

3 OPENING OF THE JUBILEE YEAR

In the vesper service to begin the Jubilee Year, Archbishop Weakland delivered this homily at the Cathedral of St. John the Evangelist in Milwaukee on November 28, 1999, the first Sunday of Advent.

This fiftieth year you shall make sacred by proclaiming liberty in the land for all its inhabitants. It shall be a jubilee year for you, when every one of you shall return to his own property, everyone to his own family estate. In this fiftieth year, your year of jubilee, you shall not sow, nor shall you reap the aftergrowth or pick the grapes from the untrimmed vines. Since this is the jubilee, which shall be sacred for you, you may not eat of its produce, except as taken directly from the field.

– Leviticus 25: 10-12

Underneath all these observances through the Jubilee Year that we just heard in Leviticus, underneath all those rules and regulations is a theology, and it is important that we begin the Jubilee Year thinking about that theology. The theology is basically this: the land belongs to God and we are but tenants on that land. Therefore, it has to revert back, it has to be cultivated, it has to be let to lie fallow. The accent is placed, first of all, on God and the prerogatives of God, and only then on what happens to us.

I think the same could be said with regard to the Kingdom and how the Jubilee Year is used in our tradition, because we want to begin by saying that it is God's Kingdom and by placing God in first place. There is a theology underneath all of that, and that theology comes from Jesus Christ himself and his revelation of what his mission was all about. In Luke, Chapter 4, he tells us why he had come, and he announces also a year of favor; he tells us that this will be the Good News, that there will be a year of favor from the Lord, a Jubilee Year, and that to live in the Kingdom of God is to live in that constant jubilee.

Everyone has to hear that Good News during this time. The signs of that Kingdom, the signs of the Good News, the signs of the Spirit moving among us in the Jubilee Year, Jesus tells us, will be when the poor hear the glad tidings, when the captives have liberty proclaimed to them, when the blind recover their sight, and when the oppressed go free. In other words, he is telling us that the Jubilee Year in the Kingdom of God, is a year in which all those who are in bondage will be freed.

All of us in one way or another fall into that category. Each one of us probably feels ourselves a bit captive. Nonetheless, we are being asked in the Jubilee Year, not only to look at ourselves and realize

that the Kingdom of God means that God wants to come to us and free us up. We are also being asked as a people to come together and realize that our duty in the Kingdom is to announce to all those in one kind of bondage or another that they shall be free, that this is what a Jubilee Year is all about. People can start over, everything can be restored to them, God doesn't change in love and God's care will be with us now and into the future.

I don't think Jesus Christ, when he announced that Jubilee Year in Luke 4, was just thinking about physical ailments, those in prison or those blind, those captive, and so on. He was also talking about all who are both physically and spiritually captive. The year of grace, the Jubilee Year, can be truly a year of being freed up. And so, you and I during this Jubilee Year have to ask ourselves who are the people in bondage here and now in our midst, who are the people who have to hear the Good News of God's love, who are the people who need that love, who are the people who need the courage to face life so that they can start over. I am sure my list might not be the same as your list. I made a list of all of those I think in one way or another are in bondage. When I come to your category, don't take it too seriously; think more about the other categories and all those who in one way or another are not in freedom.

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All of those who have to live in poverty in our midst, who don't have the things that you and I have, who find it difficult week after week to make ends meet, these people are truly in bondage. I start with the poor in our midst. What about those who have no health care, those who need it more than you and I, and yet don't have access to all those benefits in our society? How about all those who are under pressure and stress? I never knew how my mother was able to raise six kids on thirty dollars a month and still be able to make ends meet. To raise children as a single parent today is a tremendous stress. There's also the stress of people in business trying to make ends meet. I am sure that many, many people in our midst, even those who seem to have good things, are under tremendous stress and pressures because they don't know how it all has to be balanced to do for themselves and for their family as they would wish.

