

Sermon: The Year of Jubilee
Text: Matthew 4:16-21
Date: Sunday, April 22, 2018
Preacher: Rev. Becky Smithey

In a recent Peanuts cartoon, Lucy approaches Charlie Brown with a paper and pen and says, "Here, sign this. It absolves me from all blame." Then she goes to Schroeder with the same paper and says, "Here, sign this. It absolves me from all blame." Finally, she comes to Linus: "Here, sign this. It absolves me from all blame." As she walks away, Linus says, "Gee that must be a nice document to have." And that's really what we're looking at this morning.

We have been looking at the song, "Days of Elijah." We have seen how Elijah declared the word of the Lord not only when it was hard to hear but also when it was hard to preach. We need to declare the word of the Lord, faithfully according to the Bible. Then we looked at John the Baptist who was a voice in the desert crying, 'prepare the way of the Lord.' And found that the way to prepare for the coming of the Lord in our lives was through repentance and the way to prepare for the coming of the Lord in others' lives was to preach repentance. This morning, it is time to turn to one of those phrases in the song that many people will not have heard of, 'The year of Jubilee.'

We have read from Leviticus where the details for the year of Jubilee were laid down. Basically, it could be described as a whole year of party. No work was to be done in the fields, slaves were freed, debts cleared and property returned to its original owners. It was the great equalizer. It almost turned the economic status into an episode of Star Trek. Why an episode of Star Trek? Well, before we got to some of the later Star Treks, the one thing Star Trek was famous for was its famous reset button. No matter how bad the situation was, no matter how grim the problem was or how much of an advantage the enemy had you knew that by the start of the episode everything would be back to the same way it had begun. Kirk might have a new love interest one week, but come next week she would be forgotten never to return. The Enterprise might be damaged beyond all recognition but come next week, it would be back to its straight-out-of-the-shipyards-perfection. The characters might be at each other's' throats, fighting over some really substantial issue, but come next week they would be best of friends again. The famous reset button. Everything returns to the way it was.

The year of Jubilee, the reset button, the great leveler. The thing that in Israel was supposed to turn economics from the dog-destroy-dog world we inhabit into a 50 year game with a reset button. OK, so not everything was rest, money was not pulled and then redistributed, but your ancestral lands were returned, slaves were released and unpaid debts were cancelled. It sounds great but surely it would have been unworkable. Well, I don't know about that, although it is actually doubtful whether it was ever implemented, there is no evidence to say that it ever was implemented and so see the 70 years of exile in Babylon as 1 year for every time the year of Jubilee should have been celebrated but was not. However, it's not quite as unworkable as it might seem. People knew when the year of jubilee was coming up and the value of things was to be worked out according to that. Obviously, no-one is going to give someone a loan for millions of dollars in December in the year before the jubilee. But this also extended to the way the "sale" of land was carried out. Technically, the land could not be sold but only leased until the next Jubilee year and the price that was paid was worked out in relation to this. So if you "bought a field just after the Jubilee year you paid a lot more than you did if you "bought" the same field nearer to the time of the jubilee year. It was a reminder to the people that the land was not really theirs but was God's who entrusted it to them. But it also was an economics unlike anything the world had seen before or since. It was not communism where everything was state controlled and you weren't supposed to own anything or make your own profit. Your right to own the land and property were enshrined as was your right to make profit. But it was not un-restrained capitalism either. There were limits on what you could do, you couldn't permanently buy up all your neighbors land. You couldn't bankrupt your neighbors or competitors permanently. And you were to care for the poor and not take advantage of them. No matter how bad things got

at the end of 50 years, you would have the land back, be freed from your debts and whatever situation you had got yourself into and you or your children could start again. It brought hope, there was a way out.

However, the ultimate concept associated with Jubilee was that of forgiveness and restoration. Debts were forgiven and lands restored to the condition that God had given them on first entering the land.

I have said that the year of Jubilee was probably never implemented. However, there are two instances from history where something like it has been attempted. One ancient and one modern. The first incident happened 35 years after Jesus' death and resurrection. In AD 66 when the Jews revolted against Rome, one of their first acts of rebellion was to burn the temple records of debt. Debt was a problem then as now, with many of the poor in so much debt they could not realistically pay. The act of burning the records, was a jubilee statement of a clearing of debts. The new free nation was to get a clean start.

The other example is a more modern example. It was initiated in 1999 I think and I believe is still going. It was called Jubilee 2000. Now I don't know if you've heard of this appeal or not. It was an appeal involving both Christians and non-Christians one of the highest profile was Bono of U2, but the reason for the name Jubilee was the large driving force of Christians and the Biblical year of jubilee. It was an attempt to get 1st world countries to forgive third world debts, as a one off deal. The problem was that they were paying more in interest payments to 1st world countries than they were receiving in aid. Britain agreed provided the countries agreed not to spend the money on weapons. Other countries didn't agree, so I think the attempt is still going on although with less publicity now.

But Leviticus is not the end of the year of Jubilee according to the Bible. The imagery and thoughts behind it are found at least twice more. Once in Isaiah and once when Jesus quotes from Isaiah in Luke chapter 4, which we also read. This passage is often called the Nazareth manifesto where Jesus lays out the framework of his mission. The passage is indeed used by Luke as a frame for the way he presents Jesus' mission. While the quote from Isaiah doesn't actually mention the year of Jubilee, it contains a lot of the same imagery and the idea is firmly behind what Isaiah says. However, Isaiah seems to take it beyond and event every 50 years. Perhaps in frustration that it never took place at all and the ideas designed to protect the poor were just ignored, Isaiah looked for an ultimate Jubilee when everything would be put right once and for all.

