The Greatest Poverty
Rev. Jim Tippins
August 22, 2010

Luke 4.14-30
Ephesians 4.1-6
Psalm 42

Do you remember Pogo? Pogo was a political cartoon published from 1950-1970's. He had a prickly pear head and lived in Pogoland in the Okefenokee Swamp near Waycross, Georgia. A seemingly simple character, living in the simplest circumstances, but Pogo was not simple. He was plain. His humor and his truth was always plain. His most famous line, drawn while America was at the edge of the cold war with the Soviet Union was, "We have met the enemy. And he is us!"

In 1952 the cartoonist, Walt Kelly, said this about the human condition, "There is no need to sally forth, for it remains true that those things which make us human are, curiously enough, always close at hand. Resolve then, that on this very ground, with small flags waving and tinny blasts on tiny trumpets, we shall meet the enemy, and not only may he be ours, he may be us. Forward!"

The Gospel of LUKE tells us that after his testing in the desert, Jesus begins preaching in the synagogues all around Galilee. His reputation is growing as one with authority and insight. He returns to his hometown of Nazareth and steps up to the synagogue gathering of scholars, teachers and students and opened the scroll and began to read.

Reading the Holy Scriptures was never a casual occurrence. This was very different than our practice of having the word opened by all and even read aloud by the congregation. To read the scroll in public required learning, practice and confidence. A man was called forward by the elders to read. Even today, Jewish boys and girls practice for years before reading the Torah in worship. It is a rite of passage into adulthood captured in Bar Mitzphas and Bat Mitzphas. Calling someone to say the Torah blessings during a service is called an **Aliyah** (from the Hebrew, meaning, "to rise, to ascend; to go up").

Jesus stood and read with a power and understanding that was beyond the grasp of those who were seated there with him. He knew the reason for the Prophet Isaiah's words written hundreds of years before. He knew the promise and the premise for such bold hope: good news to the poor, setting captives free, sight to the blind. If a man declared that he came to do these things and did them, then surely he is the Messiah.

Jesus read the words of hope and promise and then he set the scroll back in its sacred container and said, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing…..

The men were enraged. How could this simple man, son of a simple carpenter and simple girl be the one to declare such outrage. How could this man make such a claim about himself and this time? He wasn't simple. He was plain!

They knew people who were poor, prisoners, blind and oppressed. What they did not recognize was their own poverty, imprisonment, blindness and oppression. In the hearts of all who were there that day were the very circumstances that Jesus had just read about.

They were not economically impoverished. Most of them would have been living in a certain sense of sufficiency if not even some wealth.

There were no prisoners there. No one was in chains.

A blind man would not have been sitting in the synagogue

And the part about oppression….. sure, they all knew the heel of the Roman government but life was tolerable for most of them.

Their reaction to the words of Jesus was not as much what he said about himself but what they understood him saying about them. If he was the messiah and was to proclaim hope, sight and freedom to the poor, blind and prisoners, who was listening? They were. And by his very declaration, he pointed to the very things

they used to separate and elevate themselves from the poor, blind and imprisoned. They were offended and enraged.

Like Walt Kelley said earlier, it is a human trait to see the rest of the world differently than we see ourselves. A narrow criteria seems to work here. The sinners are those whose sins are greater than ours.
The reason people are poor is that they will not work.
The reason millions are hungry is because they are lazy or ignorant.
The reason so many are sick is because they don't care about hygiene.

When we think of these conditions we do not see ourselves. Lets broaden our scope of vision. We have seen the enemy….. we have seen the poor…. we have seen the blind….we have seen the captive….. and it is us.

Malcolm Muggeridge, a writer, journalist and self-proclaimed agnostic, went to see Mother Teresa. His life was changed by their meeting. He wrote about her and his journey with her in his book, Something Beautiful for God. Muggeridge came from the wealth of the West into the poverty of Calcutta and discovered the poverty in his own soul. He said this, "The biggest disease today is not leprosy or tuberculosis but rather the feeling of being unwanted, uncared for and deserted by everybody. The greatest evil is the lack of love and charity, the terrible indifference towards one's neighbor who lives at the roadside assaulted by exploitation, corruption, poverty and disease. And he says later, "The greatest poverty in the industrialized world is the poverty of hope."

