

**THE PURPOSE OF PREACHING; JEREMIAH 1:4-10, LUKE 4:21-20; EPIPHANY IV,  
FEBRUARY 3, 2019; THOMAS H. YORTY; WESTMINSTER CHURCH**

I received an email from one of our ENERGY tutors a few weeks ago. It quoted statistics from the Census Bureau report released in December 2017 regarding the 14213 neighborhood of Grant St. and the 14207 neighborhood of Military/Riverside.

These two zip codes are predominantly young, ethnically diverse and include mostly single female heads of household; in 14207 43% of residents earn less than poverty level income and in 14213 57% fall into below poverty income placing it in the top 25 most economically challenged zip codes in the State.

Unwed mothers on public assistance in 14207 are nearly 90% of the single heads of households and in the 14213 neighborhood, unwed mothers on public assistance comprise 74% of single heads of households. In both neighborhoods the largest age group of female heads of households falls between the ages of 15 and 19.

Those are a lot of statistics. But I'm sure you heard enough to realize they're shocking. Life altering poverty for very young mothers and their small children is thriving like a cancer just a mile or two from this room on the West Side of Buffalo.

The ENERGY tutor who is a church member shared this information with me as a way of alerting me to the fact that maybe we shouldn't forget about those who struggle to get by here on the West Side while we commit resources and make bold efforts to reach out to those who are struggling on the East Side of Buffalo.

I confess my first thought was, "But we only have so many resources, so many people. It will take more than Westminster to address poverty in Buffalo. And Jesus did say we'll always have the poor with us.

But then our church member told me that some of our ENERGY children come from those two zip codes – zip codes where, I might add, this ENERGY tutor also volunteers as a tutor in an elementary school on the days she isn't here.

And I thought more deeply about it and realized poverty is complicated, more so than I first wanted to acknowledge. In my mind, the West Side is on a rebound, property values are going up, there are robust neighborhoods with new Americans. The East Side is where real poverty is rampant which is why we and where we are reaching out in that direction.

But, maybe it's not that easy. It would be easy to say "we're already paying our dues" or that poverty is a big complicated problem and we are just one little church. **Or**, we could receive the information, try to learn more about how poverty affects our city and outlying communities – particularly children; how it is connected to race; what sustains it; and what breaks the cycle. I'm not saying we are going to singlehandedly end poverty in Buffalo, I am saying God works through people to serve people and maybe that 2017 Census report, which I suspect few of us knew about, is calling us to some deeper witness.

Turn with me to today's story from Luke. It's the second half of the lesson we heard last week of Jesus reading from the scroll of the prophet Isaiah in his hometown synagogue. When he handed the scroll back to the attendant and sat down to preach everyone was praising him for what a fine job he did and perhaps, too, what a fine town they were that had that produced such an upstanding young man.

But then, Luke says, Jesus began to preach and that's when the trouble started. Jesus referred to two occasions when the prophet Elijah – second only to Moses as a great prophet of Israel – and Elijah's protégé Elisha did something surprising. Both of these episodes are recorded in the book of the prophets and it's safe to say the congregation in Nazareth knew these stories.

You see, Jesus uses the Bible to interpret the Bible – a well known rabbinical method for reflection and preaching; reiterated for Christians by none less than Martin Luther. If we rely on only one scripture we can come to the wrong conclusions about the meaning of the text – as happens in today's story. So when Jesus says, 'I have come to preach good news to the poor, release to the captive, healing for the sick and the year of the Lord's favor' he discerns that these words fall on deaf ears; so he uses the two other passages to crack open their hard hearts.

Of course, the Nazarenes are thrilled with the selection from Isaiah – it promises relief and reward for the oppressed which they and all the Jews in Palestine were – under their Roman overlords.

But Jesus shifts the focus. He uses the Elijah and Elisha stories to address the deaf ears and elitist thinking: in Elijah's case when there was a food shortage in the land and many Jewish women were suffering from hunger, Elijah chose to give food to only a Gentile woman; and when many Jews were suffering from leprosy, Elisha chose to heal only a Syrian army officer—who stood for the same thing then that a Syrian army officer would stand for today for Jews.

You can imagine the response in the pews; Jesus' old Little League coach and Sunday School teacher do a double take, a hush comes over the congregation, did he just say what we thought he said they start to murmur. Anticipating their next move, Jesus barely escapes their attempt to throw him over a cliff.

Wow, didn't see that coming! Some response to a sermon!! I've heard criticism after a sermon but never had my life threatened.

What did Jesus say that was so off-putting? He said God chose to help non-Jews first while his people, his chosen people went on with their suffering. And not just non-Jews but non-Jews who were enemies like that Syrian army commander; and people on the bottom rung of society like that Gentile woman or some of those teenage mothers on the upper West Side.