So what was Jesus trying to say by saying this passage had been fulfilled. Was he calling Israel to actually implement the year of jubilee that had never been enacted? Was it all about economic reform for Israel? While Jesus did make economic comments in his ministry, there is no evidence that Jesus was trying to get Israel as a whole to implement the year of Jubilee. So was Jesus just trying to put a spiritual interpretation to it? Well partly, yes. There is a spiritual interpretation here that we need to pay attention to.

Now the basic idea should be familiar to those who remember our look at the gospel of John. There we saw how Jesus' ministry was a new exodus, only this time it was freedom from slavery to sin rather than slavery to the Egyptians or Romans. Well in the same way, here Jesus is offering a release from slavery to sin. Again we are reminded from John that true blindness is not seeing what God is saying or requiring. The oppression which the people most needed freeing from was not the Romans but rather the oppression of sin.

But remember in the context of the year of Jubilee the key themes are forgiveness and restoration. The year of jubilee talks about slavery but it's not the usual type of slavery which we might think about. It is not the slavery of a subjected race by a conqueror. It was when someone got into debt that he could not pay, they were taken as a slave to pay the debts. When the year of Jubilee came round the debt was forgiven and the man was set free. So in one case there was forgiveness. The debt was cleared. But there was also another aspect of the freedom and restoration issues. It was not always a person's fault when they got into debt, sometimes they were just exploited by the rich, powerful and nasty neighbor. The year of jubilee was for them as well. They got their land back. The exploitation was undone. Jesus' death not only deals with forgiving us but also helping us deal with what had been done for us. It's not always instant or painless but it is there.

Corrie ten Boom told of not being able to forget a wrong that had been done to her. She had forgiven the person, but she kept rehashing the incident as so couldn't sleep. Finally, Corrie cried out to God for help in putting the problem to rest. "His help came in the form of a kindly Lutheran pastor," Corrie wrote, "to whom I confessed my failure after two sleepless weeks." "Up in the church tower," he said, nodding out the window, "is a bell which is rung by pulling on a rope. But you know what? After the sexton lets go of the rope, the bell keeps swinging. First ding, then dong. Slower and slower until there's a final dong and it stops. I believe the same thing is true of forgiveness. When we forgive, we take our hand off the rope. But if we've been tugging at the grievances for a long time, we mustn't be surprised if the old angry thoughts keep coming for a while. They're just the ding-dongs of the old bell slowing down."

"And so it proved to be. There were a few more midnight reverberations, a couple of dings when the subject came up in my conversations, but the force—which was my willingness in the matter—had gone out of them. They came less and less often and at the last, stopped altogether: we can trust God not only above our emotions, but also above our thoughts."

Or someone else put it this way. "Forgiveness doesn't make the other person right, makes you free." In the Spirit of Jubilee as a result of what Jesus did, Philip Yancey said in *What's So Amazing About Grace*, "At last I understood: in the final analysis, forgiveness is an act of faith. By forgiving another, I am trusting that God is a better justice-maker than I am. By forgiving, I release my own right to get even and leave all issues of fairness for God to work out. I leave in God's hands the scales that must balance justice and mercy."

The two key ideas here are forgiveness for the debts we have got ourselves into and also freedom from slavery, freedom from the things others had done to us. Jesus came to usher in the year of Jubilee, forgiveness for sin and also freedom from the things done to us. Jesus' death not only dealt with the evil we had committed but also dealt with the wrong done to us. The year of jubilee freedom, from our sins and freedom from the sins done to us.

But the year of Jubilee is not just about spiritual truths. It is about spiritual truths but those Spiritual truths should have effects in our lives as well and some of these are social. I think it's fair to say that Jesus expected his followers to form communities and to enact these jubilee principles within those communities. Which, if we read the description of the NT church from Acts we have evidence of this. It was about forgiveness, not just before God but between people as well. And not just in Spiritual matters but in material matters as well. People pooled resources and gave to the poor. One of the complaints Paul has is lawsuits between the Christians. Paul basically says he'd rather be wronged or cheated than take another Christian to court. Christians shouldn't be exploiting one another. The principles of Jubilee of forgiveness and freedom should be lived by Christians all the time.

British General James Oglethorpe, founder of the colony of Georgia, bluntly told John Wesley, "Preacher, I never forgive." Wesley replied, "Then, sir, I hope you never sin." The opposite of the jubilee attitude is found in this story. A pastor arranged for a gather of the women's auxiliary. It was to be a garden party on the church lawn, under the old oak. At the last moment, the morning of the party, Mrs. Preacher discovered she left Sister Hissyfit off the invitation list. The preacher called the dear sister and begged forgiveness. "I'm so sorry we didn't catch this sooner, Mrs. Hissyfit, won't you please come to the garden party?" cajoled the pastor. "Beggins' won't help now, Preacher, said the offended Mrs. H. "I've already prayed for rain!"

Another quote from, Philip Yancey, "The people of God are not merely to mark time, waiting for God to step in and set right all that is wrong. Rather, they are to model the new heaven and new earth, and by so doing awaken longings for what God will someday bring to pass."

And so, what can we say about the year of Jubilee? What do we mean when we sing the words "Lift your voice, it's the year of jubilee". Well, first, we are lifting our voices in thanksgiving and praise. In thanks that God is a God of forgiveness. That Jesus came to bring forgiveness. Both forgiveness for the wrong we have

done, as one version of the Lord's Prayer says 'forgive us our debts.' But also to bring forgiveness and healing to the things done to us. To set us free, to restore us. Sometimes that takes a long time and hard work, but God holds out the offer.

But we must also raise our voice in the proclamation of the year of jubilee. In the call for justice. The call for a second chance. The call for equality and for a rebalancing of the books. A seeking for people and situations to which we can announce the year of jubilee and a second chance.