

Luke 4:14-30

The Beginning of the Galilean Ministry

¹⁴Then Jesus, filled with the power of the Spirit, returned to Galilee, and a report about him spread through all the surrounding country. ¹⁵He began to teach in their synagogues and was praised by everyone.

The Rejection of Jesus at Nazareth

¹⁶When he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, he went to the synagogue on the sabbath day, as was his custom. He stood up to read, ¹⁷and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written:

¹⁸“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,
¹⁹to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.”

²⁰And he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down. The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. ²¹Then he began to say to them, “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.” ²²All spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his mouth. They said, “Is not this Joseph’s son?” ²³He said to them, “Doubtless you will quote to me this proverb, ‘Doctor, cure yourself!’ And you will say, ‘Do here also in your hometown the things that we have heard you did at Capernaum.’”

²⁴And he said, “Truly I tell you, no prophet is accepted in the prophet’s hometown. ²⁵But the truth is, there were many widows in Israel in the time of Elijah, when the heaven was shut up three years and six months, and there was a severe famine over all the land; ²⁶yet Elijah was sent to none of them except to a widow at Zarephath in Sidon. ²⁷There were also many lepers in Israel in the time of the prophet Elisha, and none of them was cleansed except Naaman the Syrian.”

²⁸When they heard this, all in the synagogue were filled with rage. ²⁹They got up, drove him out of the town, and led him to the brow of the hill on which their town was built, so that they might hurl him off the cliff. ³⁰But he passed through the midst of them and went on his way.

The Breadth of God's Love

A sermon preached at North-Prospect United Church of Christ, Cambridge, Massachusetts

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Text: *Luke 4:14-30*

This morning's reading from the Gospel of Luke ought be fair warning to any preacher. In this morning's passage, Jesus begins as the honored reader and interpreter in the worship service in the synagogue. By the end of the passage, the congregation is so disenchanted with him it tries to throw him off a cliff. But, as in most things Biblical, that's not all there is to the story, for this passage carries fair warning to the congregation, too. What an interesting and provocative task we have this morning to unfold the levels meaning these verses these verses contain, and what they hold for us.

Jesus has just begun his public ministry. In the preceding chapter he was baptized. Early in this chapter he has gone through the isolated retreat and temptation in the desert. He has begun teaching in the synagogues around the Galilean countryside, where he became famous and was highly praised. And now, he has come home to Nazareth. It is a great day for him and for the townspeople. Already his fame had spread from twenty miles up the road in Capernaum. And now he was home among neighbors and family. There was great excitement. There was great expectation.

As we join Jesus this morning, we are dropped into the midst of the synagogue service. Though Luke doesn't give us all the details, it would have gone something like this: The Hazzan, or the synagogue assistant, hands Jesus the scroll, which was in Hebrew. Jesus stands and unrolls the scroll to the passage he is to read. Standing, he reads from the prophet. Then he carefully rolls the scroll closed and hands it back to the Hassan. And then Jesus sits down and begins to teach.

And he says simply, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." They were amazed and delighted. They said with warmth and pride, "Is not this Joseph's son?" One of their own had become a learned teacher and a prophet, one who was claiming to be the fulfillment of the good news. Their buttons were bursting.

And this says a lot about his neighbors, a lot about his hometown people. For what was it that Jesus says is to be fulfilled in their hearing? What has Jesus announced? He has announced good news to the poor, release of the prisoners, and freedom from oppression. Jesus has announced a broad program of social concern and social reform.

It is interesting that many modern readers misunderstand the passage at this point. And that's understandable, because there is a tricky transition here. But the misunderstanding is quite revealing, nonetheless. Many readers believe that the passage goes this way: Jesus comes into his hometown. He's a big shot now, which already makes his neighbors a little envious and edgy. They already think he may be too big for his britches. Word of him has come back all the way from Capernaum. And now he is here to read in the synagogue in his hometown. And what does he do? He reads a very provocative passage, a passage with a challenging message of social reform. He talks about the poor and the oppressed. He even takes a pot-shot at the

criminal justice system, and suggests the releasing of the prisoners. Oh boy, Jesus is skating on thin ice here. And then he goes even further. He arrogantly announces, “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.” Jesus claims that he is the fulfillment of the social vision. Jesus claims that he is the messenger and the culmination of the good news. And the people, his friends and neighbors and acquaintances, say to themselves and one another, “This has gone about far enough. We know who he is. Isn’t he just Joseph’s son? Who does he think he is coming in here and telling us what to do and then saying, ‘I am the fulfillment of these words’? Joseph’s son; I remember when he was a snotty nosed kid. Who does he think he is?”