For people who practiced meticulous adherence to Jewish law this was a wake up call. Jesus says you're not as deserving as you think you are. God places others ahead of you; which resonates with what he later says about his followers choosing not to be first but last.

There's a rabbinical saying, "Judaism is a simple religion based on two profound articles of faith: There is only one God. And you are not it. This is the hard truth. Jesus knocks the members of his old church off the elitist, holier than thou, bigoted pedestal they had placed themselves on.

Let me use the Bible to interpret the Bible – Exhibit A: in Genesis God says to Abraham, "I will bless you so that you can be a blessing to *all the families* of the earth." Exhibit B: the Psalms repeat over and over that the good shepherd seeks to save the lost sheep and Jesus added the parable of the shepherd who leaves the 99 to save even one lost lamb. Exhibit C: Jonah is told by God to preach forgiveness and mercy to the despised enemy the Ninevites and when he refuses, and takes a slow boat in the opposite direction a storm comes, washes him overboard, a whale swallows him and deposits him on the beach in Ninevah where he wisely decides to preach as God wants him to.

Finally Exhibit D: Job is the ultimate example of God's sovereignty and freedom from conforming to our expectations for how God should treat us; God allows Satan to cause faithful Job who upholds the law, is righteous and does everything a faithful Jew should do, to undergo profound suffering including the loss of family and possessions.

Jesus wasn't the first to say God will save and redeem whom God chooses or that those God does rescue, save and redeem may be outsiders and outcasts to the faith.

The disconnect on the Sabbath in Nazareth that day do not have to do with the biblical lessons or what Jesus said; the disconnect has to do with the members of the congregation.

What Jesus gave them and what they expected were worlds apart. Surely they expected to be reminded that they were numbered among God's favored, chosen people. Down through the ages, they had remained steadfast. They had worshipped God, even though – through certain stretches of their history – God had provided little validation of or reward for their fidelity. Yet, they remained faithful to God. Then comes Jesus who reminds them of something very different; that God was free, sovereign and shows mercy on those whom God decides to show mercy, to love whomever God chooses to love.

What's the purpose of a sermon? There's an old saying that the job of a preacher is to comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable. Jesus certainly does that today. But it's more than that really.

The purpose of preaching is to help us think about biblical passages in new ways, show us where we've strayed and then to call us back, to provide inspiration for the week to come. All of those are good reasons to preach and good reasons to listen to sermons.

But what Jesus does today is to bring us closer to God. Sometimes we get helpful hints for living, or answers to pressing questions, but the main gift of preaching is getting to be with God who, in Jesus Christ, chooses to be with us in mystery and grandeur. Sometimes that closeness feels good, sometimes it doesn't but that's not the point.

God calls Jeremiah in today's other reading and Jesus embraces the role of a prophet in his sermon in Nazareth today because we incessantly attempt to bring God down to our size, to substitute other gods for the true and living God. A sermon that conveys that God is bigger than our flimsy concepts, our vain desires or our little projects fulfills the goal of preaching. What does all this have to do with the 2017 Census report for the 14207 and 14213 zip codes?

Here's my question for us: are we satisfied that we are addressing the problems of race and poverty in our city and region; given the body and spirit breaking reality of poverty can we sit here in our relatively comfortable and privileged lives and say "Yes" we're satisfied? I don't think so.

I am not suggesting a shift away from the East Side at all. What I'm saying is that a resourceful, intelligent, committed group of *Christians* like us ought to want to more deeply grasp what the bigger picture looks like for those who are poor and oppressed and hungry and homeless not to mention those in prison and *most especially* the children, whose chances of the success and abundance and happiness we are so blessed with are very slim indeed.

Our mandate for ministry is nothing less than the mandate Jesus embraces in his first sermon. Our mandate and his are, my friends, one and the same – for we are the hands and feet of Christ in the world.

I know. We're very busy people. We have our own lives to live – our own children and grandchildren to educate and prepare for their success in life. And, frankly many of us are helping other worthy causes in this community fulfill their mission – from art galleries to hospitals to schools.

But I'm talking about more than checking the mission box of this church – as if we don't have to worry *about that* anymore. I'm talking about teaching a young, single mother on state assistance to learn how to fish rather than just giving her a fish. It would mean more effort to educate ourselves, more time, more field trips, more research, more conversations together and with social service agencies and, most importantly the persons and families being served.

We're not a research university or a community foundation; we're just a church with a lot of talent and a boatload of resources; and unless I miss my guess we are people who have an authentic desire to do what we do well, even to the point of excellence.

Our ENERGY tutor by sharing those statistics and by her own example of volunteering to help change the life of one child at a time has raised the bar.

She's saying we can do better! And frankly, I agree!! Amen.