I don't know about those also without shelter. As you walk down this city you see many who have no place at night to lay their heads, you see many people without shelter. Every so often I read in the newspaper of someone who tries to do that for a night or two. I'm sure we could do it for a night or two, but to be homeless as a way of life because it's all you can do, that's something quite different. There are also those who have shelter but it is totally, totally insufficient. I don't know what a winter in Milwaukee without the right amount of heat would be like. The older I get, the more I need heat. I don't know how it would be not to have a good coat in the winter to keep me warm or not to be able to wear long underwear when I need it.

These are all little things, yet there are so many in our society who go without, who are in a kind of bondage.

What about those who in one way or another are spiritually in bondage? I think of all the people who are suffering and fighting addictions of one sort or another and how little help they can get in our society. Yet, they cannot be totally and fully the people God wants them to be, they cannot be totally freed up and taken out of bondage unless those addictions are taken care of.

What about all those who feel misunderstood in our society and in our Church? There are so many who feel unwelcome in our midst. We talk about wanting to be a welcoming Church, yet when a teenager comes into church with a hat on, what do we do? Do we tell him to take it off or leave it on? I don't know what to do anymore. We want him to be welcome and not correct him right away. What do we do about all of those who for deeper reasons don't feel at home in our Church, in our churches? I used to say there is no place anymore to hide behind the pillar in the church. Do you remember how you could sneak in and just hide there and then sneak out? You can't sneak anymore into our churches; they make you take up the collection, or do a reading, or they get you involved in standing up and sitting down. You can't just sit there and pray. What do we do with those who feel uncomfortable, not quite ready, or those who were hurt by the Church and are still recovering? What do we do about all those who are divorced and in second marriages? How do we make them feel welcome in our Church? How do we make the gays feel welcome in our Church? So many issues we have not resolved in our Church or our society, and so we have questions to ask during this coming year.

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And what about those who are depressed? I think depression is one of the major illnesses of our society. It seems strange that we have so much in our society, and yet we have so much depression. People who don't know how to face the next day, people who don't want to associate with others. Depression poses a very difficult question... so many people feel isolated. Go to one of our nursing homes someday and you will find out how isolated so many of our people feel.

There are also those who live with angers and fears. I meet a lot of angry people. Often that anger is diffused all over the place; it doesn't seem to light on anything or it lights on everything. So many people are inwardly angry. How are we going to free them up during this coming year, how are we going to reach out to them so that they change their attitudes? What kind of love can touch their hearts? Those are the questions we have to ask.

Then there are those who live in fear. I never lived in fear in my life; I never went to school with any fear. Yet I know that those are real things today. There are people who live in fear, and we must ask how we can help them to feel they live in a secure and safe society. What about those with low self-esteem who are discouraged? That's a common one. People who somehow feel put down and discouraged, whose talents aren't recognized, whose gifts never seem to surface, who are always in second place and never in first. That happens over and over again. We ask ourselves how we are going to help the discouraged and those with that low self-esteem so they know God loves them and they have something to contribute to the whole of our society.

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Instead of the list he made in Luke 4, if Jesus Christ were here today, I think he would make the lists I made and probably add a few others I don't know about. He would say: I came to pronounce a year of favor to all of them, that they be freed up from all these bondages that keep them from being the kind of people I want, people to love and honor me, people who are freed up to contribute and take their place in society.

I end then by saying: this year we begin with ourselves, learning how God loves us, that we all belong to God, that it's God's Kingdom, that God cares for each one of us; then we reach out to others and announce the Good News to them. Wouldn't it be wonderful if to everybody we meet on the street we could say, "God loves you" and mean it. If we could give them the sense that somehow they are worth something and that Christ came to give us all the fullness of freedom, the kind of freedom that is spiritually full because we are at one with God, and with Christ, one with each other.

If we could only find that kind of spiritual freedom we call salvation, redemption... then we would be freed to live out our gifts completely. That is what we have to do during this Jubilee Year. I think the Jews of old knew it was an ideal and a dream. But you start with dreams. Nothing gets better unless we have a dream. And so the dream of the Jubilee Year for us is that God came to free us. How can we help? How can we be his instruments? How can we be a part of that Kingdom? Let's begin! That's what the Jubilee is saying, and God will build the Kingdom then in and through those efforts that we make. God loves you.