

Jubilee: When the Gospel Stops Being Polite

An Example Sermon for Jubilee Sunday

by Rev. Dr. Caleb J. Lines at University Christian Church, San Diego

Opening Prayer

Friends, will you pray with me?

Holy and life-giving God,
you call us to catch your vision—
your vision of a better world,
a world that can be made possible
if only we will cooperate together.

May we catch that vision
and make it a reality.

And now, may the words of my mouth
and the meditations of each and every one of our hearts
be pleasing to you
and acceptable in your sight,
O God,
for you are our rock and our redeemer.

Amen.

When I was going to seminary in Connecticut, one of my regular practices was to return to my sponsoring congregation at least a couple of times a year to preach. It was a kind of homecoming.

I don't remember the specific scriptures I preached on.
I don't remember the themes or the calls to action.

But what I *do* remember is this:
the congregation rallied around me.
They supported me.
They were grateful I was there.

They said, "Go off to seminary. We love you. We want you to do this—and then come back when you're done."

And I did. I came back when I was finished, and I still felt loved and supported.

It was much like the congregation I grew up in—
a church that gave me opportunities to lead in worship, to preach, and to learn.
They were always encouraging.

Jesus' experience was not like that.

Jesus grew up in a synagogue. When he entered public ministry, he was baptized, began teaching, and traveled throughout the region doing remarkable works. He started in Capernaum—and then, eventually, he went home to Nazareth.

I imagine he spent time with his family. And, as was their tradition, they went to synagogue together.

I picture the excitement when he walked in.
This is Jesus—now grown, now a rabbi.
Pride, familiarity, affection.

When it came time for the Torah reading, Jesus stood, took the scroll of the prophet Isaiah, and began to unroll it.

If you've ever been in a synagogue and watched the scrolls unfurled, you know the weight of that moment.

And Jesus reads a familiar passage—one everyone knows.

A Jubilee text.

“God has anointed me
to bring good news to the poor,
recovery of sight to the blind,
release to the captives,
and to let the oppressed go free.”

The people are excited.

Because Jesus is talking about *Jubilee*.

In English, the word *jubilee* often sounds like a celebration—a party, a festival. But in the biblical tradition, Jubilee is something far more specific and far more radical.

It grows out of the creation story itself:
God creates for six days and rests on the seventh.

So Israel practices Sabbath—
a day of rest for people, animals, and land.

Then comes the Sabbath year:
every seventh year, the land rests.

And then—every seven cycles of seven years—
the 49th or 50th year—
comes the *Jubilee year*.

In the Jubilee year:

- The land rests
- Debts are forgiven
- Those enslaved are set free
- And ancestral lands are returned to their rightful owners

Jubilee is a **system reset**.

It is the recognition that the world drifts away from God's intentions—and that sometimes justice requires more than charity. It requires restoration.

It's a popular idea in theory, of course.
Whether you love it in practice depends on where you stand.

If you owe money—Jubilee sounds great.
If others owe money *to you*—maybe not so much.

But Jesus' people lived under oppression. They knew debt. They knew scarcity. And so Jubilee sounded like hope.

Imagine:

- Student loans suddenly wiped away
- Credit card debt erased
- A mortgage simply gone

Now imagine something even more unsettling:
land and wealth returned to those who were dispossessed.

That's Jubilee.

So Jesus reads from Isaiah. He rolls up the scroll. And then he says:

“Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.”

The room glows.

Pride. Approval. Smiles.

The text says they spoke well of him.
“Isn’t this Joseph’s son?”

You can almost hear the murmurs:
“We helped raise him.”
“Such a fine boy.”
“A rabbi now!”

Jesus sits down.

And this is where things turn.

Jesus says, essentially:
“I know what you’re expecting.”

“Physician, heal yourself.”

You want me to do here what I did in Capernaum.

Then he reminds them of their own history—
times of famine, sickness, and suffering
when they did **not** take care of one another.

And Jesus makes it clear:

Jubilee will not happen because I say something beautiful.
It will not happen because I do it *for* you.

Jubilee happens only when **we do it together**.

And suddenly, the admiration evaporates.

Because now Jesus is holding them accountable.

Now the gospel is no longer inspirational—it’s demanding.

They don’t just disagree with him.
They drive him out of the synagogue.
They chase him to the edge of town.
They try to throw him off a cliff.

This passage should be required reading for anyone going to seminary.

Because it shows how dangerous the gospel can be.
And how quickly praise can turn into outrage
when faith moves from comfort to responsibility.

Jesus escapes and goes on his way—
no longer centered in the synagogue,
but meeting people in the wilderness.

Biblical faith is personal—but it is never *only* personal.

It calls us not just to individual belief
but to collective transformation.

Jesus refused to keep faith private.
He refused to limit salvation to the soul alone.
He applied faith to systems, economies, and power.

And that is what got him killed.

Jubilee is not an ancient idea that has lost its relevance. It is as urgent now as it was then.

In the lead-up to the year 2000, Pope John Paul II called for a renewed emphasis on Jubilee and debt relief. A global movement emerged—and in the United States, that movement took shape as the **Jubilee USA Network**.

Through its work, Jubilee USA has helped secure **over \$130 billion in debt relief**, including:

- Combating predatory payday lending
- Advocating for student debt forgiveness
- Restructuring Puerto Rico's debt
- Supporting microloans for global development
- Changing financial laws in the state of New York

New York, as it turns out, holds more of the world's debt than anywhere else—a legacy hinted at even in *Hamilton*:

“Virginia gets the capital, New York gets the banks.”

Change the law in New York, and you change the world.

And Jubilee is doing exactly that.

This year is especially significant.

As our nation approaches its 250th anniversary, a campaign called **Five Times 50** has been launched—a Great Jubilee—calling for renewed commitment to economic justice and structural change.

And we get to be part of it.

So friends, thank you.

Thank you for supporting Jubilee.
Thank you for working to break the chains of injustice
and economic oppression.

If we commit to doing this work, instead of expecting God to do it for us, then the scripture can
be fulfilled in our hearing.

May it be so and thanks be to God.

Amen.