

Local Boy Makes... Not-So-Good? (Luke 4:16–30)

Pastor Hubert, Pinegrove, Jan. 31 2016.



The passage from Luke that the Lectionary gives us for today is, frankly, a tough one. When I saw it I felt like picking something else that's less challenging. If you ever thought of Jesus as always meek, kind, gentle and modest, well, you're going to be disappointed. Because we just heard how he cheeses off a whole bunch of people; people who like him and admire him, even! And what makes this passage even tougher is that we might also feel cheesed off by Jesus' words...!

Jesus going to his hometown synagogue and is given the honours and privileges of a visiting Rabbi. Typically, such a person would be asked to read the scripture appointed for the day; and then sit down and teach the congregation.

Jesus has just started his ministry. He has begun to travel from place to place to teach in the synagogues, and quickly gained quite a reputation as someone who changes lives, someone you just *got* to see and hear. So when he comes to Nazareth, his hometown, people are ready to welcome him back as someone who'd put Nazareth on the map. Local boy makes good; yay for Jesus!

They want to be wowed, and are hoping that he's going to do for them what they had heard he had done in other places, such as Capernaum.

Jesus reads the passage from Isaiah that Luke quotes in his story, and he begins to preach. This passage from Isaiah is "good news", it is news of restoration and renewal, "the year of the Lord's favour" in Isaiah's words, which is Old Testament lingo for the "Year of Jubilee".

Now before you go "the year of jubi-*what?*", let me explain.

All farmers know about crop rotation. Basically, it means you cannot grow the same crop in the same field year after year; if you keep growing the same crop, the soil will get depleted. Right?

In Israel, to let a field recover from growing crops year after year, every seventh year that field was left "fallow", with no crop. Cattle would graze there and eat whatever grew, fertilizing the land.

After 7 such cycles, so on the 50th year, a special "Year of Jubilee" was to be proclaimed. In the Year of Jubilee, all slaves were freed, all land returned to their original owners, and all debts were forgiven. It was a way of ensuring that the rich could not amass great wealth because of the misfortune of others and that each family had what was needed to earn a living. So in essence, every 50 years the nation pressed the "reset button" and everyone got a new start. Can you imagine a nation doing that? What an amazing concept!

By the time of Jesus, in a land under Roman occupation, this practise was nothing but a dream or a distant memory; but the people knew that this passage from Isaiah was written during another time of great difficulty.

It was a passage of hope; a passage assuring them that God's favour *would* once again shine on them. They knew this promise was also about them, right here and right now. And Jesus told them, "Yes; and not only that, but it's actually going to be fulfilled in your hearing."

Now if he had stopped right there, he would have been home free. They would have had a potluck lunch and praise him, and everyone would have been happy and proud of this local boy who made really good - and makes them look good, too.

But... Jesus does *not* stop there. Instead, he takes it one step further. He brings up two stories that they would have known, and he places them front and centre in his sermon. During the time of Elijah, Jesus says, the prophet did not go to someone who was one of them, a fellow Israelite, but to Zarephath, a foreigner, a non-believer - and a widow, too - a nobody! And yet it's she and her son who receive the grace and abundance of God.

And during the time of Elisha, God's healing was not given to someone from Israel, but to Naaman, again someone from Syria - a pagan, a foreigner - and on top of that: he was an enemy, an officer in the occupying army!

So as we think about this passage from Luke and what it means, we have to keep these two factors in mind: the Jubilee Year - and Jesus reminding his listeners that sometimes it's the non-believers who receive God's blessings. And judging by his audience's response, it seems that they're not too keen on hearing of any of these stories.

In that respect, we aren't all that different from those folks from Nazareth all of those years ago. To see what I mean, we only need to think of two issues - native land claims and immigration.

There are those who say that we cannot give our native people any land over which they have exclusive rights because we (the white majority) need free reign to make use of the natural and mineral resources of that land. "They" (the native peoples), they cite "treaty rights" and respect for the land - and "we" cite "the economy" and the need to keep it going. The economy always comes first.

And *immigration*, well, that's is a big issue right now, especially when the majority of our new immigrants are not from Western Europe as "our" ancestors were. People worry about the kinds of changes that are inevitable with the changing face of a community. Some people even play the "fear card", suggesting that by taking in refugees we're also taking in terrorists.

So, "good news" is not always "good" for everyone. Sometimes what is good news for one is *not* good news for another. Sometimes the good news of the Year of Jubilee, of healing, freedom and renewal, is just a lot of hard work. Sometimes "good news" is very hard to hear, and very hard to live.

Think of this "good news": the doctor says to you: "you have had a heart attack but you'll live - *IF* you change your diet, and begin to exercise." Or, "You don't have lung cancer, yet! But you'll have to quit smoking right now." That kind of news is only "good" *if* you're willing to make some big changes in your life, and that can be hard to do.

You see, I think that this was the problem for many of Jesus listeners. They thought that only *they* would automatically benefit of the good news. They thought that God's good news of God's redemption and freedom from oppression was just going to fall into their laps, with no effort on their part, and that all the changes would be pleasant and good.

But Jesus tells them - *and* us - that there is a cost to the good news. The cost is that those who are unwilling to follow God's way and prefer to stick to their own ways, well, they are going to lose out on the blessings of God. Those of us, and that is *all* of us, who are unwilling to look at our economic system which gives us many material blessings at the cost of someone else *and* at the cost of the environment/God's creation, well, they are going to lose out on the blessings and promises of God, says Jesus.

Sure, we all want the poor to have food. But, the gospel tells us, the poor will not have enough - unless the rich make do with less; that's what the Jubilee Year was for. And if you're among the rich, that's not exactly what you want to hear.

And don't think we're not rich, because compared to 3/4 of the world population, each of us here *is* rich. We have a house, a car (or two), three meals a day every day, we go to shows and movies, we travel for fun, and we have lots and lots of *stuff*. Compared to 3/4 of the world, we live in Disney World - year round! Our problem is not that we have too little, our problem is we have too much.

Thousands of people are dying every day for lack of food or clean drinking water, and what do we do? Complain there's nothing on TV...! We're so used to this absurd injustice, we don't even notice anymore. Or worse: we think it's normal.

And here is Jesus asking: what are you willing to give up, so others may live? How will *you* live out God's Year of Jubilee, and share what you have with those who have nothing? Are you up to it - or will it be up to others, the foreigners and non-believers, the people "on the outside"...?

See, I warned you that this was a tough passage! It's right up there with the rich young man who was told to first give away his wealth before even thinking about following Jesus. What do we do with those tough passages? Do we say, "nah, all very nice but it's just not realistic", or "nah, that doesn't really apply to us".

Or... do we have the humility to believe that this is what God's way is all about: about good news for the poor and the oppressed... Do we have the courage to wrestle with what that might mean... for us who are not poor and not oppressed? How do we respond to that? Do we run Jesus off like his townspeople did - or do we listen to him, hard as it may be?

Jesus never said that following him would be a walk in the park. On the contrary, he warned his followers it would be tough and challenging. But he also assured us that he'll always be there with us, that it's not all up to us, that we can always trust him. If we follow Christ, even when that's tough, we can do the impossible. Because ultimately it's not fear or hatred or the economy - but God's all-inclusive love and power that will triumph.

Thanks be to God! Amen.