

## “With You”

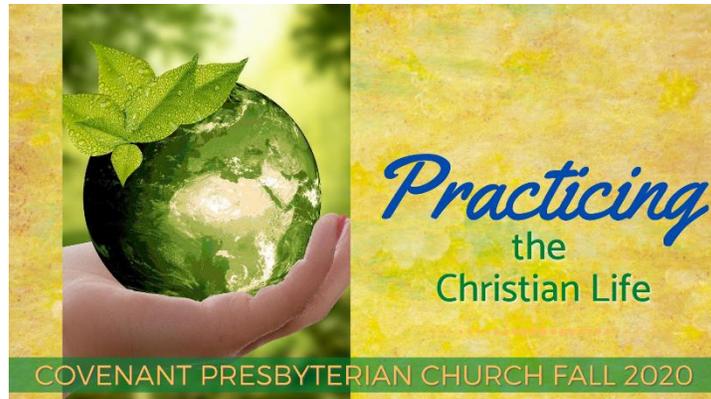
Luke 4: 16-21

Sunday, September 27, 2020

Rev. Jeff Fox-Kline

Covenant Presbyterian Church

Madison, Wisconsin



This is week three of our sermon series on the book *Practicing* by Kathy Escobar. This book takes the idea of Christian practice in a different direction by offering practices that you may not think of as traditional Christian practices. We've already heard Charlie preach on the practice of healing, and last week Chelsea Cornelius preached on the practice of loving. Today is yet another unusual Christian practice: advocating. But when you think about it, it really is one of the oldest practices in the Christian tradition.

Looking at the Bible, you can see the practice of advocating in Moses approaching Pharaoh and telling him to “let my people go”. You can see it in the witness of the prophets, like in Amos where he says “Hear this, you that trample on the needy, and bring to ruin the poor of the land... The Lord has sworn by the pride of Jacob: Surely I will never forget any of their deeds.” You can see it in Micah 4:6-7: “In that day, says the Lord, I will assemble the lame and gather those who have been driven away, and those whom I have afflicted. <sup>7</sup>The lame I will make the remnant, and those who were cast off, a strong nation; and the Lord will reign over them in Mount Zion now and forevermore.”

And advocacy is at the heart of our first scripture reading for today from the gospel of Luke, chapter 4:16-21:

<sup>16</sup> 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, <sup>17</sup> and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written:

<sup>18</sup> “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,  
<sup>19</sup> to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."

<sup>20</sup> 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. <sup>21</sup> Then he began to say to them, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."

In this passage, you hear Jesus in his first public act of ministry recorded in the gospel of Luke. He's already been out and about and gained some notoriety for his ministry, but this passage is his premiere in his hometown. And it's a doozy. He gets up and reads a messianic prophecy from the prophet Isaiah—specifically, Isaiah 61:1-2. He reads that scripture, and then pretty much declares himself the Messiah. Bold stuff. I especially love the way it's framed.

Jesus enters the pulpit for a scripture reading (reads Isaiah), then sits down while everyone gapes at him. And from his seat, "Oh, yeah, that's me I'm talking about!"

Incredible stuff, really bold and brave. A declaration of messianic identity while he's in the town he grew up in.

But while the context of this passage is striking, what is even more incredible is the text from Isaiah that Jesus chose to read. By highlighting this passage as Jesus first publicly recorded it, Luke is setting out a statement of purpose for who Jesus is going to be. Good news to the poor, release to the captives, sight to the blind, freedom to the oppressed. That is Jesus's goal in his ministry on earth. But a statement of purpose is not, in and of itself, advocacy. By proclaiming himself dedicated to those things, he did nothing more than stand in front of his family and friends and say that he was interested in doing those things.

