

# EVERYTHING MUST CHANGE

## Jesus, Global Crisis, and a Revolution of Hope

### *Jubilee*

A sermon offered by the Rev. Roselin Runnels  
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Cross Creek Community Church, United Church of Christ  
Dayton, Ohio

#### **Mark 1:40-45**

*A leper came to him begging him, and kneeling he said to him, "If you choose, you can make me clean." Moved with pity, Jesus stretched out his hand and touched him, and said to him, "I do choose. Be made clean!" Immediately the leprosy left him, and he was made clean. After sternly warning him he sent him away at once, saying to him, "See that you say nothing to anyone; but go, show yourself to the priest, and offer for your cleansing what Moses commanded, as a testimony to them." But he went out and began to proclaim it freely, and to spread the word, so that Jesus could no longer go into a town openly, but stayed out in the country; and people came to him from every quarter.*

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When I was in seminary I was fortunate to learn many things that I had either missed in Sunday School (I'll admit I didn't always pay attention) or that I hadn't been taught. One of these is God's requirement of a Jubilee. Have you ever heard of this? Well, if you have, you can check out. Just be sure to check back in when I finish this part.

The story of the Jubilee begins as God's people are trying to understand their experience of liberation from slavery in Egypt. What does it mean to understand that God liberates? Let's take a look at that.

First of all we discover in Exodus that slaves were to be liberated after six years and not only liberated but it seems that the liberator held some responsibility to provide for liberated slaves until they were able to make it on their own. Secondly we learn that every seventh year, land was to lie fallow, i.e. it was not to be planted. Those who owned no land were allowed to harvest the crops that grew spontaneously when the land was not cultivated. Exodus also establishes a seventh day of rest and enjoyment for the entire household. Later in Deuteronomy we find that every seventh year, all debts are cancelled. I said cancelled, not deferred, but cancelled.

It seems to me that God intended that the playing field be leveled every seven years: slaves are freed, the crops of the land are released to those who do not own land and therefore cannot produce crops, and debts are cancelled.

At the end of seven seven year periods, or the 49<sup>th</sup> year, a Jubilee was to be declared. Year 50 was a time when God required that no fields be planted, that everyone's land lie fallow and that all eat from the crops the land produced. All debt was cancelled and land returned to original owners or sold to original owners with the repeated instruction not to cheat one's neighbor.

It seems that as the people of God worked out their relationship with God, they came to some conclusions about how a godly people would live their daily lives.

I hear many people talk about the presence of God in their daily lives or the presence of Jesus. Most of the time God or Jesus is described in ways that make God intimately involved in the minutiae of life. I hear that although I went through the intersection as the light turned from yellow to red, the officer stopped the person behind me who tried to sneak through as well. God was with me! I hear that God is testing me when my hours are cut at

work along with my salary. God is checking to see how I respond to trouble. Sometimes I get a sense that the most common understanding of God or Jesus is that they dabble in our lives and tinker with situations for the fun of it or to see how we will respond.

God is involved in our daily lives. Jesus is involved with us on a daily basis but not at the level of leading us to the best deal on a new car or the store that has just put the sweater we wanted for Christmas on sale.

God is involved in our lives at the level at which we make decisions about the way we structure our communities, whether they are faith communities or secular communities. For God there is no difference in the two. They are the same community. God is intimately involved in our lives as we create the situations that must be re-equalized every seven years.

I once knew a man who grew up as the child of Dutch Reformed missionaries in Africa. We occasionally spoke about our understandings of God and the stories in the bible. He told me once that his mother used to say that Jesus said "the poor will be with you always" because that's the way people are. Some people are just going to be poor. Even if you give them what they need to make it, they will end up poor again. I don't think she had heard about what God's people are to do every seventh year or every 50<sup>th</sup> year.

God seemed to know that equality has to be accomplished over and over and over. Once is not enough. We have to keep leveling the playing field and every 50 years we all need to eat from the same fallow fields.

Now you are probably asking yourself what in the world this has to do with the healing of a leper and McLaren's chapters on the equity system.

From the beginning of his ministry Jesus does not cease from doing the irregular, the irreverent and the religiously unlawful and forbidden. Today Jesus heals a leper. In doing so he touches the leper. Forbidden, very, very forbidden. Jesus also states that he chooses to do what he is about to do: touch and heal. The fact that Jesus tries to persuade the man to keep quiet about what had happened while simultaneously telling him to show himself to a priest and do the requisite things to be considered clean implies that Jesus is fully aware of the rules and regulations all about him.

Many translations describe Jesus as being moved by pity when he sees the leper. Some of the ancient texts describe Jesus as being moved by anger. Yes, anger. Perhaps he was angered by the old rules that kept anyone with a skin disease apart, isolated and unable to worship. Perhaps he was angered that when healed this man still had to follow religious rules to be considered whole again.

