



Westminster Presbyterian Church Knoxville, TN  
 January 26, 2025  
 The Rev. Dr. Richard Coble  
 Sermon: “The New Community”

**Luke 4:14-21 (NRSV)**

Then Jesus, in the power of the Spirit, returned to Galilee, and a report about him spread through all the surrounding region. 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 set free those who are oppressed, 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."

**“The New Community”**

Asheville, North Carolina, where my family and I lived for six years before moving to Knoxville, is known for its – shall we say – eclectic music scene. On any given day, driving through downtown you’ll hear music across the spectrum from beautiful to awful to, just, well...strange. There’s a woman who plays nothing but spoons; it’s the most astounding, subtle music, a combination of percussion and chime - she’s famous among the locals.

There’s also the weekly drum circle every Wednesday evening at Pack Square downtown, where anyone and everyone, with – it doesn’t even have to be a drum,

just something to bang on, comes together to make, just the loudest, most energized cacophony of noise you can imagine. It's awesome.

But my favorite repeat performance, by far, is a young man who I would see regularly by a bus stop on the West side of town. He's clearly a fan of hard rock music. Sometimes he would have an electric bass, sometimes an electric guitar. And he's playing it and singing for all he's worth, with the energy and enthusiasm of Bruce Springsteen in front of a stadium crowd, but it's just him, performing for the cars as they pass by. And the thing is, the bass or the guitar, are never plugged in to anything – no amplification at all. So, with all the street noise, you can't hear it as you pass by. But that doesn't stop him, he just keeps on playing for all he's worth, clearly plugged in to a tune only he can hear.

Knoxville and Asheville are pretty close together, so this isn't impossible. But it is improbable: You see, on Thursday night, I saw him here, on the corner of Kingston and Gallaher as I was driving home – doing the exactly same thing. No guitar or bass this time. Instead, he had a microphone, and he was singing to Knoxville for all he's worth. And here's the thing, the microphone wasn't plugged in, either. And you know how busy that intersection is. He was singing us a tune, for all he's worth, but it was one only he could hear.

Perhaps, Jesus could relate to this man, when he was 'in the Spirit,' reading the Isaiah scroll to his hometown synagogue in Nazareth. Perhaps Jesus also heard a tune only he could hear or knew something only he could know, when he said, with that strange finality, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled."

This is the first time the Gospel describes Jesus as 'in...the Spirit.' As if, the Spirit, is something larger. Not just a small bit of Spirit, hidden somewhere within, but rather, a great Spirit, bigger than us, surrounding us. Something we can step into. As if Jesus has stepped into and is surrounded by the very heart of God. A power, it seems, that only he can see.

There's more to this mystery:

Notice, for instance, the verb tenses of the Isaiah passage. They're all in the present tense:

*The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,  
because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor.*

*...to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to set free those who are oppressed.*

It's not news that will someday be good to the poor, out in the future.

It's not release that will someday come to the captives.

It's good news, now. It's release, today.

Factually, of course, Jesus and Isaiah before him are wrong. The poor, the captive, the blind, and oppressed remain where they are, in Jesus' day as today. As he says in the Gospel of John, "You will always have the poor with you."

So what is the good news? What is the release he proclaims?

*Blessed are you who are poor,* he says just a few chapters later.

Really, blessed? Do the poor think of themselves as blessed?

Finally, as if to bring it all home, Jesus gives his mysterious final pronouncement after the reading: "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."

If that's true, Jesus, then you must be seeing something none of us can see. You must be hearing some good news, none of us can hear. Because I'm looking around – in and outside these walls, in this town, this state, this country, and I see more pain than blessing, more 'not yet' than 'has been fulfilled.'

It's not for lack of trying though. You've got to give Jesus that.

Start anywhere in the Gospel of Luke: Jesus never fails not just to proclaim but to begin and gather a new community to himself, inviting everyone but always starting first with the outcast and the least:

He's healing the sick; eating with tax collectors and sinners; making community with lepers and paralytics; welcoming little children; befriending Zacchaeus; praising the Good Samaritan and Prodigal Son.

*When you give a banquet,* he says just a few chapters later, *invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind.*

In gathering this community, Jesus is doing something that takes the eyes of faith to see, some good news that takes the ears of faith to hear: he's creating the kingdom of God.

Here he is, the son of God with the outcast and the scapegoat, drawing them to the very heart of God – where they are affirmed as people of worth and dignity, no matter what the crowds or the empire or the world says otherwise.

He sees what no one else can see, which is just how much they are loved by God. Which is, just how much you, yes you, are loved by God.

Amid all the news last week – and there was plenty of news last week, you may have missed a press release from our denomination’s News Service about Congresswoman Sarah McBride, who this month became the first openly transgender member of the US House of Representatives, representing the state of Delaware.<sup>1</sup>

The press release from our denomination revealed that McBride is not only Presbyterian, a life-long member of Westminster Presbyterian Church – that’s right, *Westminster Presbyterian Church* – of Wilmington Delaware, but also, that it was the church that gave her inspiration to come out.

