

## Fulfillment

Sermon by Jan Wiersma

Community Presbyterian Church - Rochester, Minnesota

Third Sunday after Epiphany - January 23, 2022

Texts: 1 Corinthians 12:1-11, Luke 4:14-21

### SCRIPTURE READING 1 Corinthians 12:1-11

*We are one in the Spirit.*

Now concerning spiritual gifts, brothers and sisters, I do not want you to be uninformed. You know that when you were pagans, you were enticed and led astray to idols that could not speak. Therefore I want you to understand that no one speaking by the Spirit of God ever says "Let Jesus be cursed!" and no one can say "Jesus is Lord" except by the Holy Spirit. Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of services, but the same Lord; and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who activates all of them in everyone. To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good. To one is given through the Spirit the utterance of wisdom, and to another the utterance of knowledge according to the same Spirit, to another faith by the same Spirit, to another gifts of healing by the one Spirit, to another the working of miracles, to another prophecy, to another the discernment of spirits, to another various kinds of tongues, to another the interpretation of tongues. All these are activated by one and the same Spirit, who allots to each one individually just as the Spirit chooses.

### GOSPEL READING Luke 4:14-21

*Thus far in Luke, Jesus has been to the waters of the Jordan River to be baptized by John. Then, full of the Holy Spirit, he is led to the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. This confrontation did not leave him weakened, but empowered, and sure of his mission of healing and liberation:*

Then Jesus, filled with the power of the Spirit, returned to Galilee, and a report about him spread through all the surrounding country. He began to teach in their synagogues and was praised by everyone. 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, and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written: "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, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." 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. Then he began to say to them, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." Holy wisdom, holy word.

In Luke's gospel especially, so much of Jesus' life and ministry is about fullness and fulfillment. Mary and Elizabeth were filled with the Spirit - and then their own bodies and wombs are filled with new life, fulfilled in birth. Now grown up, Jesus enters the wilderness to be filled with the Holy Spirit and power. The light has grown inside Jesus to the point where he can't hold it in any more. It has to shine forth. Jesus is filled with light, filled with Spirit, filled with power.

This year, the message of fullness comes to us at a time when our lives seem so empty: schoolrooms empty of students, concert halls empty of music lovers, sanctuaries empty of worshipers. But hospitals are full, full of people who struggle to fill their lungs with air.

Some of us struggle to fill our empty hours, while others - health care workers, teachers, businesses short-staffed due to covid - have no free hours to spare. Gaps and inequities in the social fabric grow more apparent, while natural disasters and hostility between nations keep the world in a constant state of tension. We wonder, what are we supposed to do? How can we help?

Jesus filled his listeners' ears with promises they had hardly dared hope for: things finally going right for people who were poor, release for captives, sight for the blind, freedom for the oppressed, God's favor filling their lives. They were ripe for this kind of blessing. They had waited for centuries, since Isaiah's time, for someone to say, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." Today this glorious work is completed, accomplished, done.

But how could he say those wonderful works had been fulfilled *then* when we look around *today* and see so much still wrong in the world? That's the question I keep coming back to: Where is justice now? Where is clear vision? Where is freedom? What can we possibly do that will help? How can we fill the gaping holes and needs in our own time?

Stuck in our own isolation, it's easy to forget the mutuality of fullness: there must be something to be filled as well as something to fill it. Wind fills the sail. Water fills the cup. Bees fill the hive with honey. Nature abhors a vacuum. The true work of the ancient prophets was not to *foretell* the future but to identify, *tell forth*, the glaring holes in their present - needs begging to be filled.

Maybe you've heard it said that there is a God-shaped hole in each of us, and we will never be complete until God fills that space. Have you ever thought that there might be a you-shaped hole in the world, and that the world is not complete until you find your place in the family of things? This is the interdependence, the mutuality, the interconnection that finally makes the *universe one being*.

Richard Rohr, one of the most Spirit-filled of contemporary Christian teachers, illustrates this with the true tale of the red knot and the horseshoe crab - a lesson from environmental science.

Red knots are mid-sized shore birds, similar to sandpipers, robin-red beneath, with dark and light stippled backs, and very long beaks. They winter in South America and spend their summers



raising their young in far northern climates - a 9000-mile migration in spring.

Naturally, they get hungry along the way so they stop in Delaware Bay to refuel, feasting on the protein-rich eggs



of the horseshoe crab which just happen to be spawning as the birds fly over. Some years ago, scientists noted a decline in the red knot population: could it be climate change? Some rampant disease? No, it was linked to human destruction of the horseshoe crabs. Steps were taken to rebuild the crab population; the migrating birds, too, began to increase. There is a common need for one another. Without the birds, the crabs might have gone extinct. Without the crabs, the birds were doomed. We can never be filled or *fulfilled* on our own.



I was struck by something Jerry Locula, our speaker last week, shared with me later in an email, about his experience here: “I personally recognized that the message of social justice is not only difficult to hear by white people, it is difficult to preach to white people. It takes so much courage on both sides. I am grateful that your church has such great people who are open and have the ability to listen.” He’s right: It takes so much courage on both sides. There must be

ears to hear and voices to fill the ears, and genuine goodwill on both sides.

In my mind, I started calling this the reciprocity of need. Paul talks about this when he speaks of the variety of gifts, but the same Spirit; varieties of services and varieties of activities, but the same God who inspires all of them, manifesting - showing forth - the Spirit *for the common good*. We need each other. I think of our last year’s involvement at Gage East. It’s not just that the staff need more hands to do the work, or that the residents’ lives are so blighted or benighted

that they need our benevolence. We need them just as much. We need to offer our gifts, and receive theirs to us. The need and the blessing flow both ways.

Jesus was not mistaken when he said, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." This was not just another overblown campaign promise. His purposeful journey through his own land brought freedom and healing - though his announcement was not as well-received as we might hope. We'll experience the angry response next week. He fulfilled the prophecy in his day and for his time; in some ways for all time. And yet gaps remain, holes in the smooth weave of the world. Who will fill them?

A friend who lives in the comfortable retirement community of Charter House commented with sadness on the view from her apartment: Methodist Hospital, with all its lights blazing, every room occupied, not just with Covid, but certainly Covid sufferers, too. From a place of safety herself, she grieves for others. "What," she wondered, "are we to do? How can we help? I guess," she concluded, "we just have to keep our hearts open."



Yes. Open hearts beg to be filled by God, with the power of the Spirit. Open hearts seek connection, and find it. Open hearts receive the needs of others and perceive their own need to respond. There is light within you, within each of us, longing to shine forth. You need not worry; you are not the Messiah, and your shining need not dazzle the world; to stop one heart from breaking is enough. To

connect with even one lonely soul, to lighten one sorrow - it is enough. And scripture is once again fulfilled. Thanks be to God.

### **Prayer**

*God, Lord of all creation, lover of life and of everything, please help us to love in our very small way what You love infinitely and everywhere. We thank You that we can offer just this one prayer and that will be more than enough, because in reality every thing and every one is connected, and nothing stands alone. To pray for one part is really to pray for the whole, and so we do. Help us each day to stand for love, for healing, for the good, for the diverse unity of the Body of Christ and all creation, because we know this is what You desire: as Jesus prayed, that all may be one.*

(To remind us of our one-ness and the universal kinship of all beings, we use a contemporary version of the traditional Lord's Prayer:

*Our Father and Mother in heaven, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread, and forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors. And do not let us be led into temptation but deliver us from evil. For the kingdom, the power, and the glory are yours, now and forever. Amen.*