Listening In A Time of Jubilee—What a Psychologist Hears
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It is an honor to participate in this year’s cycle of chapels around the theme of Jubilee. I want to thank Chaplain Van Groningen for pointing us in this direction and especially for inviting the faculty to play such a significant role in leading an entire year of chapels calling us to worship and reflect on the occasion of our 50 years as a Christian college—our year of Jubilee. When I first considered this theme of Jubilee at Trinity my thoughts turned toward reminiscence about the “old days”. Now that Trinity is 50 it actually has a history—Professor Sinnema has written a good one. When I arrived here as a freshman student in 1970—yes 1970—with plaid bell bottom trousers, three inch heeled shoes, paisley shirts, beads and long hair, Trinity was a mere eleven years old—too young to really have a history worth the name. But now that I have taught here for close to 32 years I know we have a history—much has changed. I have a lot of memories full of colorful characters, serious debates, conflicts and great joys—mostly in rooted in academic discussions and the people I have shared them with. I will spare you a recounting of those memories and save them for my retirement dinner some day—Lord willing. If we take Chaplain VanGroningen’s theme of Jubilee seriously I know he intended something more than just quaint memories and funny stories. In ancient Israel, Jubilee, as instituted by God, involved some amazing practices involving the forgiving of debt, the setting free of slaves, the returning of land, and so forth. If we cannot exactly return to the Jubilee practices of the Israelites then what meaning can Jubilee have for us today in a time and place far different from Canaan. One way to approach this might be to follow the thinking of a Christian philosopher, Jamie Smith who has recently published a book entitled, Desiring the Kingdom. Over the past several weeks faculty have gathered in small groups to discuss the insights contained in this text with the hope of exploring how they might shed light upon our mission as a Christian college.

One thing that Smith claims in his book is that every activity in life has a liturgy, a set of practices that embody the things we most care about and love. In that sense everything we do in some way is consecrated—offered up to Yahweh or an idol, or some ultimate source of meaning. He spends an entire chapter working through the liturgy of Christian worship explicating how each element in a Sunday service consecrates and incarnates meanings that open us to life, relationships, community and the world in particular ways. He also examines the liturgical practices embodied in shopping malls and football stadiums—places where you might not expect to find anything holy, sacred or consecrated—but it’s there if you open your eyes and ears. Now what I am asking you to consider with me briefly is how might we approach the Old Testament practice of Jubilee from this standpoint. What is the liturgy of Jubilee? What can we learn from it? How can Jubilee help us shape our lives and our college around a set of Christ-like, God-glorifying practices showing who we are in Christ and what we love and care about as we follow him and desire his Kingdom?

Before I go any further I must let you know to you a bit more about what I do—in case you may not know. In addition to my teaching here at Trinity I have been in part-time clinical practice for over thirty years meeting with 10-12 clients a week. As you probably know clinical psychologists apply psychological insights and techniques to the treatment of emotional and behavioral disorders. That profession, its perspectives and its practices profoundly shapes my world. Maybe it makes me a little different than most people. I used to worry about that. I don’t anymore. I am not sure if that says I am finally become normal or past caring. In any case what I am about to say about Jubilee is rooted in my life as a clinical psychologist—someone who lives, breathes, thinks and practices clinical psychology.
So when I think about liturgy in the context of clinical practice I first think about the practice of listening to the life stories of others. Like the television character, Frasier, I can say my motto is “I’m listening”. The people I listen to do not come to me first of all because they are happy, joyful, satisfied and healthy. They come to me with thoughts similar to those expressed by Solomon in the passage we read from Ecclesiastes. Or they come to me in the throes of suffering—often a suffering so deep it moans and groans with the whole creation as Paul described in the Romans passage. Just to give you sense of what I do here are some brief vignettes from what I listened to just last Tuesday—just one typical day. A woman in her mid-thirties who has lived in an abusive relationship for seven years with a man she loves with all her heart left him for good on Easter. Through her tears she speaks of the pain of separation from the man she loves, her dashed hopes and dreams, her fears of never having children, the lasting damage to her sense of self when he called her slut, bitch, and much worse. Next hour—a man of forty who has lost his marriage, his job, his children, because he cannot stop drinking despite thousands of dollars in rehab, AA meetings, many prayers and many promises. He comes into my office reeking of alcohol but denies to my face that he has been drinking. Next—on to the young girl of 17 who can’t seem to let go of what she believes is the love of her life. She thinks about him constantly despite hearing from her family and her pastor that it must be God’s will that they are not together. But I love him more than anything and I just know we are right for each other she says. Next hour—a married couple of fifteen years who have not made love in the last three years. The wife reports her husband will not even touch her. Why you ask? The husband says he cannot show her affection because several years ago he needed help caring for the yard and she refused to help him. You think to yourself— you’re kidding right? But he is serious. Hmmmm. On to the next hour—a young boy of twelve whose parents are divorced. His mother describes him as depressed and angry. You learn that his father abandoned his mother and now wants nothing to do with him either. He says it doesn’t matter but you know it does. Then to top off the day I meet with a woman of 70 whose children have abandoned her and facing the end of her life lonely and disabled by declining health. And last but not least I listen to another woman 60 years old whose husband is dying of cancer and she herself is disabled by arthritis. It’s 10PM—time to go home and listen to my wife tell similar stories of her cases. Sometimes I don’t want to hear them.

And on it goes. Hour after hour—day after day—more tales of tragedy, folly, abuse and mental anguish. Wow, you say. How do you do that—listening to those stories of pain, sadness and madness? Believe it or not—hearing the stories is not the most difficult part. The difficult part is the solitude—the demand to carry these stories alone, and ponder them, pray about them, but rarely if ever share them. To know with Solomon in his wisdom that everybody hurts—everybody suffers, everybody despairs—that so much of how people live is vanity and a chasing after wind. It can drive a person mad. Of course I seek to open myself to those who know and understand what it is like to do this kind of work. That helps, but I hope you get a sense of my world.