Yes, she made that decision during a Christmas Eve service back in the early 2010s. She made that decision sitting in a pew, after living a decade in the closest

In her book *Tomorrow Will Be Different: Love, Loss and the Fight to Trans Rights*, McBride describes this moment,

*I sat next to my parents at a candlelight service in the beautiful stone sanctuary of our longtime Presbyterian church. The choir was singing, ‘O Holy Night,’ one of my favorite Christmas hymns. And as I stared at the stained-glass window...I had my own realization. I can’t do this anymore. I cannot continue to miss this beauty. My life is passing me by, and I am done wasting it as someone I am not.*<sup>2</sup>

As expected, telling her parents the following Christmas day did not go smoothly – there was quite a bit of shock and grief and misunderstanding. They saw it as loss – loss of everything Sarah might lose as a transgender person: love, and jobs, and

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<sup>1</sup> David Staniunas, “Sarah McBride, Pathbreaking Presbyterian.” *Presbyterian News Service*. January 16, 2025. <https://pcusa.org/news-storytelling/news/sarah-mcbride-pathbreaking>.

<sup>2</sup> Sarah McBride, *Tomorrow Will Be Different: Love, Loss, and the Fight for Trans Equality* (New York: Thomas Dunne Books, 2018), 24.

safety, and recognition. In their shock and in their grief, her parents called their church's pastor, the Rev. Gregory Knox Jones of Westminster Presbyterian.

Rev. Jones later recalled: "We talked about the fact that this was your child. You love your child. [It's not] losing a son. You've gained a daughter."<sup>3</sup>

When McBride was sworn in, she put her hand on a Bible given to her by Westminster, when she was eight years old.

In her book, she repeats the statistic, that 41% of transgender people suffer from thoughts of suicide. When they are accepted by their parents, that number is cut in half. When they are supported by their community, and yes, even their church, that number is even smaller.

I think of that moment, on that Christmas Eve, so many years ago. Back when being trans was almost unheard of. When you could be fired from your job, denied service at a restaurant, publicly and institutionally shamed and humiliated for having a gender identity different from what you were assigned at birth. It's not so much different than today, really.

Even with the weight of all those other voices, McBride still heard a tune in that Westminster Church. Not 'O Holy Night,' specifically, but within that beloved carol, on the night the Church celebrates the birth of the savior, she heard Christ's song of:

*good news...to the poor.  
release to the captives  
recovery of sight to the blind,  
and freedom to the oppressed.*

Isn't that precisely the work of the Church, after all?  
To witness to that tune of good news.

In a world so full of bad news, intolerance, division, closed doors and high walls, the church is called to be the gathered community of the body of Christ, a community proclaiming his love, his grace, his welcome for all, but first and especially to the down and out, the lowly, the rejected.

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<sup>3</sup> Tiffany Stanley, "Transgender Trailblazer Sarah McBride Heads to her Debut in Congress, Hoping for a Touch of Grace." *Courthouse News Service*. December 31, 2024. <https://www.courthousenews.com/transgender-trailblazer-sarah-mcbride-heads-to-her-debut-in-congress-hoping-for-a-touch-of-grace/>

In a world so full of noise:  
 Consumed by the thirst for power.  
 Where sustainability is sacrificed on the altar of corporate greed.  
 And inclusion and equity are made into a political punching bag.  
 When even mercy is belittled and politicized, as it was when an Episcopal Bishop  
 dared to mention it last week on the national stage.  
 When...everything is politicized and divided: our hearts, and minds, our faith, our  
 communities.  
 So that, we can't even talk to each other without suspicion and hostility.

In the face of all that noise...

The Church of Jesus Christ is called to stand up, and sing, and proclaim, and cry  
 out, and pray, and witness to:

The Christ who gives

*good news to the poor,  
 release to the captives  
 recovery of sight to the blind,  
 and freedom to the oppressed.*

That Christ draws all those driven away back to himself, to his body, the body of  
 Christ, the Church, which, when it is truly the Church, never stops echoing Christ's  
 radical song of welcome.

Christ's radical song of welcome  
 Christ's radical song of welcome  
 Good news.

You know, the thing, about that man playing his electric guitar unplugged on the  
 street, in Asheville and now, if my eyes are to be believed, also in Knoxville?  
 You'd think it would be just noise. Just the deluded ramblings of some poor man  
 out there needing attention. But here's the thing. There's been a couple of times  
 that I've pulled up beside him and rolled down my window. And, you have to  
 really listen, because, of course, the sounds of the street drown it out, but it turns  
 out, I was wrong, earlier, when I said it's a tune only he can hear.

It's muted but You can hear it.

And, well, I've been surprised. I wouldn't have thought it. But it is. It's the most beautiful music.