

These past few weeks, I've been reminiscing a lot about my time spent in Tanzania, as I prepare to join this year's Christ the King group on their biennial trip of accompaniment with the folks in the Iringa Diocese of the Lutheran Church of Tanzania. Some of you might remember hearing me say that I've been to Tanzania three times: once as an exchange student for six months at the University of Dar es Salaam, the following summer as the student leader, accompanying the next group of US Lutheran college students to begin their exchange year, and then remaining for three months volunteering in a well-digging project in Singida, and then finally Sarah and I spent a year in Morogoro, where I did my seminary internship as a teacher and student pastor, and she served as administrator of the Swahili language school at the Lutheran Junior Seminary there.

One of the stories I remember so well from that third trip, from my internship year, was a conversation I had one afternoon with a secondary school student named Imani. Classes were over for the day, and students were heading back to their dorms to get ready for afternoon sports or other activities, and I was heading back to our house on the edge of campus, just past the dorms. Imani called out to me, “Mchungaji,” which is the Swahili word for shepherd, which of course also means pastor, “Mchungagi,” he said, clearly about to ask the question on his mind he then caught himself, offering all the standard greetings of Shikamoo (a greeting appropriate for elders) to habari gani (how are you) habari ya nyumbani (how's your family) habari za kazi (how's your work going) habari za leo (how are you today, just to be sure) to each of which I of course responded as appropriately as I could, Marahaba, nzuri, njemi, salama, and asked him a similar round of habaris—how's your day, how's your school work going, how is the afternoon, how is your family, before we got around to the question he had run across campus to ask me: “Pastor,” he said in English—remembering that apart from greetings students we suppose to speak English only during the school day, “Pastor, I was wondering did you already you collect our tests?” “Collect your tests? Did I collect the tests you took today?” I asked. “Yes,” he repeated, “did you collect the tests we took this morning.” “Collect them? Yes, Imani, I collected all the tests as soon as you were done,” I said, wondering what I was missing. “No,” he said, laughing, “I'm asking if you collected them—did you collect the answers, how many right, how many wrong, and give us our marks.” “Oh, I said, you mean did I *CORRECT* the tests,” I said, a little too loudly, suddenly aware that I might have offended him by suggesting his English wasn't quite right. But Imani just smiled, shrugged his shoulders and said quite evenly, “You know, Pastor, I'm from the south, and in my mother tongue we don't have any ARLs. To us collect and collect are the same word!” So I told him I would *correct* the test this evening and he'd have his marks the next day, and as he went his way, satisfied with this exchange, I was reminded that like most high school students at LJS, English was his third language, and his skill with it far exceeded my own meager attempt at Swahili.

Why you might ask, did I remember *this* particular story today? Well, it just so happened that the test in question had to do with the fourth chapter of Luke, and included the students writing down what Jesus had said that Sabbath day in his home congregation: The

Spirit of God is upon me, because God has chosen me to bring good news to the poor; to declare freedom to prisoners and recovery of sight to the blind; to set free the oppressed and to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor. Those were the words my students like Imani had remembered for their test. Those were the words I collected and corrected that day.

"The Spirit of God is upon me," Jesus begins, reading from the prophet Isaiah. He's come back to his hometown, to his home congregation, and according to protocol, he was asked to be a lector, a reader for that day. "The Spirit of God is upon me," he begins. This is actually a central theme in the gospel of Luke, particularly in these early chapters. You remember when we read about Jesus' baptism, and the Spirit of God descended on him in the form of a dove. That same Spirit accompanies him from his baptism, through his temptation—this series of challenges to his identity as God's beloved son that we'll come back to (a bit out of order) once Lent begins—the same Spirit accompanies him throughout his ministry as over and over he is described in Luke as being filled with the Holy Spirit.

"The Spirit of God is upon me," he begins. And then Jesus continues reading from Isaiah, announcing **good news** to those struggling economically on the fringes of society, hope to those who are imprisoned, healing to those without sight, a lifting of the burden from those who are weighed down or oppressed, and even the in-breaking of a holy year of God's favor. Back at his home church, Jesus is clearly familiar with that worshipping community as well as with the stories they tell. He stands in the tradition of prophets and priests alike who speak, engage, and teach God's word. We're told that the people appreciate his presence, his reading—I imagine they are filled with pride with one of their own, this local boy made good, the pride and joy of the entire congregation in his home synagogue in Nazareth. But then Jesus shifts from standing to read to sitting down to teach. And at first he adds just a few words of interpretation to the text. The sermon he offers is short and to the point: Today—this very day—this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing. And as we might say if this were happening today, he then drops the mic and walks away.

