

The Charter Statement

Luke 4:14-21

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“Gospel Music Sunday”

Before I rush in to my sermon, I would like first to acknowledge the incredible gift given to us today by our choir, the accompanying musicians, and our able guest director.

And before we strain with ear and heart and mind to discern a Word which God might have us hear today, I need to ask your permission.

I wonder if you might allow me to step out of my comfort zone a bit. I wonder if you might loan me the change I need to catch a ride on the Holy Spirit train that I have heard is making a stop at First Congregational Church today. And, finally, I wonder whether you might consider coming along for the ride? Yes, I am asking you to step out on faith, to get on the train this morning, and to journey into what may be unfamiliar territory.

With your permission, then, I would like to take up as my preaching topic, “The Charter Statement.” You may already know the definition of a “Charter Statement.” It is a document written on behalf of a group which describes the mission and purpose of the group, with the intent to lead and to encourage its members. While I am borrowing the term from a contemporary model, I believe “The Charter Statement” is an apt description of the passage of scripture from Luke’s Gospel on which I intend to preach today.

From the 4th chapter of the Gospel according to Luke, Beginning with the 14th of the chapter and concluding at verse 21, we hear these words:

¹⁴Then Jesus, filled with the power of the Spirit, returned to Galilee, and a report about him spread through all the surrounding country.

¹⁵He began to teach in their synagogues and was praised by everyone.

¹⁶When 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, ¹⁷and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him.

He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written:

¹⁸‘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 let the oppressed go free,

¹⁹to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favour.’

²⁰*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.*

²¹*Then he began to say to them,
'Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.'*

These words speak the power of life. They may be trusted. Amen.

I.

The context of the scripture is clear. Jesus, filled with the power of the Spirit, is coming home. He is returning to his roots. He has arrived at his hometown synagogue and his intention is transparent. He is there to maneuver his ministry in motion. He is there to kick off his career through the charisma of his character. He is there to adumbrate the articles of his ambitious agenda. He is there to punctiliously prognosticate the powerful programmatic points of his purpose. He is there to draft, to ratify, and to sign the Charter Statement for his entire ministry.

Jesus' return home affords me an opportunity to recall the first Gospel choir in which I had the honor to sing. While a student at the Harvard Divinity School, I joined Harvard's Kuumbwa singers. Of the 80 or so singers, I was one of maybe a half dozen or so white folks in the choir. As a minority in that choir, I experienced "home" in the welcome I received as no less a part of the chorus, no less a singer of the gospel. In fact, the close community created by that chorus led many of us to refer to it as our "home away from home." Amid the frantic and frenetic feel that was university study, that choir became a setting of solace and safety, a bright-spot of beauty and belonging.

Well, over spring break of that year, I went on tour with the Kuumbwa singers. We traveled south from Boston to Atlanta, stopping to sing concerts in along the way. I remember Philadelphia, where we sang at a large, primarily African-American, Pentecostal church. Coming from a small, primarily European-American mainline Protestant church, I felt pretty far from home. Imagine my fear and foreboding facing the fact that I had been allotted a solo in a call and response piece called "Glory to God" by Fred Hammond. I remember sweating and squirming in my leather shoes as the place in the program for that piece drew closer.

Finally the time came and there I was, with microphone in hand, a choir of 80 singers behind me and a congregation of over 2000 in front of me.

The piece began and I sang: 'Glory to glory to glory to glory to glory to God.' Then the choir came in and during the few seconds they were singing, I seriously doubted whether I would make it through the rest of the song. But then I looked out at the congregation and noticed how much folks were enjoying the singing, I noticed the degree to which the spirit was moving among them, and then I noticed a man in the front row.

At first, he was clapping and singing, smiling at the choir, and then he looked at me. He must have noticed the fear in my face because, smiling,

he gave me an encouraging nod, and mouthed the words “Bring it on home.” It was exactly the kind of holy encouragement that I needed, and just in time. You see, it was my turn again to sing: “Said to the only Savior, Majesty, Dominion, and Power. Forever and ever and ever be glorified.”

Bringing it on home is not an easy thing to do, and in some sense it is something that cannot be done apart from the Holy Spirit. We have no way of knowing what Jesus expected from his return to Nazareth, the town in which he had been raised. But as we read, we learn a few things about his homecoming.

In verse 14, we learn that the Spirit of God is with him, the same Spirit that descended upon him at his Baptism and the same Spirit that sustained him as he passed Satan’s tests in the desert, passed them with flying colors, 1-2-3.

In verse 15, we learn that he has been preaching in synagogues throughout the region of Galilee. His reputation is spreading and it is possible that they are expecting him in Nazareth.

In verse 16, we learn that it was Jesus’ custom to go the synagogue on the Sabbath day. That is, it was Jesus’ practice to be part of an intentional community and to hear the public reading of scripture.

In verse 17, we learn that, while at the synagogue, “the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him.” We do not know whether Isaiah was the prescribed reading for the day, but we could say that the Spirit itself gave Jesus the scroll. You see, that day was the day the Spirit would draft The Charter Statement for Jesus’ ministry. Today the agenda would be set. Today the snowball of justice would be set a rollin’ down the hill of God’s will.

Jesus unrolls the scroll and finds the place, Isaiah, chapter 61, verses 1 and 2, where it is written: *‘The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me...’* The first words of the Isaianic text affirm who Jesus is. That is, the text authorizes Jesus’ ministry by naming him the anointed one. You’ll recall that the word anointed, in Greek, is *Christos*.

