

Fifth Sunday – Worship at Work
Why Little Libraries?
Luke 4:16-19

The words of Jesus that we just read from the Gospel of Luke weren't actually Jesus' words. He was reading them. Before they came out of Jesus' mouth, hundreds of years earlier, those words had been spoken by Isaiah, one of the greatest prophets in Israel's history. Isaiah said those words as if only someone appointed by God could say them. Often we read the Bible as if they were only meant for Jesus. But I think maybe Jesus was telling us that they can be our words too. So this morning I want to invite you to say these words out loud with me, as if God has put them in *your* mouth.

The Lord's Spirit has come to *me*,
because he has chosen *me*
to tell the good news to the poor.

God has sent *me* to announce

freedom for prisoners,
to give sight to the blind,

to free *everyone* who suffers,
and to say out loud,

'This is the year the Lord has chosen.'

What if that were actually true—that God has chosen *you*, sent *you* to make it clear to people that there is good news for them, something to hope for? What if we really believed that *this* is the year God has chosen to do something big, maybe even something miraculous?

I believe it. You know why? Because I think it's probably true about *every* year. The only thing is, we don't know what that miraculous thing is that God might do. We don't know which of those projects we start, or crazy ideas we commit ourselves to without knowing how it will come out, or little acts of kindness that might never get noticed, might be the thing that makes a difference. The thing that feels like God must have had a hand in that.

It is a particularly Methodist way of doing ministry to be out in the world trying to fill people's needs before we ever talk to them about faith. Methodists are not so inclined to evangelize; we're much quicker to bring food, or build water filtration systems, or fight malaria. I'd like to think that we're living in the words of St. Francis: "Preach the Gospel at all times; when necessary, use words."

But make no mistake: when do these acts of service; when we work with our hands to build and paint little library boxes or sort books; when we read with children who are just learning English as a second language; when we dig in the dirt to start a school garden, we are preaching the Gospel. We are speaking the good news of a God who is interested not only in what happens after this life, but what happens in *this* life. A God who pays such close attention to his creation that what matters to God is not just our spirits, but our bodies and minds as well. A God to

whom *every* sort of suffering matters. A God who will not stop nudging us until *no one* is left out of the picture of hope and connection and abundant life.

That's the God who inspired among some folks in this congregation the vision of putting free little libraries in parts of this city that many people try to pass through as quickly as possible, or avoid altogether. In neighborhoods where the only people who live there are the people who can't afford to live anywhere else. Front yards where there is not much that is beautiful or welcoming.

What we will be saying when we ask permission from property owners to plant these boxes in the ground, and when we show up to make sure that there are enough good books, and sometimes to repaint over graffiti, is: *We are in this community with you. We are your neighbors. It matters to us that your children can read; that they have books that will help them imagine something great for their lives.*

Who knows what God might do with these libraries—and with those children—and in us—in the year that is ahead?

Do you know that some experts think that almost 80% of the achievement gap between high-income and low-income students might be caused by the loss of skills that happens over summer vacation? That children with families that can afford time to go to the library or sit and read with them over the summer do much, much better in school. What if by next year we had a summer reading program here—so that our neighborhood's children have a fun and loving and safe place to keep reading all year long?

God's Spirit has come to *us*.
God has chosen *us* to tell the good news:
'This is the year God has chosen.'