

Nehemiah 8:5-10

5 Standing above all of the people, Ezra the scribe opened the scroll in the sight of all of the people. And as he opened it, all of the people stood up. 6 Then Ezra blessed the Lord, the great God, and all of the people answered, "Amen! Amen!" while raising their hands. Then they bowed down and worshipped the Lord with their faces to the ground.

7 The Levites—Jeshua, Bani, Sherebiah, Jamin, Akkub, Shabbethai, Hodiah, Maaseiah, Kelita, Azariah, Jozabad, Hanan, and Pelaiah[c]—helped the people to understand the Instruction while the people remained in their places. 8 They read aloud from the scroll, the Instruction from God, explaining and interpreting it so the people could understand what they heard.

9 Then Nehemiah the governor, Ezra the priest and scribe, and the Levites who taught the people said to all of the people, "This day is holy to the Lord your God. Don't mourn or weep." They said this[d] because all the people wept when they heard the words of the Instruction.

10 "Go, eat rich food, and drink something sweet," he said to them, "and send portions of this to any who have nothing ready! This day is holy to our Lord. Don't be sad, because the joy from the Lord is your strength!"

Psalms 19

1 Heaven is declaring God's glory;
the sky is proclaiming his handiwork.
2 One day gushes the news to the next,
and one night informs another what needs to be known.
3 Of course, there's no speech, no words—
their voices can't be heard—
4 but their sound[a] extends throughout the world;
their words reach the ends of the earth.
God has made a tent in heaven for the sun.
5 The sun is like a groom
coming out of his honeymoon suite;
like a warrior, it thrills at running its course.
6 It rises in one end of the sky;
its circuit is complete at the other.
Nothing escapes its heat.
7 The Lord's Instruction is perfect,
reviving one's very being.[b]
The Lord's laws are faithful,
making naive people wise.
8 The Lord's regulations are right,
gladdening the heart.
The Lord's commands are pure,
giving light to the eyes.
9 Honoring the Lord is correct,
lasting forever.
The Lord's judgments are true.

All of these are righteous!
10 They are more desirable than gold—
 than tons of pure gold!
 They are sweeter than honey—
 even dripping off the honeycomb!
11 No doubt about it:
 your servant is enlightened by them;
 there is great reward in keeping them.
12 But can anyone know
 what they've accidentally done wrong?
 Clear me of any unknown sin
13 and save your servant from willful sins.
 Don't let them rule me.
 Then I'll be completely blameless;
 I'll be innocent of great wrongdoing.
14 Let the words of my mouth
 and the meditations of my heart
 be pleasing to you,
 Lord, my rock and my redeemer.

Luke 4:14-21

14 Jesus returned in the power of the Spirit to Galilee, and news about him spread throughout the whole countryside. 15 He taught in their synagogues and was praised by everyone.

16 Jesus went to Nazareth, where he had been raised. On the Sabbath he went to the synagogue as he normally did and stood up to read. 17 The synagogue assistant gave him the scroll from the prophet Isaiah. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written:

18 The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
 because the Lord has anointed me.
 He has sent me to preach good news to the poor,
 to proclaim release to the prisoners
 and recovery of sight to the blind,
 to liberate the oppressed,
19 and to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.[e]
20 He rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the synagogue assistant, and sat down. Every eye in the synagogue was fixed on him. 21 He began to explain to them, "Today, this scripture has been fulfilled just as you heard it."

Sermon

Grace to you and peace from God our Creator, our Lord Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit: Amen.

When you hear the word **favor**, what's the first thing that comes to mind? We might imagine someone saying, "Can you do me a favor?" Or we might hear an announcement at a wedding reception, "Don't forget your party favors!" Favors seem, well, favorable in our eyes. It's good to receive a favor.

But what's it like to receive God's favor? Why does God's favor look like? Jesus stands in the midst of the Nazareth synagogue, his hometown community and hometown worship space, and says something like, "God's Spirit sent me here to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." Today, the year of the Lord's favor is our focus as we discern what kind of year God has in store for us as a congregation.

So we must begin with a question. What in the world does Jesus mean by this?

Well, there's some context clues here. Jesus uses four things to describe the year of the Lord's favor. (1) Preach good news to the poor. (2) Proclaim release to the prisoners, (3) Recovery of sight to the blind. (4) Liberate the oppressed. The year of the Lord's favor focuses on those in deepest need, reaches to those ostracized by society, serves those at risk for oppression. The Lord's favor, in this sense, intends to reset society into proper order.

God's desire for this kind of year of reestablishing equality is as old as God's faithfulness. In the Torah, God's law given to the Israelites wandering in the desert, God commanded that Israel should celebrate a Jubilee Year every fifty years. On the Jubilee, everything was returned to its rightful place. God given family land that had been sold was returned to the family. People who sold themselves into

indentured servitude, effectively a form of slavery, were set free. All debts were wiped out, totally forgiven. At least, this was the intention of a jubilee. In the historical record, including Scripture, there's no indication that this was regularly practiced, if practiced at all. But God's intent was for jubilee, for equality, for restoration to God's intended order.

