shine of those whose shine has grown dull. We are releasing people from their chains of captivity – to sin, to fear, to addictions, to anger, to abuse. We are reconnecting people with each other and with God. We'll say that here, in this place, the liberating, healing, forgiving, empowering good news of Jesus Christ is being lived out. We'll say that amazing things are happening. And if we are asked, "when?" – we will say, "TODAY" .