I can return now to the notion of Jubilee. What does a clinical psychologist like me hear when he or she listens in the time of Jubilee? Well, I would just point to three elements of what I consider to be Jubilee liturgy—the practice of joyful listening, the practice of listening to confession and repentance, and the practice of listening as emancipation.

First of all, listening is joyful celebration. Although it is questionable to what degree Israel practiced Jubilee as described in Leviticus the practices of Jubilee are, in essence, a recognition of God’s gifts to us.
It is God who made us and we are the sheep of his pasture says the Psalmist. That means that none of us owns, controls, or fully understands ourselves or anything or anybody for that matter—the land, our things, our children, our knowledge, our minds, our bodies, nothing. Everything is a gift from God and celebrating these realities as gifts is the source of true joy. For me as a psychologist that means listening to each person as a gift from the Lord, listening to their life story as a life surrounded by the love of their heavenly father, a gift to be treasured with what Carl Rogers described as “unconditional positive regard” no matter how foolish, hurting, delusional, anxious or depressed they may be when I meet them. This sense of celebrating life is what makes my work fun at times and always rewarding. I seek to give back to my clients what is rightfully theirs—the awareness of themselves as gifts from God. Communicating that sense of each person as gift requires practice, since not all persons seem like gifts at first glance, but it puts into practice on a daily basis what I truly care about and love namely to always begin by taking people just as they are, starting a relationship with where they are at, and refraining from automatic judgments, stereotyping or evaluating. It is hard work sometimes. It means that whenever I meet someone we enter a sacred space and in that sense my counseling office is a sanctuary, a holy place, a safe place of liturgical practice in which I celebrate the lives of others and hopefully invite others to celebrate the gift of life from our Lord.

Secondly, Jubilee liturgy is a practice of listening to confession and repentance, a turning away from what is evil, bad and hurtful. In ancient Israel it involved recognizing that taking advantage of others’ labor, land, and resources is a wrong that must be righted even if it takes fifty years. For me as a clinical psychologist it means listening to clients confront whatever brings pain and suffering into their lives. Together we have to face the pain, the folly and the ugliness in ourselves and others—face it, acknowledge it, and own it. Together we practice confession through moans, groans and lamentation—the cosmic and yet deeply personal reality of the Fall. When someone walks into my office I exercise the right to ask them to tell me honestly what is wrong, to confess what is not right in their lives, relationships, and ultimately their souls—or if they honestly do not know what is wrong (as is often the case) to join with me in the journey to find out. In recognizing what is wrong there is hope for making things right.

Finally the third practice, and perhaps the best part of the Jubilee liturgy, is practice of emancipation. This is the Jubilee practice most miraculous and most mysterious because it involves turning our world, ourselves and our relationships upside down, inside out—actually doing the unexpected, the unnatural, the truly spiritual act of setting things right. I am sure the ancient Israelites wondered and doubted the rationality of Jubilee practice many times. Who in their right mind ever gives back land you have acquired from others? Who sets free their slaves? Who forgives debts that one is entitled to collect? How can you be free, how can you be happy, when you let go of what you have, give away what makes you rich and powerful? I am not sure the Israelites ever found out, but I know in the Jubilee liturgy of my clinical practice it is incarnated in the lifting of bondage to secrecy, ignorance, folly, insecurity, suffering and hopelessness. Jubilee liturgy is about reversals of fortune, restoring what was lost, starting over, new beginnings—“it’s about freedom man” as we used to say in the sixties. It’s about miracles of grace. What I hear in clinical practice is how a person sounds when they have turned a corner, have become hopeful again, or just plain feel better than they ever have before because they finally told someone their deepest fears and anxieties. I hear Jubilee sounds when a person learns to value his or her self, when they realize for the first time that a relationship can get better, that forgiveness is real, that hurts can heal, that joy can be recovered.

Back to our starting point. Jamie Smith is right about this much—Jubilee becomes meaningful and real when persons practice the liturgy of Jubilee. I hear it in my office every day through the power of the Holy
Spirit. But Jubilee is much wider in scope than what my world and clinical practice is all about. Jubilee is everywhere persons they love their enemies, visit the sick and dying, turn the other cheek, give away their riches, say to each other, “I love you” or say finally say they are sorry and really mean it by changing their ways. These are the miracles of Jubilee that Jesus brought to fulfillment when he spoke of the gospel. Jesus was the living embodiment of Jubilee—he lived and practiced Jubilee when he healed the sick, brought hope to the poor, made the lame to walk, gave sight to the blind, and set the captives free—including those captive to mental illness by the way. How often he said things that seemed to startle his audience reversing the prevailing wisdom and order of things in the cause of righteousness. He frequently began his teaching with...You have heard it said, but I say unto you...

So what makes Jubilee still relevant for us today here at Trinity Christian College is not the mere fact of the 50 years we have existed, but the Jubilee liturgy we enact in our life together. Jubilee practices are the wisdom of God that shows the madness and folly of fallen human striving—check out Solomon. Read Paul—he understood it. Jubilee is revealed in the person of Jesus Christ, the way, the truth and the life that leads to salvation. Our hope is that all of life will become perpetual Jubilee—not something that comes around every fifty years or so and eventually death itself, the most predictable and natural of events will be no more, Christ’s resurrection is ultimate fulfillment of Jubilee, the restoration of life against the seeming futility of life. And when that happens at the end of times what a wonderful new heaven and earth we will enjoy—Jubilee—forever and ever—life without end. So if you are listening in a time of Jubilee—each of us from our own sense of calling and vocation—what do you hear? Keep listening. Amen.