

3rd Sunday after Epiphany
January 27, 2019
Text: Luke 4:14-21

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Part of the morning routine around our house includes me taking our dog, Moka, for a walk and then putting him in his kennel before leaving the house. The thing is, our dog knows that “kennel” is just a fancy word for “cage.” And while he loves his walks, he’d rather not go in the cage—er, pardon me, “kennel.” Sometimes after I take his harness off, he’ll try to hide behind the big red chair in the front room. Sometimes he’s even gone upstairs to hide on one of the kids’ beds. To get him into the kennel, I usually break off pieces of his favorite treats—they’re like kryptonite for dogs. He can’t resist them. I create a little trail of treats leading to the kennel, and then pop a couple of pieces inside. Then very slowly, reluctantly, Moka will make his way to the kennel, gobbling up treat by treat, until he’s in the kennel. I always make sure to save a couple of extra pieces of treat to feed to him once he’s in. The look on his face, though, says that he knows he’s been had.

Nobody really wants to be in a cage. But sadly, there are all sorts of cages that people live in. Some people live in a cage created by debt, or bad decisions in the past. Some people live in a cage defined by depression, or addiction, or mental illness. And some cages are all but invisible. As we grow up, we learn how to be a person—how to be a man or a woman. We learn what we’re supposed to do, how we’re supposed to act. The fashion magazines that tell you how should look like if you’re a woman and the movies that define masculinity as unfailingly strong and decisive—they are simply caricatures of our culture’s images for being a man or a woman. And those images can become a kind of cage that makes our lives small.

The cage that this culture builds for you will be different depending upon whether you’re a man or a woman. It will be different depending on your skin color, your educational background. Some of the limits will be placed on you from the outside, by how other people see you and react to you. But the most insidious part of the cage is what this world does to your mind and your spirit. The world tells you who you are and what is possible. It will tell you what to want, what is desirable, what is worthwhile, what to devote your life to. And insofar as those cultural messages point toward something other than the fullness of life and freedom that God desires for us, then they become cages that constrain and limit and diminish our lives, making our choices and our futures small and cramped and less.

Our gospel story for today tells us that Jesus has come to put an end to cages. It was a Sabbath day, in the synagogue service in his hometown, and Jesus stood up to read. He picked a reading from the prophet Isaiah. “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, for he has anointed me. He has sent me with the commission to announce good news to the poor, to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free.” Jesus understands that this is what God has sent him to do—and in fact, as the story unfolds, this is exactly what Jesus does. He brings hope to those who have been ground down by life. He sets people free from demonic possession. He heals a man who was paralyzed. He sets Zacchaeus the tax collector free from the grip of his own greed. From the beginning, Jesus sets people free from all sorts of cages. Jesus’ work is to create a new world, a new future for the human family, a future without cages.

And Jesus’ work continues still today, here! Jesus’ work is continuing through our life together as a Christian community. As we worship together and learn together and serve together, our lives are being reshaped by everything Jesus is about. And as we absorb Jesus’ values, we experience the freedom he wants for us. So, as we attend to his way of forgiveness, we’ll find he sets us free from anger and resentment. As we embrace Jesus’ way of trusting God, we’ll discover release from fear and worry. As we take on Jesus’ way of compassion, we may find a more life-giving way of seeing our neighbors. As we follow Jesus’ way of gratitude and generosity, we receive freedom from greed and entitlement. Who would want to live in any of those cages?

And there’s more. Through this community, week in and week out, Jesus’ work is continuing to set people free from some truly life-diminishing cages. Every week, through our partnership with Lift Urban Portland, between 100 and 150 people come to visit the food pantry, to be set free from hunger or food insecurity. And through our partnership with Rose Haven, women and children are welcomed in off the street—100 or more every day. A visit to Rose Haven means being free from cold and rain, at least for a while, perhaps to receive a shower, or medical care, or a meal. At the very least, it’s a place to be treated with respect. This is how Jesus’ work to set people free is continuing in Northwest Portland in 2019.

At the heart of it all, Jesus’ work to set people free is powered by a very simple truth. First, God is generous to us, giving us life and providing for our needs through the abundance of creation. First, God reaches out to us with forgiveness, entirely apart from any question of our deserving it. First, God shows us compassion and reaches out to us in our deepest need to set us free from sin and death, from fear and condemnation. First, God comes to us in our human weakness and embraces us with

limitless mercy and grace, claiming us as precious and beloved children. First, God says to us that we are worthy in God's sight and we belong to our loving Creator forever. Everything else flows out of that great, beautiful, good news.

So after worship, when we have our annual meeting and make some basic decisions about our life together, it's all in response to having experienced the overflowing goodness of God. We try to live our life together in such a way that expresses as fully as we can Jesus' way of forgiveness and compassion. And it's not just gathered together that we are the living expression Jesus' ongoing life and work. As we go to our homes and our jobs, as we go about our lives as neighbors and citizens and workers, we carry with us the outreaching, life-giving love of God, so that good news is shared with the poor and release to the captives, recovery of sight to the blind and letting the oppressed go free. Because it's just like Jesus said so many years ago: "Today, this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing!" Thanks be to God. Amen