

Greenfield Hill Congregational Church

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Date: October 27, 2019
Sermon Title: "De Oppresso Liber"
Scripture: Luke 4:16-21
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Luke 4:16-21

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.'

Jesus started a movement. He was already Jewish. One hundred percent of his followers were Jewish; they had a synagogue in their villages, and they had the great Temple in Jerusalem. They had a religion and places to practice their religion. But Jesus started a movement. His followers turned that movement into Church. There's nothing mutually exclusive between movement and Church unless the movement becomes the Church. Or, the movement gets confined within the four walls of the Church.

A movement, by definition, is supposed to move, right? It moves, it's moving, it's on the move, it's dynamic by nature. The proper role of the Church is to be the

headquarters of that movement. Church is the jumping-off point, the starting point, not the end point.

Historically, this Sunday is celebrated as Reformation Sunday. Two years ago, we made a big deal out of it because it was the 500th anniversary of Martin Luther's Reformation that turned the Christian world inside out, upside down, and that's a whole lot of movement right there.

The Protestant Reformation was actually the result of decades of movement, decades, even centuries, of Christians trying to get their Church to get a move on, to un-stop itself, to cease being static and stagnant. The protests led to their being called "protest-ants," Protestants, and they were definitely on the move! Some got kicked out of their Church. Some left, some started their own. There was a movement going on all across Europe of the day, good and bad, literal and figurative, movement of ideas. Much of it helped by one of the great inventions, Gutenberg's printing press, thanks to, you guessed it, "movable type." Movement makes things happen. Movement *is* things happening.

Today's Scripture is fascinating. Jesus returns to his hometown, a hometown boy made good, his fame and popularity growing; and on the Sabbath, he goes to his little hometown Church, the synagogue in Nazareth. And he's given the honor of reading the Scripture and commenting on it. He was the guest preacher that day. The Scriptures were from the Prophet Isaiah. Jesus read out loud: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me and has anointed me to preach good news to the poor . . . to proclaim freedom for prisoners, to give sight to the blind, to release the oppressed." (Luke 4:18-19 from Isaiah 61:1-2)

Jesus's commentary on that Scripture may be the shortest sermon ever preached. He sat down, looked around the room, and said, "Today this Scripture is fulfilled in your hearing" (verse 21), which means, "All that stuff you just heard? I'm here to get it started."

Things went downhill from there. Jesus and the crowd exchanged words, and by the end of the day, the townsfolk tried to kill him. Some folks don't like movement. What was so scary about Jesus's message and that Scripture? On the one hand, it's good news. It even starts off with the statement, "The Spirit of the Lord (that's God) has anointed me, chosen me, appointed me, to preach good news to the poor." That's the foundation of the whole thing; everything else follows from it. God puts us in the "good news" business, and that good news is supposed to dramatically transform the lives of every sort of people.

Timothy Keller, a legendary New York City pastor and prolific writer, wrote an excellent book on God's view of justice, and he uses this Scripture, so I'm stealing his ideas. Jesus tells us here and in his life, point blank, clear as day, that we are

supposed to be world-changers, life-transformers. We are the “yeast in the bread,” we are the “salt of the earth,” we are the “light of the world,” he says. We are to “feed the hungry, clothe the naked, visit the prisoner, give water to the thirsty.” We are to “set free the prisoner, restore sight to the blind, release the oppressed, preach good news to the poor.”

Heck, we might as well raise the dead. Well, actually, yes, he tells us to do that too. Timothy Keller tells us those are all “for instances.” Jesus gives us a list of images and ideas. We need to broaden our definitions and our horizons and our contexts. There are dead, blind, hungry, imprisoned, naked, oppressed, thirsty people all around us.

Now, I’m not going to look at a paralyzed person and tell them to “just get up and walk,” the way Jesus did. I’m not going to spit on a blind man’s eyes, as Jesus did, until he sees clearly. I’m not going looking for a naked man and then take him to the mall to buy clothes. I’m not heading to the Bridgeport Correctional Center to lead a jailbreak. And the next time I do a funeral, I’m not standing at the casket to tell the corpse to stand up.

I’m not God. I’m not Jesus Christ. But I am, we are to be Christlike. And Christ’s resurrection comes in a thousand ways, a million ways, long before the one that takes us to heaven.

Jesus’s itemized list of targets for our Church work was literal and figurative. Take the obvious: people are hungry. Get them food. How clear is that? How Christian is that? How Churchy is that? Keep the list going. People are spiritually dead, emotionally paralyzed, blind to the feelings of others, hungry for justice, imprisoned by addictions, thirsting for freedom. Keep going. Take the word Jesus used and think of your own application for who’s dead, who’s hungry, who’s in prison, who’s blind, who’s oppressed.

Yes, it’s the Kurdish people 10,000 miles away. Yes, it’s the Rohingya people, forced to flee Myanmar, stuck in refugee camps. Yes, it’s Muslims in Chinese concentration camps and Hong Kong citizens for protesting. And it is someone you know, on your street, in your classroom, on your sports team, at your workplace, around your Thanksgiving dinner table. Find the poor, the prisoner, the blind, the hungry, the naked, the oppressed. *The oppressed*. That’s what Jesus said: We are to be a world of good news for them.

By now, people are thinking either, “Well, this is a liberal Church—all that talk about the poor and the oppressed.” Or, you’re thinking, “Well, Jesus was a liberal, all that talk about the poor and the oppressed.” Well, if the word “liberal” makes you squeamish, let me balance that. Did you see my sermon title, a nice Latin phrase? “De Oppresso Liber.” It’s the motto of a real left-wing, ultra-liberal, do-

gooder organization: the Green Berets. The United States Army Special Forces. "De Oppresso Liber," "to set free the oppressed."