But this interpretation, I have to confess, says maybe more about how we think we might act if one of our own came into our midst claiming the authority to assault us with a provocative and challenging message, this interpretation may say more about us than it does about the townspeople of Nazareth. It’s just a dead wrong understanding of what the passage actually says. In fact, the townspeople were genuine in their pride of Jesus. They were glad for a prophet preaching justice and good news for the poor. According to Luke Jesus consistently preached a message of release from all kinds of bondage, from the bondage of poverty, from the bondage of physical ailments, from the bondage of political condemnation.

At least until this point the reaction of townspeople in Nazareth recommends itself to us. Jesus’ hometown people embraced his message, and that recommends itself to us. For it is disconcerting that many in the Christian church are increasingly distancing themselves from these focal points of Jesus’ message. Among many Christians there is great support for the policies of tax cuts, even though those cuts have benefitted the richest and cut help to the poorest, even though the cuts have often been a form of welfare for the corporations and left towns and cities faced with either raising the property taxes of its citizens or cutting spending on everything from public safety to education. In a nation that the polls tell us is far and away dominated by practicing Christians, we have consistently failed in the will to guarantee basic healthcare for our families and their children. And many in the Christian Church today are happy to use the same hackneyed arguments and flawed Biblical theology against same sex marriage that they trotted out against interracial marriage such a short time ago. It is easy to see why many Christians imagine that Jesus’ hometown neighbors were angry at his message of social concern and justice, but they weren’t. In this case Jesus’ friends and acquaintances are an example for us to emulate, for they heard the challenging word that Jesus brought to them, and they were proud to be in his presence, proud to claim him as a hometown boy, proud to say he was a favorite son.

Jesus understands their support. He understands that they are glad that he has come back to Nazareth not only to proclaim the good news but to institute it. They are ready for him not only declare but also to effect the good news to the poor, the sick, and the dispossessed. ²³He said to them, “Doubtless you will quote to me this proverb, ‘Doctor, cure yourself!’ And you will say, ‘Do here also in your hometown the things that we have heard you did at Capernaum.’” Jesus’ neighbors are ready for him to do his work here in Nazareth. And they deserve a lot of credit for their good-heartedness.

But from here things get even more interesting, and the tone begins to change. Jesus doesn’t bask in the warm feelings of his support among the townspeople. He doesn’t simply deliver what they are ready for, as good as that is. He goes on to further challenge the residents of Nazareth. And there is where it gets sticky.

It turns out that Jesus' hometown people were with him, that is they were with him so long as the good news was for them alone. They believed that charity begins at home. But Jesus alludes to two stories from the Old Testament, two stories they would have known well, two stories that make an opposite point.

In First Kings, chapter 17, Elijah the prophet tells King Ahab that because the king has fallen prey to idols, there will be no rain, not even dew in Israel for what turns out to be over three years. As you can imagine, Elijah had to go into hiding when the drought began to take its toll, and a famine ensued. God had Elijah hide out near the Wadi Cherith, east of the Jordan River. A wadi is a small brook or seasonal stream, and there Elijah could drink, and God provided him food. But as the drought progressed, one day even Wadi Cherith dried up. God then told Elijah to go to Zerephath, a town in the land of Sidon, and there to find a certain widow who will take care of him and feed him. The woman was kind and fed Elijah, even though she and her son were about to die because they had come within one meal of running out of food. Because of her kindness, her meal and oil containers remained mysteriously full throughout the drought.

In the second story in Second Kings, chapter 5, Naaman is the leader of the enemy army of Aram, or Syria. Naaman has contracted Leprosy, which both because of its physical and social complications would ruin his career and threaten his life. Through a young Israelite girl, who is a captive of the Aramians, Naaman learns of the prophet Elisha in Israel. Naaman ends up going to Elisha. Elisha heals Naaman by having him wash in the Jordan River seven times.

