**Seek the Kingdom: No Calculator Required**

**Text: Luke 4:18**

**Preached by Bruce D. Ervin**

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I’m going to say a few short quotes, and let’s see who can guess who said it, and maybe even the occasion:

“We have nothing to fear but fear itself.”

“Ask not what your country can do for you, ask what you can do for your country.”

“America is a shining city on a hill.”

“With malice toward none, with charity for all.”

There’s something to be said for launching your mission with a bang. Sometimes just the right turn of phrase can define who you are and what you’re about.

Jesus knew this. He announced the start of his mission this way:

“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor.”

That got their attention. Luke says, “The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him.” And it wasn’t just that he was the local boy who’d made good. It was also the power of his words. They were “amazed at the gracious words that came from his mouth.” I mean, the man could speak! Jesus knew how to turn a phrase, tell a story, grab the attention of his audience and hold it there.

But it wasn’t about him. It was about the Kingdom and the power and the glory of God. It was about the mission of the Kingdom, which Jesus was setting in motion with this inaugural address.

It wasn’t about him. Jesus spoke not to draw attention to himself, but to draw the attention of the people beyond himself, beyond themselves, to all who were poor, or oppressed, or afraid, or in need of release from whatever held them captive.

No, it wasn’t about him. It was about the Holy Spirit. “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,” Jesus said. It is the Holy Spirit that calls me, empowers me, speaks through me. That’s what Jesus is saying. It’s not about me. It’s not about us. It’s about the Holy Spirit. And the mission that the Spirit has anointed us to pursue.

The Spirit drives the action in Luke’s gospel. We made that point a few weeks ago, but it bears repeating. The Spirit drives the action. The Holy Spirit comes upon Mary when she conceives Jesus. The Spirit comes upon Jesus at his baptism. The Spirit drives Jesus into the wilderness. The Spirit grabs hold of the disciples when they’re tongue tied and teaches them what to say. The Spirit anoints Jesus for ministry, the Spirit anoints the disciples for ministry, the Spirit anoints the Church for ministry.

I want to talk about anointing this morning, and I want to talk mission this morning. And I want to talk this morning about being focused on mission.

Anoint: the word means “to smear or rub with oil.” That sounds kind of yucky! It comes out of the ancient practice of priests and kings, who had oil poured on their heads as they assumed their office and their authority. It’s similar, really, to our practice of laying hands on someone as they assume their duties as a pastor, or as they’re sent out on the mission field. Anointing, or laying on of hands: it is a symbolic gesture; an outward and visible sign of the Holy Spirit coming upon someone; the Holy Spirit authorizing someone – or a group of someones – to take-up a call and set-out on a mission.

It’s like a basketball game when the team leader – the play maker – goes down with an injury. And you’re the sixth man. So the coach calls you off the bench and sends you into the game. You’ve been anointed to save the day. Maybe you’ve even rubbed on some Ben-Gay to keep your muscles loose. You’ve been anointed. And you feel the power of the moment. It’s a close game, the crowd roars, and you take the ball. And now it’s not just the Ben-Gay that’s got you feeling fired-up; there’s something burning inside you. There’s a strength there. There’s a confidence there. It’s not there every game, but you’re feeling it today. You’re setting-up the plays. Getting the ball to the right player at the right time. And the ball is dropping. You and your teammates are in a groove. You’re down at the half but you start to come back. Swish! There’s goes a slick 3. Bam! It’s a slam-dunk. Your star player is on his way to the hospital with a broken leg, but you all are winning the game.

That’s what it’s like to be anointed by the Spirit. Except that we’re not talking about a basketball court, we’re talking about a mission field. The mission field that is Bedford. The mission field that is Lawrence County. The mission field that is southern Indiana.

And what is the mission? Jesus is pretty clear about that. It’s about good news for the poor. It’s about release to the captives. It’s about liberty to the oppressed. In short, it’s about justice.

Which is to say that it’s not about us. Justice is not “just us.” It’s about reaching beyond ourselves, and sharing the good news of God’s abundance with others.

Let me tell you about a group of churches that did this. 40 years ago about 30 churches in Brooklyn came together around something called Nehemiah Homes. Since then they have built about 10,000 units of affordable housing in Brooklyn and the Bronx, building it in the worst possible places in the city. These were free-fire zones for rival street gangs. These were areas abandoned by business and retail. No jobs, bad schools, just horrible places to live. Acres of vacant lots. The City of New York gave some of that vacant land to the churches. The churches partnered with a visionary developer named I.D. Robbins. Homes were sold at affordable prices because the land was free. Monthly payments were low because the churches pooled their assets and offered low-interest mortgages. The result was that folks were paying less on their mortgage then they’d paid for rent in the horrible, high-rise housing projects that they’d been living in. And because some of the units were duplexes and triplexes, a family could move into one unit and rent out the others. That gave them a revenue stream and turned them into entrepreneurs.