My point is, the Church movement Jesus outlines for us is not liberal. It's Biblical. It's a high calling. It's Christian. It's Greenfield Hill Church.

Have you caught what our theme is for this year's stewardship/pledge campaign? "More than you can imagine!" It comes from a powerful verse in Ephesians, "God is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us." (Ephesians 3:20)

"Immeasurably more than we can imagine." Most everybody I know has a ceiling to what they can accomplish. We can achieve this much, but no more. We can go this far, but no farther. That ceiling is mostly self-imposed. "I could never do that!" We tell ourselves. People even say, "That's beyond me." "That's above my pay grade." Or the ceiling is imposed upon us by outside forces, like racism, sexism, all kinds of prejudices; or just some authority figures' low opinion of us, all establishing a ceiling you can't go beyond.

That's applied to people, but it applies to institutions too. Which is why a lot of institutions shrivel up and die. Things that you and I long took for granted are going by the wayside: colleges, libraries, restaurants, theaters, bookstores. And Churches. Limited by their own vision. Or limited by the understanding of others. So the promise of St. Paul should echo in our heads like a loud trumpet call, like Copeland's "Fanfare for the Common Man," *We can do immeasurably more than we imagine!* My goodness! What a promise to Greenfield Hill Church in our 294th year!

"We can do more than we imagine." Immeasurably more. Which is a bit like God's saying to us, "I haven't even started with you yet!"

Last Sunday our Adult Ed Board hosted a luncheon/discussion on "Racism and Faith." We had a huge crowd, an excellent discussion, helpful ideas. My job was to set the stage, give an overview. Since the discussion was built around two books, I began with a summary of each book, the highlights, the key points. Both books were written by fervent, Bible-trusting evangelical Christians, and they were writing specifically for us: Christians in Churches. Their overarching point was that Christians, in Churches, with Bibles, should not abide racism. We are united by the loving, life-giving blood of Christ. This makes us one people, no divisions. Instead, both authors admit, Christianity has mostly failed to meet God's highest standards. Mostly, we've settled for mediocrity.

As part of my overview, I shared two quotes I beg you to hear. The first is; "We need to get nonbelievers to be in awe of Church again!" "We need to get people,

nonbelievers, the folks outside our doors, society at large, people who have given up on religion to be in awe of Church again." Think about that. Think about your family and friends who don't go to Church or don't understand why you go. What would it take for them to be "in awe" of our Church life?

The other quote urges us to change our game plan to "when Church growth isn't about how many show up, but how many oppressed are set free." Every Church, every pastor, me especially, gets hung up on attendance. My mood, my self-worth, rises and falls on how many show up. But Jesus, and that quote, and the Green Berets, want us focused on "how many of the oppressed or set free."

Both quotes are significant, Church-altering challenges. We need to function in a way that makes others think again about Church, God, Christ, organized religion, with awe. And we need to function in a way that sets the oppressed free. The first is tougher; we're actually doing the second. The first is tougher because there is so much Churchy-Christianity around that is embarrassing and mean-spirited that it's hard to get attention over here in our little corner, even if we shout out, "Hey! We're awesome!" But setting the oppressed free? Yes, that happens.

Today we share worship with 35 men who have lived lives imprisoned, deadened, paralyzed, oppressed by alcohol, addiction, poverty, homelessness. They've lived years, lost years, hungering and thirsting for a way out, for a new life, for salvation, in every sense of the word. They've lived years oppressed by systems and demons and dealers and fears. They've lived years yearning for that day when someone would "preach the Good News to their poorness"; who would "restore sight to their blindness"; who would "set them free from their oppressors."

Do you do that? Let me rephrase that. Do you *know* you do that? Do you know that you, we, do that? That we are the Green Berets of Christianity, right here, in this little Church on top of this little hill?

I was thinking the other day about what we support, fund, participate in through our Church. The Pivot House. The Council of Churches and their cutting-edge ministry. The Bridgeport Rescue Mission, on the front lines of poverty, about 10 miles from our front door. Our legendary Appalachia work, our India work, our refugee work. And work you know nothing about because it's confidential, but it's what we do on a daily basis.

And the best part is that God tells us, our little old Church on top of this little hill, we can "do immeasurably more than we can imagine."

It's true for these men from Pivot House. It's true for you and me in our daily lives. It's true for the work of this Church as we echo the words of the Prophet

Isaiah, Jesus's first sermon in Nazareth, *and* the motto of the Green Berets, to "set free the oppressed."

You can give to help us to do it. You can jump in to help us to do it. You can pray to help us to do it. And together, we will do it.

Our final hymn today is an answer to a rhetorical question from the Old Testament, No. 501 in your Hymnal, "There Is a Balm in Gilead."

*There is a balm in Gilead
to make the wounded whole;
there is a balm in Gilead
to heal the sin-sick soul.*

*Sometimes I feel discouraged,
and think my work's in vain,
but then the Holy Spirit
revives my soul again.
There is a balm in Gilead
to make the wounded whole;
there is a balm in Gilead
to heal the sin-sick soul.*

*If you cannot preach like Peter,
if you cannot pray like Paul,
you can tell the love of Jesus,
and say "He died for all!"
There is a balm in Gilead
to make the wounded whole;
there is a balm in Gilead
to heal the sin-sick soul.*

*Don't ever feel discouraged,
for Jesus is your friend;
and if you lack for knowledge
he'll ne'er refuse to lend.
There is a balm in Gilead
to make the wounded whole;
there is a balm in Gilead
to heal the sin-sick soul.*