

“THE JESUS MISSION”
A Sermon Preached at
FIRST UNITED PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH
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(transcribed from audio file)

The Word of the Lord comes to us today from Luke 4:14-30. Let us hear what God is saying to us today.

*And Jesus returned in the power of the Spirit into Galilee: and there went out a fame of him through all the region round about.
And he taught in their synagogues, being glorified of all.
And he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up: and, as his custom was, he went into the synagogue on the sabbath day, and stood up for to read.
And there was delivered unto him the book of the prophet Esaias. And when he had opened the book, he found the place where it was written,
The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he hath anointed me to preach the gospel to the poor; he hath sent me to heal the brokenhearted, to preach deliverance to the captives, and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty them that are bruised,
To preach the acceptable year of the Lord.
And he closed the book, and he gave it again to the minister; and sat down. And the eyes of all them that were in the synagogue were fastened on him.
And he began to say unto them, This day is this scripture fulfilled in your ears.
And all bare him witness, and wondered at the gracious words which proceeded out of his mouth. And they said, Is not this Joseph's son?
And he said unto them, Ye will surely say unto me this proverb, Physician, heal thyself: whatsoever we have heard done in Capernaum, do also here in thy country.
And he said, Verily I say unto you, No prophet is accepted in his own country.
But I tell you of a truth, many widows were in Israel in the days of Elias, when the heaven was shut up three years and six months, when great famine was throughout all the land;*

*But unto none of them was Elias sent, save unto Sarepta, a city of Sidon, unto a woman that was a widow.
And many lepers were in Israel in the time of Eliseus the prophet; and none of them was cleansed, saving Naaman the Syrian.
And all they in the synagogue, when they heard these things, were filled with wrath,
And rose up, and thrust him out of the city, and led him unto the brow of the hill whereon their city was built, that they might cast him down headlong.
But he passing through the midst of them went his way,* *NRSV*

This is the Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

This week I went thrifting with one of my adult children. Went to these vintage clothing stores and I realized something. Man, I had a gold mine with all my clothes from the 80's. We're going through these shops and I'm seeing stuff like, I had a shirt just like that. Yeah, I loved that shirt. Now it's being valued by the next generation. I felt really good about it. Man, if my grandfather had just kept some of those leisure suits he used to wear, we'd make a killing. But then we started to get to certain sections and at one point my son said, "Did you actually used to wear stuff like this in the 80's?"

I said, "Well, not that!" It was one of these jackets with bright colors, like neon colors all over the place and I was like, "No! That was garbage. No. I never wore that."

And I found myself sifting through all this vintage clothing and the stuff I liked from my childhood, the stuff that I liked to wear when I was wearing those clothes back then, oh yes. This is very valuable. Of course. But then the other stuff. I can't believe people are paying money to wear this nowadays.

We have a similar situation of trying to understand the value of things in this scripture passage. It's one of those passages where Jesus starts off strong and the crowd is with him and then it just takes a turn. Jesus shows up and it says that he was teaching in the synagogue as he was accustomed to do. So, this isn't his first time showing up to do some teaching. So, people showed up for this. He had a reputation at this point of wisdom and teachings and miracles.

He pulled out the scroll and it wasn't like he whipped out his Bible and flipped to the page that was labeled Isaiah and then he found a certain chapter and verse and then read it. No. Back in those days the scriptures were written on these scrolls and

there were no chapters and verses. In fact there were no spaces between the words. They were all the letters run together. It was no small thing for a person to be learned enough or gifted enough to just be able to pick something out from that and read it aloud. That was already impressive to them.

Came here to proclaim good news to the poor, to those who are in prison, to those who have different afflictions, the blind, or to those who are oppressed. He had good news for them and the home crowd sitting there applauded. Yes! Yes! It says they were amazed, and they thought it was wonderful what he was saying. And then they get together and say, “Is that Joseph’s son?”

