

Fellowship of Hope sermon
July 12, 2020
Jubilee—anointing woman (Luke 7:36-50)

This is the year of Jubilee for Fellowship of Hope.
What does that mean?

There is little doubt that the notion of jubilee
has become secularized and diluted through the years.

Most people note that the idea has biblical roots
in the customs of Israel's Sabbath years and Jubilee years.

But over the years it has come to mean the celebration of almost anything
from the years of the reign of a king or queen,
to the years of a marriage.

Usually, the biblical roots of the concept are given lip service
by limiting the celebration to marks of fifty years.

Fifty years of a monarchy,
fifty years of a marriage,
fifty years of a monk's commitment to a monastery,
fifty years of a congregation's history.

But often, the theology of Jubilee as a time for the redistribution of wealth,
reparations, and other evidences of shalom and human thriving as the people of God,
are given short shrift, if any shrift at all.

Here at the Fellowship of Hope, we are getting the fifty years part of it right,
and, as I have come to know and love this community of faith,
we want to be intentional about the biblical theology of Jubilee as well.

As you know, if you have been reading the minutes of the elders' meetings diligently,
we have been thinking and talking about renewing and regenerating our Mutual Aid Fund,
as a Jubilee Fund.

There is a proposal in the works and we are looking forward to serious and lively discussion
about these important ideas and issues with our beloved community.

Our theme for these weeks, as guided by the worship group, is designed to lead us into the questions
that accompany our coming into our Jubilee year,
not only in its "50 years of lived history" connotation,
but what it might mean for our connection to the biblical notion of Jubilee,
as introduced to Israel and taken up by Jesus.

As we've been hearing the question from Keith and Suella and others of us,
what does the call to economic justice, restitution, and restoration
have to do with us as we reflect on and celebrate the fifty years of God's guiding
the Fellowship of Hope in this particular time in South Central Elkhart?

To summarize the biblical theology of Jubilee, the practice has its roots
in the reality that there are lots of diversities in human experience:

There are variances of sin, greed, domination.
There are differences of ability, drive, ambition,
There are happenstances out of anyone's control: disaster, disease, bad luck.

Jubilee was a remedy for the effects of those vagaries.

No matter what resulted from these ups and downs in fifty years,
on the fiftieth year everyone would get a do-over.

At least once in most people's lifetimes,
whatever was lost would be returned,
whatever was taken would be given back,
whatever was ruined would be restored.

There is, of course, debate about how and whether
these practices of Jubilee were ever really put into practice in Israel.

But what we can say for sure,
and I can't say it strongly enough,
is that it was a persistent idea.

It was a part of Israel's cultural DNA.
Furthermore, it was a lively and active part of Jesus' thinking and teaching.

There is every evidence that for Jesus, the notion of the do-over,
the establishment of justice, the restoration of the lost and the taken,
the leveling of the playing field, going back to square one in terms of fairness,
was good news not only to those who had lost something,
but also for those who had "found" what others lost.

It was good news not only for those from whom something had been taken,
but also for those who had done the taking.

It was good news not only for those who had fared poorly in the fifty years.
It was also good news for those who had fared well, even too well, in the fifty years.

It was good news not only for those who came out on the bottom rung of the ladder,
but also for those perched precariously at the top of privilege.

Jubilee is a word of freedom for everyone.
Paul says in Romans 8 that there is no condemnation for those in Christ Jesus.
The law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set us free
from the law of sin and death.

In our story for today, both the woman of the city and Simon the Pharisee,
for all his blundering posturing, are both people who are experiencing Jubilee first hand.

When the woman of the city invades Simon's precious dinner party for Jesus,
Simon is not happy.

This woman does not meet Simon's approval with her sloppy tears and kisses,
and that cloying, expensive, heavy perfume, for goodness' sake.

She is making a spectacle of herself, calling attention to herself,
and certainly behaving in ways
that are never going to be used as examples in Emily Post's book of proper etiquette.

But Jesus asks Simon, gently, do you see this woman?
Of course Simon sees the woman; that's the problem, everyone is looking at her.

But Jesus' question is deeper: do you see this woman?
This woman, this Jubilee seeker, this beautiful human loving and tending to Jesus:
Simon sees the woman one way; Jesus sees the woman another way.
Jesus is inviting Simon into Jesus' way of seeing her.

Luke doesn't tell us how the story ends, of course.
I'm often frustrated with Luke that way—just tell us how it all turned out!
But what his not telling us the end of the story gives us,
is an opportunity to imagine how it might have ended.

In fact, Luke gives us a hint when he notes
that Simon answers Jesus' question about gratitude correctly.

Simon admits that perhaps the woman is more gracious than he is himself,
because she, having lost most, loves the more abundantly.

As I imagine the end of this story
I think this encounter with Jesus is the beginning of Simon's Jubilee journey.
After all, however grudgingly, Simon does begin to think differently.
He begins to see the woman who made his party difficult the way Jesus sees her.
He begins to see that she might have something to teach him.
He begins to see the spiritual poverty of his own position of privilege.
He begins to move away from that position of privilege,
to take his place with the woman of the city,
to take his place with the rest of humanity.

I think there is every possibility that Simon started to let go of his sad and limited privilege.
I think there is every possibility that Simon might have begun to experience,
the joy of friendship with the woman who interrupts his dinner party.
I think there is every possibility that Simon began living out of the generosity of God.
I think there is every possibility that the trees might have clapped their hands for Simon, too.

It is what happens with so many other people in our biblical story.

We think of Zacchaeus, who out of his joy in meeting Jesus, begins his own super Jubilee,
not only restoring but restoring four times over, what he has taken by fraud.

We think of Peter, not only seeing the Gentiles as also beloved children of God,
but proclaiming exuberantly their inclusion in the body of believers.

We think of the Christians in Corinth, not so well off themselves,
Bringing their offering to their needy brothers and sisters in Jerusalem,
with great joy.

We think of the people of Israel, responding to the generous mercy of God,
and discovering the joy of that response,
a joy in which the very trees participate, clapping their hands in exuberance.

Jubilee is truly a party.

It is a party celebrating the generous mercy of God over fifty years
of life as Fellowship of Hope.

Jubilee is a generosity and a joy,
and this year we want to reaffirm and renew our participation in that God moment
of generosity and joy.

With all that is going on around us, and in us, in this strange new time,
let us reconnect and recommit to the age old notion of Jubilee.

The Jubilee resting at the core soul of God's people,
the Jubilee that Jesus offered the woman of the city, but also Simon.

The Jubilee that invites to clap our hands along with the trees,
and to go out with joy.