So, when Jesus declares the year of the Lord's favor, he's also calling Israel to account for faithfulness to God's covenant, for this societal resettling, to value God's order rather than the disorder we so readily accept in our society. Jesus declares God's justice, not in terms of hateful judgement but in terms of compassionate reorganization. For the wealthy, though, this message surely was hard to hear, especially those whose bloated incomes depended upon indentured servants, or those real estate moguls that bought land that God gave to other families, or any person

whose wealth, whether directly or indirectly, benefited from the oppression of marginalized peoples. The year of the Lord's favor reminds us that the wealth that we have, the land that we have, the resources that we have, just don't belong to us. They belong to God, and God intends to share them with all people in a way that provides abundant life to all people. The advantages that society builds in for some of us, whether because of our race or sexual orientation or gender or inherited wealth, are leveled by the year of the Lord's favor.

As we got over a foot of snow on Friday, Michelle and I watched one of our favorite shows, *Girl Meets World*. It's a spinoff of *Boy Meets World*, a favorite show from my childhood, in large part because it took seriously the opportunity to provide life lessons. In the most recent episode, one of the wealthy characters, in response to the way that his family's riches often prevented them from

seeing one another since the parents were away from home and running the business so much, asked his father, "What good is what we have if it keeps us apart?" **What good is what we have if it keeps us apart?** There it is. That's how you identify God's favor. If it keeps us apart, no matter how good it seems, it's not God's favor. If it divides us, if it prevents community, if it hurts people or benefits from the oppression of others, it's not God's favor.

And this **IS** good news, this is Gospel, for all creation, for everyone. I recently saw on Facebook a wonderful quote about prayer. "Once a person was asked, *What do you gain by regular prayer?* The person responded, *Nothing. But let me tell you what I lost: anger, ego, greed, depression, insecurity, and fear.* Sometimes, the answer to the importance of prayer isn't about what we gain, but what we lose, which ultimately is gain." That's fundamental to the Christian life. Growth comes not just from gaining stuff, but

from losing the fears and perverted desires and broken behaviors that prevent us from becoming more like God. Losing that stuff is gaining God, and God's kingdom, and God's favor.

This seems to say that, God's favor isn't necessarily the kind of favor we seek, at least at first. But what we get in the year of the Lord's favor is so much more valuable than what we lose. What we gain is a community of equals, inclusive of all people. This means that everyone has responsibility to one another, to work for one another, to care for one another, to love one another. This year of the Lord's favor is built upon our commission to love our neighbors as ourselves, that we don't love ourselves, our time, or our possession more than we love our human kindred, all made in God's image.

Jesus declares that we're meant for communion and community with one another, and that God's desire is to set

the world right so that can happen without the hurdles that so often divide us. This does a couple of things for us. First, through those examples, Jesus gives us concrete images of what the year of the Lord's favor means. Good news to the poor. Freedom to captives. Healing to the sick. And liberation to the oppressed. The year of the Lord's favor has tangible results for people who face the deepest needs in our society.

Secondly, Jesus' proclamation enables us to dream about what kind of favor God might have in store for us, allowing us to envision what kind of favor God might look like in our context, about how we might become good news for the poor, how we might offer freedom to the captives, how we might become the balm that heals the sick, about how we might witness the liberation of the oppressed. Y'all have already shared such good ideas in response to the sermon questions. One of you suggested we

look more closely at our partnerships with organizations like Beans and Rice and the Radford Clothing Band the Women's Center of the NRV to increase the ways that we show God's favor to the community. Another suggested we look at after school programming with the middle and high schoolers in a new way, through the development of a community garden.

How exciting is that? Maybe we put these two suggestions together. We could partner with Beans and Rice and perhaps the Head Start just down the street to develop relationships with kids and families who are at risk for food insecurity. We could build raised beds on our property and work with kids after school to teach them how to grow their own food as a way of increasing skills and abilities to provide healthy meals and skills for work.

And it doesn't have to end there. How might we work to bless neighborhoods in Fairlawn and the West End of

Radford that are often overlooked when it comes to government improvement projects and church programs? Could we work with Grace Inside, Virginia's prison chaplaincy ministry, to send cards to inmates and proclaim release to the captives? How might we connect with the Community Health Center of the NRV to further the work of wellness and healing? How might we show favor to our neighbors who are poor, sick, imprisoned, and oppressed? What this leads us to see is that, in the year of the Lord's favor, we're meant to share the favor we've received. We're meant to see God actively at work in the world, and to live in ways that help people to see God's work too.

You've probably figured this out by now, but the year of the Lord's favor doesn't mean that we'll fall into ridiculous amounts of cash, or that our congregation will become politically powerful or socially well respected. It doesn't mean that our problems go away. Instead, God's favor

means we take stock of the wealth of gifts God's already given us, and how we're supposed to share that wealth. God's favor means we speak truth to political power in order to protect and uplift those marginalized by prejudice like poverty, racism, and sexism. God's favor means we see others favored first before ourselves. If it keeps us apart, it's not God's favor, so let's rid ourselves of those things that divide us and instead find ways to create relationships, to foster community, to experience God's favor through the images of God that live and work in our neighborhood.

This leads to some questions to consider as a community as we look to God's vision for us this year: What does God's favor look like in our context? Who most needs to experience the Lord's favor this year? How can we be signs of that favor? What do we have that keeps us apart? How might we instead find ways to share that, to leverage what we have to create community?

May we find God's favor at work, losing the things that divide us from one another and finding the things that we need most: active love of our God and active love of our neighbors. Amen.