He was despised and rejected (February 2, 2020)


Let us pray. God of love, fill us with your Spirit as we seek to understand the truth that our Lord proclaimed in the synagogue so long ago. Inspire us to do your kingdom work in the name of Jesus Christ, who frees us from oppression and gives us sight to see. Anoint us, O God, with your Good News. Amen.

I want to begin today’s message by watching a video that breaks down the demographics of the world’s population as if there were only 100 people living in the world. This video is produced based on the data from a non-profit organization called 100people.org and every year they compile global statistics and then analyze them as if only 100 people lived in the world. With our average weekly attendance being around 100, let’s imagine that we represent the entire world.

If the world were 100 people.

I watched a video like this one many years ago sitting in a classroom while I was doing my Master of Divinity degree at Knox College in the heart of the University of Toronto’s main campus. After watching the video, the professor had us discuss where WE fit into this picture of 100 people. It became obvious very quickly that as we sat in one of the finest universities in the world (aka the Ivory Tower), that we were all part of the 1% of people in the world who are well educated, have adequate food and shelter, and make a good living. Even though I was only working part-time while I went to seminary, I still had all of these things because of my husband’s employment.

When I compare myself to the rest of the world instead of comparing myself with the Jones family down the street, I am part of the 1%. And so are many of you. For most of us, the main reason why we are part of the 1% is because of where we were born. Canada is one of the greatest nations in the world and in 2019, we were ranked third in the global index of best
countries to live in.¹ We are ranked in sixth place on the Global Peace Index.² There is no doubt that we have a lot to be thankful for!

If we continue to imagine that we represent all of the people in the world, I want you to imagine if someone stood up in the crowd who was filled with the Holy Spirit and said these words:

“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, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.” (Luke 4:18-19)

If you heard these words proclaimed today and belonged the majority of people in the world who are poor and marginalized, how would you respond? Wouldn’t this be wonderful news!? Wouldn’t this be Good News!? I would hope that there would be clapping and shouting as we offer our praises to the Lord for delivering us from our suffering.

But that’s not what happened when we keep reading Luke’s gospel. Yes, the crowds gathered in the synagogue were amazed at Jesus’ teachings, but their amazement didn’t last for long. Isn’t this Joseph’s son? Who does he think he is, telling us that he has come to fulfill the teachings of the great prophet Isaiah?

It’s almost as if the people gathered in the synagogue were part of the 1% of their society and didn’t feel like they needed a Saviour. In fact, they felt threatened by Jesus’ Good News for the poor because this meant that they would have to give up their power and wealth. Their reaction to Jesus’ proclamation did indeed help to fulfill another teachings of the great prophet Isaiah.

Isaiah, that the Messiah would be despised and rejected. That the Messiah would be a man of sorrows who was familiar with suffering. (Isaiah 53:3) And that suffering would lead him to the cross, where he would be pierced for our transgressions and crushed for our iniquities. (Isaiah 53:5)

When I imagine myself sitting in that synagogue listening to Jesus, I must admit that I can see myself being part of the crowd who tried to throw him off a cliff. I am not proud of this, but it is the truth. And I suspect that I am not the only one who feels this way. Jesus did not come to woo his hometown crowd – or us for that matter - with an inspiring speech that makes us feel all warm and fuzzy. He came to announce the kingdom of God. And in that kingdom, the poor will be fed, the blind will receive sight, and the oppressed will be set free. In that kingdom, outsiders – like the widow in Zarephath and Naaman the leper from Syria – will receive healing and the blessings of God. (Luke 4:25-27) In that kingdom, the rich (the 1%) will be challenged to join in Christ’s ministry to the poor. They – or dare I say, we – will be challenged to confront the socioeconomic and political systems that legitimize poverty, inequality, and injustice.

**This is the upside-down nature of the kingdom of God. It is not what anyone expected!**

The kingdom of God – which was ushered in when God broke into this world as the Word made flesh (John 1:14) and which will be fully realized when Christ comes again – is where we currently live. But it is a strange place to be as Christians because we have one foot in the earthly world and one foot in the realm of God’s kingdom. In our earthly world, we live in one of the richest and most peaceful countries in the world. We have freedom, wealth, and opportunities that billions of people can only dream of. In God’s kingdom, we are called by the Lord to join in his work of reconciliation, justice, and equality.

As people who dwell in 2 kingdoms, this is why the work of Presbyterian World Service & Development is so important. It is kingdom building work. The mission of PWS&D is to work towards a sustainable, compassionate, and just world. They seek to accomplish this through
the priorities of improving food security, health, livelihoods, advocating for human rights, providing emergency relief, and assisting refugees. In 2018, Canadians across the country donated $2.3 million dollars to this ministry and when combined with matching grant programs offered by the Canadian government and our ecumenical partners, these funds were multiplied into $5.6 million dollars.³ This congregation is very generous in its support of PWS&D, along with other mission work here in our own backyard, across the country, and around the world. I honour and celebrate your generosity!

Today I wish to encourage to keep up the good work. You are generous givers and I urge you to continue to be so. I also wish to encourage you to do more as you are able. Even when this work takes us out of our comfort zone or forces us to re-evaluate our priorities, helping others is a very important part of our life in Christ and in his Church. We do this kingdom building work not for our own gain or glory, but for the glory of God. We do this work because our Lord, who was despised and rejected, calls us to proclaim the Good News to the poor, the oppressed, the blind, and the prisoners. He gave up his life for us and for that, we are eternally grateful. This is indeed Good News to celebrate.

Amen.