Fast forward 40 years. Those inner city, wasteland, free-fire zones have become viable neighborhoods once again. And the people who moved out of the projects and into those neighborhoods have gone to good public schools, gone on to college, become successful business people and teachers and lawyers and social workers and public servants. Apart from the free land, the whole thing was a private sector initiative.

But here’s the thing. Over those same 40 years, kids who continued to grow-up just a few blocks away in the projects have not benefitted from any of those things. 40 years ago you were talking about identical families. Today the folks in the projects are still trapped in poverty, while the folks in the Nehemiah Homes have become solidly middle class. Today test scores from the schools in the projects are abysmal. While test scores from the schools in the revitalized communities are among the highest in the city. Just a few blocks away!

What’s the difference? The difference is that once folks became home owners, they had something to take pride in. Once folks were out of the projects, their lives were safer and they didn’t have to focus on simply surviving anymore; they could focus instead on being good parents and getting job training and starting careers.

And, once these things happened, they were perceived by the school system as being a safe investment. New schools were built, quality teachers were assigned, money was poured into the schools in the revitalized communities, while the schools near the projects were left to rot. Just a few blocks away.

Somebody believed in those kids. Somebody saw them as a good investment. They weren’t any different from the kids left behind in the projects. But there were perceived to be different. Once their families were chosen by lottery to be eligible for a Nehemiah home, the schools and the city and the private sector invested in them. Justice happens when somebody invests in God’s people. Perfect justice happens when somebody invests in all of God’s people!

Nehemiah Homes is about good news to the poor. Nehemiah Homes is about release to the captives. Nehemiah Homes is about justice. It began with churches that reached outward – beyond themselves – to connect their neighbors with God’s abundance.

Hmmm, reaching outward to connect people with God’s abundance. Seems like I’ve heard those words before. That’s our mission. And it’s really not all that different from the mission field in Brooklyn. We don’t have the street gangs. We don’t have the projects. But we do have the drugs. We do have the loss of business and retail. We do have people who are trapped in poverty – people who are held captive by poverty – and who are held captive as well by the despair and the anxiety and the sense of just being overwhelmed by life; these things are sapping their energy and taking their focus away from what must be done – individually and collectively – to free them from captivity: what they must do and what business and government and schools and community organizations and churches must do.

And that’s where we come in. This church and other Disciples churches and other Bedford churches. A key place to start is with the kids: give them some hope, give them some confidence, give them some support, give them some mentors, give them a community where they will feel accepted and loved; unconditionally loved. That’s what they need to break out of the generational poverty that’s held families captive for so long.

Release to the captives. That’s what Camp is about. We’re not building homes, but we are rebuilding our Camp: with a ropes course and a team-building focus and community partnerships, and we’re going to bring kids to camp who wouldn’t otherwise have the experience of being there, and then coming home with their hearts on fire.

Release to the captives. That’s what Holy Moly is about. I see children and youth coming here on Thursday afternoons and experiencing joy and love and acceptance in this place.

Release to the captives. That’s what the Children’s Chorus is about. Love, acceptance, joy and community for sure. And, there’s a wealth of data about how music opens our minds and hearts so that we can be all that God has made us to be.

All of this is about forming the faith, the spirit, and the character with which our youth can engage the world, and be vessels for the Holy Spirit in the world. They’ve got to have the tools to play the game. No tools, no justice. No justice, no good news. No good news, no release to the captives.

Reaching outward to connect people with God’s abundance. This is our mission. And we need to be focused on our mission. Not our numbers, but our mission. Yes, the numbers are important too; they need to be factored into the equation too and we’ll talk about that next week. Numbers in terms of both church membership and church finances. But if we don’t have the mission straight, the numbers won’t matter. And if we do have the mission straight, the numbers will add up.

St. Mother Teresa put it this way: “Never worry about numbers. Help one person at a time, and always start with the person nearest you.”

Jesus, after all, started with only 12 disciples. But he had the mission straight. And eventually they had the mission straight. And then the numbers came, and they changed the world. Especially because they waited on the Spirit…to call them into the game…and drive them down the court. Release to the captives. That’s what the game is all about. Amen.