

BREAK THROUGH TO BELOVED

Texts on Sunday, January 27, 2013

Leviticus 25: 8-17; Luke 4: 14-22

At two o'clock today, over seven hundred people will gather here at Riverside Church to see the film "The Central Park 5." This film proclaims release to the captives. It tells the terribly untold story of how in 1989, the City of New York—D.A., police, people, media, mayor, more—convicted five boys of a violent and bloody rape without any evidence except their own deceitfully forced confessions; and how, as grown men, the captives were released and finally exonerated in 2002, when the real rapist at last identified himself; and how, since 2002, our news media have showed no passion for the truth in any way matched to their former passion for the myth of evil boys out on a "wilding." Our city has resisted paying these men any damages. Justice delayed is justice denied.

About all this, you can learn much more this afternoon—if you have a ticket. Here's the point for this morning. I went to see *The Central Park 5* at the Maysles Cinema in Harlem on a Sunday last December. Seven hundred thronged the small hall. This Sabbath afternoon, the church will be packed with people who don't go in for church, but who will come here to hear proclaimed good news to the poor, release to the captives, and new eyes for the blind. The eyes of all will certainly be fixed on that film! Look, what Jesus felt impelled to say on his first day of work, and what thousands on thousands of our citizens long to hear proclaimed, are one and the same word. *Release!* But here this morning, we're fewer than that throng will be this afternoon. What has the morning to learn from the afternoon about breaking through to the future? We'll try an answer to that question presently, but first, let's learn a little more from our Jewish brother Jesus.



What was Jesus doing in the synagogue on that Sabbath? Now, lots of preachers grow warm, then hot with a sermon rooted in Luke 4:14ff or in Isaiah 61, from which Jesus read. I have done so. Preachers so long for the Spirit of the Lord to come upon them, so hunger to be about something significant, something transforming, something that will show up in history, that we wish maybe this time, this reading will supply the rocket fuel to drive our little ship of words beyond the pull of religion, which drags all things down to the grave, and this time bring new eyes to see a new heaven and a new earth, and move justice to the cliff of time to roll down like mighty waters. But Jesus' word is not like preachers' just wishing their words would work.

You know that he is reading from the scroll of Isaiah. You might know that the oracle he reads was composed five centuries earlier, after the people had come home from exile in Babylon, back to Jerusalem, a city in ruins. There, this anonymous prophet called forth a deep memory from the people, encouraging them in the midst of their ruin to re-build their righteousness first, and their city on top of that. Reaching all the way back to the ancient Leviticus code, the prophet reminded his people that they must found their reconstruction on the sound ground of just relationships and equity.

The spirit of Leviticus 25 rings clear: Among God's people, inequality of condition must never get out of control, for God owns the land, and God alone is master of human beings. Therefore, every fifty years, all debts, all indentures, all slaves and all slave-owning with all land owning will be set back as it was fifty years before. For a whole year, every one and everything must take a Sabbath rest from labor and ambition. For a whole year, every one and everything must enjoy a festival of beloved good will in just relationships of balance and equity. No family, plotting to get ahead, will forever get ahead; no family, fearing their fall, will fall further than can fit into fifty years of fortune, good or bad. "You shall proclaim liberty throughout the land . . . You shall return, every one of you, to your property and every one of you to your family . . . for it is a jubilee and it shall be holy to you."

There is no doubt that Israel's actual practice of this ideal was at best partial. But what people ever get beyond partial in the practice of their constituting ideals? Marxists? Americans? Christians? None! In the name of God, the great prophets of Judah and Israel raged at the inequity despoiling their land and the people, but they never once referred to the law of jubilee. It is as if the law was forgotten. So when the poet of Isaiah 61 dusted off the old Leviticus scroll at the inauguration of a new hope for his people, after Babylon; when he proclaimed release to the captive, sight to the blind, and "the year of the Lord's favor;" when he sounded that horn of truth which had gone ages unheard; he was demanding that his people break through to beloved community now. *Before we struggle to rebuild the city wall or a tall temple on standard toil; before we organize committees and councils and strategic plans; before we draw up accounts and engage staff—first*, sang the unknown poet, *we must get our relations right. Do you remember Jubilee?* he asks. *I proclaim Jubilee!* In Walter Brueggemann's phrase, jubilee justice means we "sort out what belongs to whom and return it to them." Do not build on sand, but on the solid rock of right relationship.

