

FREEDOM TOGETHER

Rev. Benjamin Broadbent

First Congregational Church of Colorado Springs

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Jubilee Day / New Year's Day / 1st Sunday after Christmas

'But when the fullness of time had come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, in order to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as children. And because you are children, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, "Abba! Father!" So you are no longer a slave but a child, and if a child then also an heir, through God.' -Galatians 4:4-7

I.

Here we are. New Year's Day 2012. Jubilee Day 2012. It is an honor for First Congregational Church to have been asked to host this celebration. I want to thank Rosemary Harris Lytle, President of the Colorado Springs chapter of the NAACP, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, for inviting us to host this event. And I want to greet Pastor Jesse Brown, a long-time laborer for Civil Rights in Colorado Springs and beyond. As well, I want to welcome those of you who have made a special effort to join us for this event. Our goal is an extravagant welcome and we hope that is your experience. Finally, I offer a New Year's greeting to my own congregation. Thank you for representing the rest of the folks on this Sunday following Christmas. Today is a day sometimes called a "Low Sunday," perhaps especially because it is also New Year's Day. Somehow, you knew today would be anything but "low." The cattle may have been lowing last Sunday, but not today.

Today we kick off a new year with a celebration, with a gathering of community, with an awareness that we belong to each other. Today we celebrate the Christmas proclamation: God has come, in Christ, to the diverse human community, and reminds us that we are family. In Christ, we are sisters and brothers, equally loved, equally valued, equally forgiven, equally set free from all powers that seek to dominate us and to diminish our common humanity. In the words of the apostle Paul, we are all God's children, adopted by our loving God, set free from all chains, and gifted with the Spirit of Jesus, which cries out in every heart "Abba! Father!" Today we gather to worship together as brothers and sisters who belong to each other as one common family, one common humanity, vouchsafed, affirmed, and guarded by none other than the one born of a woman on Christmas day. This is good news. This is a great occasion. It's a joy to come together as sisters and brothers in Christ and to offer God thanks and praise.

II.

Jubilee is a wonderful word, is it not? It's fun to say: Jubilee. It reminds me of ripe cherries popping in the mouth. Jubilee: It makes me think of confetti and trumpet music. Do you know that Jubilee may be one of the most radical ideas ever conceived. The idea of Jubilee comes from the Bible, from the Hebrew scriptures, from that book many of us avoid, the book of Leviticus. In chapter 25, we hear of the Jubilee Year, which is to happen every 50 years. During that year, all debts are forgiven and all slaves are released. It's an astonishing idea, and there is no evidence that it was ever practiced. Nonetheless, there it is, in our Bible. Jubilee: the practice of forgiving debts, of redistributing wealth, of freeing those who are in bondage.

Sometimes I have to wonder whether our leaders, especially the vociferous ones who have taken to thumping the Bible to justify their exploitative policies ever bother to open the thing. Jubilee describes a concrete way of implementing the good news of God's grace. God's grace is the free gift of love and acceptance that comes from no other than God. And God's grace leads to freedom:

Freedom from debt.

Freedom from exploitation.

Freedom from violence.

Freedom from discrimination.

Freedom from harassment.

Freedom from debilitating poverty.

The beauty of God's grace is that it leads not only *away* from these forms of evil.

God's grace also leads *toward* a whole lot of good stuff:

Toward a positive self image.

Toward a meaningful vocation.

Toward work that provides adequate resources.

Toward healthy food and water and air.

Toward relationships that build a person up.

Toward communities and governments that care for the least, look after the sick, protect the vulnerable, and stand up to all who would hurt or maim or destroy.

God's grace, expressed through Jubilee, can do, and is already doing, all of this and more.

III.

While we can and should celebrate the good news of God's grace, let us not pretend that Jubilee, as described in Leviticus, is our current policy. Jubilee was not practiced then and it is not practiced now. As the 99% movement recently highlighted, wealth inequality in this country has been growing for the past 30 years. Since 1979, the bulk

of our nation's economic growth has gone to the top one-hundredth of one-percent (that's .01), whose average annual income is \$27 million. The average annual income of the bottom 90% is \$32,000. From another angle, consider that since 2007, that is, during this "recession," Wall Street profits have risen 720%. In that same period of time, unemployment has risen 102% and Americans' home equity has decreased 35%.

These are figures for the population in general. If we look at race as a factor, we find that it's hard *not* to play the race card when the deck is stacked against people of color. Despite significant gains in civil rights, improvements in race relations, and an increase in positive images of people of color, institutional racism is alive and well, enshrined within an economy rigged to benefit, disproportionately, those at the top, and to disenfranchise those at the bottom, all the while insidiously insisting that this is a land of equal opportunity for all.

