

Epiphany Four C
St. David's - 1/31/10

The Lord spoke to Moses on Mount Sinai saying: Speak to the people of Israel and say to them: "You shall hallow the fiftieth year and you shall proclaim liberty throughout the land to all its inhabitants. It shall be a jubilee for you:... The land shall not be sold in perpetuity, for the land is mine; with me you are but aliens and tenants...the years since the sale of the land shall be computed and the difference shall be refunded to the person to whom it was sold, and the property shall be returned...in the jubilee it shall be released and the property shall be returned."

To listen to the arguments going on across the religious landscape in America today, it would be natural to assume that the predominant topic in our sacred text is the same as the predominant topic found in our culture's media and entertainment fields. S-E-X. But the truth of the matter is that the discussion of sex in our Bible is nearly inconsequential, especially when compared to the topic that positively overwhelms it. Money. Economic concerns far outweigh anything else in our text. A quick search finds that the word money is used in the Bible seven times more often than sex, but the ratio of how often the two subjects are discussed is even more skewed than that. In the Gospels, it is no contest at all. Jesus virtually never talks about sex. But money, or more correctly, the lack of it, is on his lips constantly.

In today's Gospel, which is the continuation of last week's, Jesus articulates for us what his mission will be for his entire life. And that mission centers on reversing the economic conditions that have created such suffering for so many people. How does Jesus plan on giving such good news to the poor and setting the oppressed free? By proclaiming, as he says, "the year of the Lord's favor, that is, the jubilee year." The concept of a jubilee year is an ancient one in Judaism, articulated by Yahweh in those

verses from Leviticus that I just read to you.

From the earliest stories in the Hebrew tradition, Adam and Eve, Cain and Abel, it was obvious that one of the major factors in creating bad behavior among humans is our constant desire to accumulate. Perhaps the early Hebrews did not have the economic acumen of Ben Bernanke, but they knew all too well that if people were allowed to amass as much property and wealth as possible, only disaster would result. They knew from experience that in an economic system that allowed people to accumulate all they could, a small percentage would get obscenely wealthy, while the masses would have less and less with which to live. So the year of Jubilee was instituted, a year when all those people who had hoarded so much land had to give it back. The theological basis for this is stated in Leviticus. It's not your land anyway. It's God's. So give it back and redistribute the wealth to the poor. It is the ethical and moral thing to do.

Of course, such a practice in real life is another thing all together. In fact, the whole idea of Jubilee just may be the most difficult requirement of faith found anywhere in the Bible. And of course, for those who have accumulated the land, the idea seems incredibly unfair. "I worked hard for what I've got. Why should I now give it back to some lazy slob who didn't manage to pull himself up by his bootstraps?" So today, when Jesus suggests to the elite part of his home town crowd that he is here to begin a redistribution of wealth, well, let's just say they get a little testy. Finally, to take the cake, Jesus suggests that his mission of bringing hope to those with no hope is not just about his fellow Jews. He tells two stories of God's grace extending beyond their

religion - to a widow in the region of Sidon (hear Gentile or foreigner territory) and Naaman, the military commander of their...get this...enemies in Syria. The underlying suggestion is that Jesus' plan for this redistribution of wealth is not just to occur within Judaism, but to people of every religion and culture. Now not only is Jesus asking people to give up their own wealth, but he wants that wealth to go to their religious rivals and bitter enemies. Is it any wonder that they try to throw Jesus over a cliff?

Beloved, this is the Jesus of the Gospels. The central goal of his life is to overturn the economic system that all of us in America know so well. He wants to destroy the system of private land ownership that Anglos forced upon our Navajo neighbors and instead embrace the concept that all land is God's, that all of creation is God's and that it is a moral imperative for all of us to share God's land and our wealth with all, not just with Episcopalians and Catholics and Methodists, but with everyone from every religion and culture. It is as revolutionary and insane an idea as the world has ever heard, before or since.

It is so crazy, that it is not just his hometown crowd that tries to throw him off the cliff. Everywhere Jesus went from that day on, people attempted to do the same thing, and of course, they would soon enough succeed. After his death and through his resurrection, Jesus's radical ideas would surface one more time. But once again, they were killed because they were just too wildly radical. After the emperor Constantine's conversion, Christianity would adopt a new understanding of the Jesus message, one that could be embraced by an empire. Christ suddenly went from Caesar's worst nightmare to an actual supporter of the empire. This domestication and dilution of

Jesus has continued to this very day because, the truth is, we do not want the Jubilee Jesus any more than did his neighbors in the first century or Roman leaders of the 4th century. In fact, our fear of what Jesus actually said today may be even more strong than those two groups. We do not want a God who tells us that our enemies are God's friends and we do not want a God who suggests that all of us need to give our land back. No, we want a warm and fuzzy Jesus made in our image, rather than the other way around.