Jesus' brief sermon offers one thing more—fulfillment. The words of those who dream and hope, who work for justice and mercy on behalf of God, these things are *now* true, he says. No more waiting, no more longing, no more wondering "how long, oh Lord." Today, says Jesus, these words have been fulfilled. Unlike the prophets, unlike Isaiah and the rest, unlike even John the Baptist, Jesus is not pronouncing some sort of *future* fulfillment—he says in no uncertain terms that God has acted and that God is still acting in the world.

More than 2,000 years on since that visionary inaugural address that Jesus offered in Nazareth, Sunday after Sunday morning—and indeed, at other times during the week—we can still hear Jesus speaking this word of fulfillment, this word of vision and expectation, and we are called to join him in proclaiming God's good favor to all, in experiencing healing, and enacting social transformation. In other words, we are called again and again to see ourselves as the hands of God, the voice of God, the Body of Christ in today's world.

This past week, many of you were able to take part in our all-congregation night, when we heard and saw and talked about and had a hands-on experience of being God's hands in the world. We gathered around the question "Are you my neighbor?" and together considered another text from the gospel of Luke, the story of the Good Samaritan. We sang some songs, we heard the bible story and saw a brief video retelling of it, and then we discussed in groups who were the people today who are the wounded among us today? Who are the unexpected avoiders who steer clear of the problems? Who are the unexpected helpers, the last people you might think would lend a hand? And what are the barriers that exist today between those who need help and those who can offer help? And what can be done to break down those barriers.

Well, in the course of the evening Pastor Steve Thomason, our guest artist compiled ideas from the groups in the room and created this great modern-day depiction of who the wounded are, who the avoiders are, who the helpers might be. Meanwhile, each of the groups were busy working on their own hands-on art project, a mosaic that eventually came together to form an image of the hands of Christ, reminding us that we bring our hands and feet and voices and all of the body parts the Apostle Paul mentions in our first reading today to be the Body of Christ, and do enter into the work of God. God's work, Our Hands, right? And through our work we become the hands of Christ here and now. And it is by being Christ's hands that we can bridge the gap, the barriers constructed all around us.

Similarly, we hear these words spoken by Jesus, read first from the prophet Isaiah, then said to be fulfilled in his presence, in his reading of them. In these words, this inaugural address, this vision statement and action plan that Jesus was outlining as he began his ministry, in this we find our mission as well: to proclaim good news to the poor and to all people, to work for the liberation and release of all those in bondage, those oppressed by the systems of this world, to bring about healing and wholeness to those who suffer or are broken, and to declare God's favor for all people—not just this year but always, not just those already here but everywhere. The Spirit of God is upon us—each and every one of us, thanks to our Baptism into Christ's death and resurrection.

Thinking back to that afternoon when Imani asked me if I had corrected the tests his class took, I remember going home and looking at the tests right away. Not only Imani, nearly all of the class got that section from Luke 4 almost exactly word-for-word correct. Now, there are certainly pros and cons to the level of rote memorization used in Tanzanian education back then as today, which is certainly much more than we're used to here in the US. But Imani, and most of his classmates did just as well on the open writing section of the test, explaining in their own words what this passage meant back then and what it could mean today. They had internalized Jesus' words and their meaning for their life, for their world.

And while not all of them became pastors in the church, some of them did, and others among them put this into action as active lay members of their church, part of the movement Jesus launched in that inaugural address in Nazareth. They are part of a church that actively proclaims good news to the poor, liberty to the captive, sight to the blind,

freedom to the oppressed, the arrival of God's favor to all people. This is one of the things I hope to see again first hand and learn from on this trip to Tanzania next week: how the Lutheran Church in Tanzania continues to live out its witness to the Good News of Jesus by being a community of faith that embraces Jesus call to action: to announce the good news in word and deed, to put their faith into action, and to share God's love with all people.

We, too, are called to be such a community of faith. One that continually shares Christ's good news of liberation, release, health, wholeness, and God's favor for all people. We are called to hear again the soaring rhetoric and visionary action plan of Jesus' inaugural address. We are called to take to heart his words, and to make them our own. We are called to see and know that in Christ, these prophetic words have been fulfilled. And we are called to share that news with a world that desperately needs to hear it. We're called to be God's hands, God's feet, the body of Christ with all its many members, complementing one another, working together.

The Spirit of God is upon us. Now what?