The underreported story is that, as bad as the unemployment rate has gotten, the rate for African-American men is *double* that of white men. Consider the poverty rate, specifically children in poverty. In 2010, 22% of children in our country were living in poverty. In that year, 12% of white children lived in poverty, 35% of latino children, and 38% of black children lived in poverty. Wow. I'm not a statistician - I found these figures on the internet from reputable sources - and there are many other statistics to explore, including incarceration rates, violence, access to health care and education. I hesitate to tell anybody here how they should feel when they hear these figures. I can tell you how I feel: dismayed, grief-stricken, outraged, somewhat helpless, but ultimately resolved.

IV.

For the church, in light of Paul's word to the Galatians, these are not merely statistics, these are people. But not just people. These are brothers and sisters, sons and daughters, family, every one of them, not by our own doing, but by God's adoption of us all as God's own children. How should we feel when we think on our men and women without work, when we think on our children living in poverty? As members of God's family in Christ, we should feel the same way as if it were our husband, our wife, our partner, our brother, our sister, our child. Now, I know that is a lot of weight to bear, which is why we need to bear it together.

And yet, many influences within our culture would keep us apart, would confine us to our silos of class and race and neighborhood: We're so busy running around getting stuff done, we haven't left any time to get organized and inspired. We're so distracted by our various forms of entertainment, we lose our ability to imagine a possibility other than the status quo. We're so concerned with our *own* well-being,

making sure that I got my fair share, that we have forgotten to look out for our neighbor. Our leaders don't provide anything like a moral example, divided as they are ideologically, and yet each one comfortably snuggled up in somebody's silk and money-lined pocket.

Perhaps we regular church-going folk aren't much better. After all, Sunday mornings remain the most segregated hour of the week. I'm not saying that we should naively think we're going to integrate our churches in 2012. What I'm saying is, "let's get together more often."

Let's not be divided. We say we're all a part of Christ's family.

Let's start acting like it.

Powers in this world would rather keep us divided.

Let's get together anyway.

Moneyed interests in this country don't want to hear us complain.

Let's complain anyway.

Politicians don't want us to rock the boat with our protests.

Let's protest anyway.

Hard-core individualists opine that we're better off if everyone looks out for themselves.

Let's look out for each other anyway.

Jesus came into the world to proclaim a new creation, to instigate a new way of being human, to constitute a new community, and to nurture a new way of being family. And Jesus held back no part of himself in order to accomplish this act of God's exceeding grace. God's work through Jesus extended from the cradle to the grave. Jesus was born to a couple who defied the definition of family. And yet there they were, a family by God's grace. Throughout his life, Jesus was constantly challenging all of the cultural and political powers that would divide people from people - race, gender, family-ties, sexual difference, relative wealth, varying styles of religiosity. His ministry called together people who thought they didn't belong together, and he gathered them to proclaim the breaking in of God's new creation.

He took this work all the way to the cross, and from the cross formed a family bond with a thief, and brokered his own mother's adoption of a new son. The cross has become the symbol of our God's bond with humanity through Christ, and it continues to symbolize the bond of God's new family, embodied by the church. As Paul wrote later in his letter to the Galatians (6:14-15), "May I never boast of anything except the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world (that is, the world as the status quo of power that would keep me

bound). For neither circumcision nor uncircumcision (that is, factors that would divide me from my brother and sister) is anything; but a new creation is everything.”

A new creation is everything. That is what we are called to be, friends, nothing less than a new creation,
a family constituted not by fear, but by grace,
not by greed, but by generosity,
not by suspicion, but by trust,
not by violence, but by vulnerability,
not by scarcity, but by abundance,
not by division, but by coming together to embody the community that will change this city, this nation, and this world,
not by our own plan, but according to one who whose Spirit cries out, even now, within us, “Abba! Father! Ima! Mother of us all!” Be with us, your people, whom you’ve already free. As we proclaim Christ, with his Spirit within our hearts, and his anointing upon our lives, let us proclaim what he proclaimed:
good news to the poor,
release to the captives,
recovery of sight to those who refuse to open their eyes,
freedom to the oppressed,
and, finally, boldly and impossibly, let us proclaim that this year, 2012, against all that would say otherwise, is the year of the Lord’s favor, a Jubilee year. May it be so. And may the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit, sisters and brothers. Amen.