Jesus said he has come to give hope to the poor. He doesn't say to give money to the poor. He doesn't say to give possessions to the poor. He says HOPE.

Maybe you do not see yourself as poor. You might have debts, but you have a house, a car, food to eat. You have the choice of what and even when you eat. You think the words of the messiah are not for you. You are not poor. But will you see yourself in the light of the love of God. Do you know a poverty of hope? Hope for your soul and your world? Hope for your loved ones and even for those you do not love?

Remember the old sarcastic adage, "I was sitting around and thinking things could be worse, and sure enough, things got worse." We do find ourselves hopeless and hapless in the living of our days. One poet said this: We're as young as our faith,
As old as our doubts,
As young as our hope,
And as old as our despair.

Is it only the young who have hope? A man approached a little league baseball game one afternoon. He asked a boy in the dugout what the score was. The boy responded,

"Eighteen to nothing--we're behind."

"Boy," said the spectator, "I'll bet you're discouraged."

"Why should I be discouraged?" replied the little boy. "We haven't even gotten up to bat yet!"

Do you have hope?
Maybe the better question is what do you hope for? It depends on who you are. The woman without a job, kids at home and abandoned by her husband, hopes for something…..The man with AIDS, needing dozens of medications a day just to keep on living- hopes for something…The teenager who never hears a loving word- hopes for something…The parents whose child runs to the chaotic melody of the prodigal- hopes for something…The woman alone…. The man in his office, alone…..the child hiding from the shouting….. are all hoping for something.

Hope means hoping when things are hopeless, or it is no virtue at all...As long as matters are really hopeful, hope is mere flattery or platitude; it is only when everything is hopeless that hope begins to be a strength. (G.K. Chesterton, *Signs of the Times*, April 1993)

What is our hope. That the perils of this day are only for here, now. There is hope that is enduring, enduring and everlasting. “We have this hope”

What do you hope for?
The Bible says this about hope. It comes from God, He is the source of our hope, but it is a gift of grace. It is not something you can earn. This is tucked into a little verse in 2 Thessalonians chapter 2 at the end of verse 16. It's really a benediction. "Now may our Lord Jesus Christ Himself and God our Father who has loved us and given us eternal comfort and good hope by grace comfort and strengthen your hearts in every good work and word." Never let it be said that we did anything to earn our hope, it is a gracious gift. God is the source of that gift. God is the one who gives us something to hope for. God is the one who gives us everything to hope for. And He gives us this good hope by grace. (John Macarthur.)

Remember Cicero's famous line, "While there's life, there's hope,"

The school system in a large city had a program to help children keep up with their school work during stays in the city's hospitals. One day a teacher who was assigned to the program received a routine call asking her to visit a particular child. She took the child's name and room number and talked briefly with the child's regular class teacher. "We're studying nouns and adverbs in his class now," the regular teacher said, "and I'd be grateful if you could help him understand them so he doesn't fall too far behind."

The hospital program teacher went to see the boy that afternoon. No one had mentioned to her that the boy had been badly burned and was in great pain. Upset at the sight of the boy, she stammered as she told him, "I've been sent by your school to help you with nouns and adverbs." When she left she felt she hadn't accomplished much.

But the next day, a nurse asked her, "What did you do to that boy?" The teacher felt she must have done something wrong and began to apologize. "No, no," said the nurse. "You don't know what I mean. We've been worried about that little boy, but ever since yesterday, his whole attitude has changed. He's fighting back, responding to treatment. It's as though he's decided to live."

Two weeks later the boy explained that he had completely given up hope until the teacher arrived. Everything changed when he came to a simple realization. He expressed it this way: "They wouldn't send a teacher to work on nouns and adverbs with a dying boy, would they?" (*Bits & Pieces*, July 1991.)

Do we have hope, yes, yes indeed. God sent his son, our teacher, our example, our savior, Jesus Christ to show us, teach us, give us…HOPE.

Now may the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that you will abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.

Rev. Jim Tippins, Chaplain BMCN