Five hundred years passed, and jubilee was again forgotten. Rome ruled everywhere, which meant debt and indenture and deprivation of land ruled in Galilee, just as they have in every empire down to this day. To the syna-

gogue, Jesus now comes to set his lips to the ram's horn of jubilee and proclaim once more: release to the captives, liberty to the oppressed, justice no more delayed, no more denied. No longer shall God's beautiful word of right relationship sit in the dust of ordinary religion, but by the power of God Holy Spirit, mercy and equity shall leap to life. *I proclaim Jubilee today!* he says. *Do not wait for revolution. Do not think the will of God tarries till a new mayor is chosen in Jerusalem or Nazareth or Gotham. Cease your passive whining that "they" have to do the right thing before righteousness and mercy kiss. Release the captive now!* declares Jesus. Then he sets to the work. He work not so much through miracles, though we like to think that's the story. If we like the standard fantasy that Jesus' ministry was mostly miraculous, perhaps it's because we suppose that, having no powers like his, there is nothing we can do—and we like it that way! But if Jesus was fully human, as all the church in all times attests, then he came among us not as an outsider with magic powers, but as one chosen by God to reveal who we are and whose we are.

I re-read Luke's gospel from the fourth to the twenty-fourth chapter last week. I took a brief note about each of its far more than one hundred separate stories. The great majority are not miraculous, but subversive. Jesus is continually breaking through the shell of social and religious structures that enforce captivity, fear, and blind judgment on rich and poor, Jew and Gentile, sinner and (self-supposedly) saved. Every story is like a punch breaking through our ordinary selves, our ordinary religion, our ordinary injustice to one another. So of course his first public word proclaims Jubilee, for he knows we can do it. We have only to let go. *Release the captive!*

At the outset of this sermon, we asked why our number is not a great throng, when there is strong evidence that many people are waiting eagerly to see a church that looks like Jesus. You could lay the cause of the blockage on others. You could imagine it's the fault of the preacher, of the order of worship, of the music, of the stony architecture, of the governance, of the staff, etc. According to Jesus, none of that is the heart of the matter—though any of those concerns might be symptoms of the real disease.

The real disease, according to Jesus; the real cause of weakness in a spiritual community, is a breakdown in love, in unity, in relationship to God above all gods. The solution is to proclaim Jubilee. Its first command is *Cease!* Leave off ambition, and accumulation. Let the land lie fallow. Let yourself be fallow land and rest. Stop your bizziness. Look to one another. And forgive. Forgive everything. Forgive every debt. Learn love again. And celebrate.

It is obvious that the spirit of the Levitical law of Jubilee will never be

practiced in diverse populations where groups handle their fear and judgment of one another through politics, oppression, and violence. Never mind them. The important question is, What keeps a Christian community stuck in group-divisions, handling *their* fear and judgment of one another through politics, oppression, and inaction? To shrug and answer “human nature” would be to give up on Christ altogether. If Christ cannot break through the shell of ordinary fear and judgment that rules whenever humans forget that they belong to God and to no other, then what are we doing in church?

Riverside Church holds a great vision for a just world; this is a beautiful gift of God. Yet no vision can move one centimeter into reality unless those who hold it are purifying themselves of every possession. The world out there will not transform, unless the world in here is already transforming. The world out there cannot step in and take part in the church, unless the church is taking part in Christ. Jubilee means: *Are you worried about church money and structure and meetings you must make?* Worry blocks the beloved and bars you in, as it bars others out. There must be a Sabbath from so much work. Let the oppressed go free. Jubilee means: *Is there someone in the church whom you distrust or dislike, to whom you will not speak?* Your thought is iron bars to the beloved. You are its captive; so is the other. Proclaim release. Forgive everything. Let not a bitter word about another touch your mind, but you instantly ask yourself, *What is it about me, O Lord, that is so needy and feeble and fearful, that I do not lean on you to guide me in the path of love, but rather lean unto my own understanding, and freely despise one of your children. Dear God, proclaim Jubilee in me.* Why is such prayer rare in the Church? Why do we prefer the smell of our small self to the fragrance of Christ, which he gladly gives in the instant of the ask?

Here's the core of it. A social revolution demands of its leaders a personal revolution, a personal transformation—a break through into beloved. Corrie ten Boom set this down plainly: “Not on our faith any more than our goodness does the world's healing hinge, but on Christ. When Christ tells us to love our enemies, he gives, along with the command, the love itself.” Therefore, just do it. Let go. Forgive. Release. This is the only rule. The church which learns once more the rule of release—having seen with new eyes that they too have long forgotten it, just as Jubilee was long forgotten before Jesus came to synagogue one Sabbath—that church will break through to beloved. And the world will begin to turn.

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*The Riverside Church
in the City of New York*