Kathy Escobar, in the book *Practicing*, the focus of our sermon series, talks about three ways in which people try to help. One way is that they do things *to* other people, which she describes as paternalistic, saying "it is built on the principle that we are somehow better than others, have something to give *to them* or some wisdom or help to impart." A second way that she describes people helping is doing things *for* other people, which she describes as maternalistic, saying it "is centered on us wanting to do things *for*

others. Much of the preposition *for* is centered on us taking care of others so that our anxiety is relieved.” But she reveals a third way of helping others, and that is *with*, which she describes as saying it is “built on equal value, mutuality, and arises from relationship instead of stepping in and trying to solve problems on our own terms.”

Isn't that what Jesus is? What does the word Emmanuel mean, but “God with us”? Often, we pray to God to do something *for* us, sometimes we pray to God to do something *to* our enemies (don't pretend you haven't ever done that). But when we look to Jesus Christ, Emmanuel, we know that we have God *with* us. Jesus shows us true advocacy. As God with us, Jesus proclaimed that he was there to advocate with the poor, the oppressed, the captive, the blind. And then he went with them. Jesus lived with the poor, gave sight to the blind, stood against the forces of oppression, and warned the rich and powerful of the folly of their worldly goods.

God had no obligation to come among us and live in solidarity with the oppressed. But God did just that, and showed us that advocacy does not happen to, or for, but rather with. And it's in this way that God demonstrates the true folly of the way the world works. The world continually sets up hierarchies; preferencing this group over another, giving more power to certain people. In its ugliest form we see this perpetuated through sexism, homophobia, transphobia, racism, classism, xenophobia, etc.... But this is how the world works. The hierarchies exist to keep the hierarchies existing. Power begets power, and we (as a species) keep trying to ascend so that we can exercise the power over others.

This tangled web of power and authority results in so much pain, so much anguish and so much violence. But what does God show us? If there's any true hierarchy it is us, as God's children, serving beneath God the creator and maker of all of us. And then God has the audacity to come alongside with us! And not only that, God shows up and advocates alongside those who live at the bottom of the hierarchy.

The unfortunate reality of our world is that these hierarchies exist. But the reality of our faith is that there is no longer any hierarchy because we are all children of God. We exist with our feet in both of these worlds, and we can live in solidarity with the poor, the oppressed and the captive only because we recognize the injustice of these constructed hierarchies. But we can't just say “These hierarchies don't actually exist, and therefore we will just talk about how they don't exist.” Rather, we say, “The world as it is, is not the world as it should be,” and we use whatever advantages we have to

make the world a little bit more like it should be. Each of us has our own peculiar and specific privileges and resources that we can use to help amplify the voices that the world's hierarchies silence. And we all have our own areas in which our voices can help amplify.

For example, I am a pastor. And for better or for worse, that gives me certain authority. I'm not saying I deserve it, and I'm not saying that it makes me better or more special than anyone. And certainly God looks at me in the same way that God looks at all of God's children. But I occupy a certain place in the world's hierarchies, and so I have a responsibility to use that to amplify voices of people who don't have as much access to these spaces. Every day I'm learning what this means, trying to accept my space in this world, and trying to use it to help my neighbor.

Escobar says that in order to be advocates "we can't remain distant, protected, or comfortable". What stories do we tell, what words do we say, that shows us standing with our neighbor? Black lives matter. Trans lives matter. No human being is illegal. Each of you watching this service has access to special places; each of us occupies a unique place in some hierarchy. Use that. Remember, God came down to earth to show us the folly of hierarchies. It's the least we can do to use our power to show the world the same. Because in the end, advocacy is how we use what we've been given to emphatically declare that we live together, with one another, and that all voices need to be heard.

Ultimately, we only leave our legacy, and I pray that our legacy is one of solidarity, of *with*, of working tirelessly to make the world recognize that we rise and fall together. In the words of a titan of advocacy, the late-lamented Ruth Bader Ginsburg, "I would like to be remembered as someone who used whatever talent she had to do her work to the very best of her ability." I pray that we can be remembered well, as people who used whatever talent—and I'll add privilege—we have to do our work.

Amen.