In both of these stories the point is that those whom God helped were outside the religious inner circle of Israel. The widow of Zerephath was from the land of Sidon. Naaman was the commander of the Syrian army and the enemy. Jesus alludes to these stories and emphasizes how the Israelites were left out while outsiders were not. Jesus says, "The truth is, there were many widows in Israel in the time of Elijah, when the heaven was shut up three years and six months, and there was a severe famine over all the land; ²⁶yet Elijah was sent to none of them except to a widow at Zarephath in Sidon. ²⁷There were also many lepers in Israel in the time of the prophet Elisha, and none of them was cleansed except Naaman the Syrian."

I need at this point to set out a cautionary sidebar about the meaning here. The uproar over Mel Gibson's about to be released movie about Christ makes it very clear how our ancient Biblical texts can be interpreted as anti-Semitic or anti-Jewish treatises. But to do so is really a travesty. Elijah and Elisha were prophets of Israel and were calling their native land and religion to account. Jesus was Jewish, and he was calling his hometown and his hometown's religion to reform. When we read these texts, we ought to see something very similar. That is, we should imagine Jesus speaking to us. We should imagine that we are the ones Jesus is trying to get to live up to God's expectations. It would be a great mistake of pride in the worst sense to imagine that we are on Jesus' side against the people in the text. We are the people in the text, struggling, missing the point, and failing God. To understand that is to understand ourselves to be like the Israelites and the Jews, loved by God, even as God gets irritated with our shortcomings.

With that in mind, let's return to Jesus in Nazareth. Jesus' hometown crowd has just made it clear how much they like his message, and how glad they are that he has come to Nazareth, on which he can shower his promises of good news to the poor and release to the captives. And Jesus has responded by telling them two very pointed stories in which it is not the

hometown crowd but outsiders whom God has flooded with blessings. According to Jesus' the good news was for everyone, not just the insiders. Jesus' stance in this matter was what allowed what was to become Christianity to move throughout the Mediterranean world and ultimately across the globe. The good news was for everyone, no matter the place of their birth, no matter their culture and tradition. As Paul would say, in Christ there was no Jew nor Greek, no East nor West.

Once again, this is a place for caution in our own interpretation. It is relatively easy to accept Jesus' idea that God reached outside of Nazareth or Israel. Indeed, we are living proof and the beneficiaries of this broad love of God. It is easy for us to accept, because we seem to be the ones Jesus was trying to include. But as before, we had better be careful about where we locate ourselves in the story.

For I imagine Jesus standing before us today and telling us wonderful promises of good news. But then I imagine him telling us that the Hindu Mahatma Gandhi understood the meaning of a Christian life better than many Christians. I imagine him saying that the Buddhist the Dalai Lama lives out the Gospel of love better than many who proclaim the Gospel. I imagine him saying that many same sex couples live the true meaning of the marriage vows than many heterosexual couples do.

Alan Culpepper says:

Not only is this scene [at Nazareth] paradigmatic of Jesus' life and ministry, but it also a reminder that God's grace is never subject to the limitations of any nation, church group, or race. Those who would exclude others thereby exclude themselves. Human beings may be instruments of God's grace for others, but we are never free to set limits on who may receive that grace. Throughout history the gospel has always been more radically inclusive than any group, denomination or church, so we continually struggle for a breadth of love and acceptance that more nearly approximates the breadth of God's love. The paradox of the gospel, therefore, is that the unlimited grace it offers so scandalizes us that we are unable to receive it. Jesus could do no more for his hometown because they were not open to him. How much more might God be able to do with us if we were ready to transcend the boundaries of community and limits of love that we ourselves have erected?¹

How much more if we could say, "This is Joseph's son, and we are ready to go the full distance with him. Amen.

¹R. Alan Culpepper in "The Gospel of Luke: Introduction, Commentary and Reflections," in *The Interpreter's Bible: A Commentary in Twelve Volumes, Volume IX*, ed. Leander E. Keck, *et al.* (Nashville: Abington Press, 1995), 108, 109