I can imagine Jesus moved by anger. I can understand that he would think that something is wrong with a system supported by religion that excludes and requires re-entry only after certain things have been done certain ways. I believe that Jesus was so profoundly in touch with the spirit of God that called for a level playing field to those many centuries ago was angered at the lack of progress. I believe he was moved by anger not pity. I believe his anger was at an oppressive system of religious requirements that made no sense and made life no better.

We all know that the Hebrews, God's people, did not have an easy time of it. We remember that they spent time as exiles in Babylon. They returned to Palestine and began to rebuild their lives and their community. Much had been lost while they were in exile. The later chapters of Isaiah speak to their circumstances as they work to restructure life:

*The spirit of the sovereign Yahweh is upon me,  
for Yahweh has anointed me  
to proclaim good news to the poor  
and has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted,  
to proclaim liberty to the captives  
and the opening of the prison to those  
who are bound,  
to proclaim the year acceptable to Yahweh.*  
(Isaiah 61.1-2)

It is entirely possible that as Jesus observed and participated in first century Palestinian life, he observed a very uneven playing field. He saw debilitating discrepancies between the way the Roman rulers lived and the way the residents of Palestine lived. He saw how religion was used by the ruling religious leadership to oppress God's people. He grew up seeing a system, a society and a people who needed a level playing field.

And so it should not surprise us that when Jesus, as a grown man, goes 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, and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written:

*The Spirit of God is upon me,  
because God has anointed me to preach good news to the poor,  
and has sent me to proclaim release to the captives  
and recovering of sight to those who are blind,  
to set at liberty those who are oppressed,  
to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord.* (Luke 4.18-19)

And Jesus closed the book, and gave it back to the attendant, and sat down; and the eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on Jesus, who began to say to them, Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing. The story continues with a reminder that God had a habit of sending representatives to the least likely place and the least likely bunch of people. And there he was: a Jew in a synagogue reading from a scroll. It was shortly after this that the people decided that he should be thrown off a cliff.

Last year the United Church of Christ celebrated 50 years of existence as the union of four sometimes like-minded and sometimes disparate denominations. It is fitting that the theme was Jubilee. It is fitting that the denomination supports marriage equality, speaks boldly about Iraq and the Church's Voice, engages in dialogue on science and religion, and links faith and the economy. This is what happens when there is a Jubilee.

McLaren doesn't mention a Jubilee but he does write about economic orthodoxy with one dominant framing story that rewards the insiders who see the world in outdated ways that cannot address the inequities that have developed. He calls for a Jubilee kind of fairness, one that includes a grace that can heal while undermining systemic injustice. He reminds us that today's religious institutions are not very different from those Jesus encountered. Ours teach us to see no horizon for the message of Jesus beyond the soul of the individual or the Jesus of life's minutiae I spoke of earlier. McLaren writes of a justice that "goes beyond fairness to include a concern for social sustainability, healing and transformation." Sounds like a Jubilee to me.

McLaren challenges his readers to three tasks:

1. Help the poor through generosity avoiding a dehumanizing and demoralizing paternalism. This can be avoided when everyone eats from the produce of the same fallow field.
2. Call the rich to generosity. Jesus knew how hard this one is. Remember that he told us that it is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than the rich to enter the kingdom of God. Think of a camel. Think of the eye of a needle.
3. Seek out and remove systemic injustice. This means seeing clearly what is present and what is absent. If there is a law that oppresses, write to the lawmakers with language for a law that removes the oppression. If there needs to be a law that prevents or protects from oppression, write to the lawmakers with language that prevents and protects from oppression. In short, do what you agreed to at your baptism: fight oppression in all its forms.

Let me close by bringing together McLaren's call for religion to organize for the common good and a quote from *The Trumpet of Conscience*, Dr. King's last book:

The developed industrial nations of the world cannot remain secure islands of prosperity in a seething sea of poverty. The storm is rising against the privileged minority of the earth, from which there is no shelter or isolation and armament. The storm will not abate until a just distribution of the fruits of the earth enables people everywhere to live in dignity and human decency. ...If we do not act, we shall surely be dragged down the long, dark, and

shameful corridor of time reserved for those who possess power without compassion, might without morality, and strength without sight. A true revolution of values will soon cause us to question the fairness and justice of many of our past and present policies. A true revolution of values will soon look uneasily on the glaring contrast between poverty and wealth.

The leper causes Jesus to see glaring contrasts. His power and compassion, his might and morality and his strength and sight act in concert to make whole. We are called to do the same, to participate in making the world whole. And let the people say amen.