Some of you know that there is this weird contest at St. David's that occurs every year during the Christmas season. There are a group of sadistic people in this parish who compete in what has come to be called the tacky religious art contest. Their goal is to give Jean and me the worst piece of religious paraphernalia ever invented. Here are some recent entries in that contest. We have the lovely Jesus duct tape. Then there is the really cool Jesus pencil toppers. The movable touchdown Jesus statue won the event a couple years ago. And the piece d' resistance, enlightenment on a spring, the dashboard Jesus.

Now of course, these are supposed to be jokes, at least I think they are supposed to be jokes, I hope they are supposed to be jokes, but they are symbolic of what we have done to the image of Jesus. We have taken the most radical prophet of all time, and turned him into... the Pillsbury doughboy. We have taken away the Jesus who calls us to turn the world upside down so that we may bring dignity to every human being and made him into an amorphous character who talks about peace and love.

Actually, it is only part of Christianity that has turned Jesus into a marshmallow.

That would be the left, or the progressive wing of the church. They like their Jesus Dalai Lama like. The right, or what is now called the evangelical wing of Christianity, takes a different approach. They take the same approach as Jesus's neighbors do in today's Gospel. They like their Jesus dead, because a dead Jesus is a safe Jesus. That is why the theology of the right skips right over Jesus's life and goes right to Good Friday. Jesus was born, they tell us, to die for our sins. In this scenario, Jesus's life has no meaning. He was born so that he could die for us. The theological impact he has on us only comes as a result of his death.

In both of these scenarios, the same thing is accomplished. Jesus's revolutionary, life changing message is effectively domesticated and distilled. None of us need feel guilty about our neighbors who are starving. None of us need get upset about the plight of Haitians who had no life before the earthquake much less after. We don't need to ponder what our religion says about our personal need to accumulate anything and everything and what that does to our soul. Instead, we can embrace this...(the dashboard Jesus), or we can go watch Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ*. We can have a low commitment relationship with a convenient God.

But just for a second, let us imagine. Let us imagine all of us getting past our guilt and actually listening to and hearing the real Jesus. Think just for a moment what would happen if we really believed that the land was God's, if we actually stopped making believe that we could own it. The first thing that comes to my mind is that the worst crisis of our time would suddenly end. If we stopped treating the land as if it was our personal property, if we actually embraced a theology of Jubilee, environmental

degradation would all but cease. We would be caring for the land for the next person and the next.

It is all but impossible in our culture to imagine the next part. But let us try. Think about what it would be like if we actually lived into Jubilee. Think about turning your land back to the people who lost it. Think about corporations returning land to families. Imagine cancelling the debts of those who owe you money. Consider a country that would cancel the debts of two-thirds world countries with so many people struggling to survive. If we could actually bring ourselves to live into Jubilee, what we would do is let the poor back into the economy. It could, in fact, mark the end of abject poverty. But in addition to that, if we all knew that we were going to return it at some point, could it be that the accumulation escalator would stop? Could we end the social system that states that he who dies with the most toys wins? And if the desire to accumulate and monopolize the world's economy was gone, could it be that not only would every one be fed, but that everyone would have the opportunity to live in dignity and that we could stop killing each other over the world's goods and money?

That beloved, was Jesus's vision and the dream of God. God's dream has nothing to do with cherubim and seraphim floating on the clouds. It is about creating a world where people do not need to suffer their entire physical lives, desperately waiting to die so that they can live. And Jesus knows that the way to create that kingdom, the kingdom of God, is by breaking the long standing chain of the never ending accumulation of goods.

It may sound pie in the sky, and desperately impossible to actually do. But of

course each of you knows first hand that it works. Just prior to this parish's jubilee year, we practiced our own form of Jubilee. We had virtually nothing, but we turned it all back anyway. We fed everyone who came here. We cancelled people's debts and gave them a fresh start. We lived into today's Gospel. And look at what has happened to us and to this town as a result.

On this day of our Annual Meeting when we will be talking about the future of this church, let me express my fervent hope for the church at large too. Enough already about sex. Let's start focusing on Jesus's focus. Let us move to Jubilee and lift up everyone who is suffering and everyone in our world who has been exploited and ostracized, whether that be for sexual reasons or any other bigoted agenda.

If we are going to bring this kind of change to the world, let us remember what we must do first. We need to reject, once and for all, the saccharin Jesus of the left and the Good Friday Jesus of the right. We need to take back the real Jesus. We need to reject all forms of theology that continue to domesticate him, as well as the theology that finds him only useful when he is dead. Instead, let us embrace the Jesus who challenges each and every one of us to confront the inequities in our world and to do something about them.

Finally, let us not just pray the prayer that Jesus gave us, but let us live it. There is a strong case that the Greek word in the Lord's Prayer that we sometimes translate as trespass and sometimes translate as sin is much more likely best translated as debts. And when we hear the focus of Jesus's mission as he states it today, it seems overwhelmingly likely that this is the case. "Forgive us our debts as we forgive our

debtors,” for it is in that practice that we live into Jesus’s vision and bring about the kingdom of God. Amen.