So the text that Jesus reads interprets him. In reading that text, the Spirit affirms, authorizes, and anoints Jesus of Nazareth as the Christ.

But you may be asking, “anoints him to do what?” And I’m so glad you asked. The Spirit has anoints Jesus for a purpose, namely “...to bring good news to the poor,” that is, to deliver good news to those who are victims of unjust economic practices. In other words, Jesus’ good news is for those who know they are in need.

The Charter Statement continues: *‘He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favour.’* That last phrase is a reference to Jubilee, what brother Brueggemann has called “an extreme form of the Sabbath principle to liberate people

from all kinds of debts, to forgive all kinds of liabilities” (Mandate to Difference, p. 181).

I hope it is clear that we cannot say this Charter Statement describes a self-help movement. This Charter Statement is not a get-rich-quick scheme. This Charter Statement is not about self-aggrandizement or self-promotion or even self-preservation.

But we *could* say that this Charter Statement is about getting out of debt. We *could* say that this Charter Statement is about letting a new governance rule in our lives. We *could* say that this Charter Statement describes nothing less than a reorientation of our personal and public realities, a reorientation in the direction of justice and wholeness. The Charter Statement of Jesus inaugurates a dramatic reordering of our relationship with our neighbor.

II.

But the Charter Statement of Jesus also inaugurates a dramatic reordering of our relationship with God. Luke the Evangelist leads us to wonder what is meant by these words: ‘*[Jesus] rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down. The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him.*’ You see, they were all wondering, “What’s he going to say?” And this is what he said: “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.”

It’s tempting to read Jesus’ Charter Statement and to think, “Of course we should do those things.” Of course we should bring good news to the poor. Who wouldn’t? Of course we should proclaim release to the captives, well the one’s we’re sure won’t harm us anyway. Of course we should proclaim recovery of sight to the blind, especially to those who have been blinded by prejudice and hate. Of course we should let the oppressed go free. All of this sounds like a perfectly reasonable social agenda, doesn’t it? One we would be gladly willing to attempt to incorporate into our already busy, but well-intentioned lives.

But the question I have to ask myself is, why is it important that *Jesus* reads this text? Why is it important that the Spirit of God is upon *Jesus*? Why is it important that God has sent *Jesus* to proclaim release and recovery and freedom? Couldn’t we just adopt the Charter Statement without all the religious stuff on top? Without all the requirements of discipleship? Without all the trappings of the church? Can’t we adopt the Charter Statement without the confession that Jesus is the Christ? Can’t we do it without the one anointed by the Spirit in Baptism? Can’t we do it without the one who came out on the other side of desert-temptation filled with the Spirit? Can’t we do it without the one who is the fulfillment of prophecy?

III.

Let me answer, initially, that, yes, you could do such thing. You could adopt the Charter Statement without reference to Christ. But have you ever noticed that, despite our best intentions, we have little energy to carry out the terms of the

charter. You see, without Jesus, the Charter Statement has no power. Jesus is what gives it power. Without Jesus, the Charter Statement is a collection of good intentions, but without the necessary staying power to transform lives. Without Jesus, the Charter Statement is like a windmill on the prairie with no wind. Without Jesus, the Charter Statement is like a Lamborghini with a lawn mower engine under the hood. Without Jesus, the Charter Statement is like the Broncos since Elway left. Without Jesus, the Charter Statement is like a gospel singer with laryngitis... the will is there but the notes just won't come out. Without Jesus, the Charter Statement is like an organ with no billows, like piano with dental floss for strings, like a saxophone with no reed. I could go on, but suffice it to say that, without Jesus, the Charter Statement is like a church with no Holy Spirit.

But *with* Jesus, the Charter Statement has all the power it needs to transform the whole of life. It was *that* power that allowed Jesus to give the shortest sermon in history. You see, in the synagogue, a visiting rabbi would stand up to read from the scrolls. But he would sit down to interpret them. So, when Jesus was finished reading from the scroll, he sat down. People's eyes were fixed upon him, waiting for him to give the interpretation, the sermon. And he said, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."

In other words, "I *am* the sermon!" I am the pinnacle of all prophetic yearning. I am the means by which the poor receive good news, I am the Word by which the captives are released, I am the healing by which the blind recover their sight, I am the door by which the oppressed are set free, and I am the embodiment of Jubilee.

And we know he is trustworthy because after he drafted and signed the Charter Statement, he then carried it out. "Go tell John what you have seen and heard," Jesus says in Luke, chapter 7, "the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers* are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, the poor have good news brought to them."

IV.

I just want to take a moment to celebrate what good news this is. You see, Jesus is the one anointed and sent with power to do these things. On my own, all of it is impossible, and I may as well despair. But through him, all things are possible.

Without him, I may as well put my microphone down and get off the stage. But by *his* power, I can "bring it on home." Without him, our life together is, at best, a well-meaning, but tentative collection of self-interests, but by his power, we are a people united, a people with a Charter Statement, that is, a document written on behalf of a group which describes the mission and purpose of the group, with the intent to lead and to encourage its members. But we have one more thing. We have the power to enact it, not only our own power, but the power of the original signator who has signed his name with a pen that never runs dry.

Who else is ready to sign on? Who else is seeking a mission with meat?
Who else wants a purpose with power? Who else is being led to say, sign me up? Who else has been encouraged?

I don't worry that so often I am weak, for I remember the words of scripture, "I can do all things through him who strengthens me." (Philippians 4:13)

Let the people of the Charter Statement and the people who know where to find the power to enact it say "Amen."