And I will admit to you, when I was younger my memory of this passage was where Jesus said, “I have good news to bring” and their response was, “Who is this person? Isn’t this just Joseph’s son?” But if you read it carefully that’s not what is going on here. It’s more like, “That’s Joseph’s boy! That’s one of ours! Good one! Done good! That’s ours, right there! Hometown! We’ve heard you did some good stuff out at Capernaum. How about you do some of that good stuff here, so we can get some of those miracles and some of those blessings?”

Jesus knows this is their attitude. They are glad because they’re thinking it’s coming for us now and Jesus says, “Surely you’re going to say to me, doctor heal yourself. But I’m here to tell you a prophet can’t be a prophet in their own hometown.”

Side note. Do you know how many times people have quoted that Bible verse to me, coming back to be a pastor in my hometown where I grew up? It is difficult at times you can say.

But he says that to them and then he recounts a couple of stories to them. And knowing the full context of the stories might help you to understand, why did they go from applauding and saying, “that’s Joseph’s boy”, to “let’s throw him off a cliff”.

So, the first story is about a time when there was a great famine, and there were plenty of widows that were hungry. They were lacking food right there in Israel, but for whatever reason the Lord directed Elijah not to take care of those who were suffering in Israel, but instead sent them out into this pagan region, to this area where they did not worship the God of Israel and went there and found the widow there and ended up blessing her and her son so that they would not die but would live in plenty of food even in the midst of a famine.

And then the second story he tells is about when there was a great leprosy, skin disease happening all throughout Israel and the prophet Elisha did not end up healing

all these people in Israel. Instead what happened was, one of their enemies, one of their enemies from a foreign land came into their area and offered some goods and said, “Please give me a healing” and Elisha, as directed by God did lead him in getting healed.

So, in response to them wanting some hometown blessings, Jesus says, “Whoa. Whoa. God’s grace just doesn’t flow like that on demand and in fact sometimes it actually goes to the outsiders who aren’t part of your community. Sometimes it even goes to your enemies. This spirit of God is not going to be your lapdog that you can just call.

And they didn’t like that. Suddenly he wasn’t the hometown hero. He was the local brat, and they chased him out of the synagogue. This one that they had come to listen to because the blessings that he was speaking about meant they had to understand it went beyond just their own interests, and they didn’t like that, so much so they were ready to throw him off a cliff.

So, in these stories we don’t have a good parable to understand how we’re supposed to receive the blessings of God. We have a proclamation and a lousy response. But the good news is that right here in this church family we have a living parable to give us another insight into this, and we’ve been going through it. In fact some people are still responding to it.

Over the last couple of weeks, we’ve had a couple of what we call our Needs Among Us Sundays where we collected the needs that you have and we collected the needs from 50 families that are in crisis through Bright Point, and we mix them all up. We didn’t sort them and make sure we take care of the internal ones first. We mixed them all up and let the Spirit of God motivate you as it did last week to volunteer to help out with things or not help out with things. And we let the spirit of God go where the Spirit of God goes, to inspire what it inspires and to be faithful to that. And it works. And we aren’t lamenting helping some of those people. “Well, I don’t think some of those people have even been in our church before.”

The spirit of God and God’s grace flows beyond your own church membership area sometimes. And I would love to say that this is just like a really great form of discipleship that blossoms easily out of us. But the truth is, it was cultivated, and we were given a bit of a crutch over the years. Some of you who are new to our church don’t know how this attitude got developed here. Those of you who have been here for a while know that about 10 years ago we started Needs Among Us, but it was just us. It was just in the worship service collecting the needs and helping out one another and we did that for several years. Not because we were shutting people

out, that's just what we were doing at the time. It wasn't a purposeful decision, it's just what we were doing here.

And over the years it developed a sort of confidence to know that the message of God's grace, care and mercy was alive here in this fellowship and so we felt a little secure. And once we had something that we were receiving it made it easier for us to want to share it with others. Because when you know what it's like to be loved, to be cared for, it's easier to love and care for others.

So when the opportunity came up to partner with Bright Point, we started with 12 families in crisis. Then we went up to a rotating list of 24 families and now we're up to a rotating list of 50 families at any one time that we are partnering with. It works because we first built up a little crutch for ourselves. It's okay!

Can you imagine if when we started Needs Among Us, I said this. Okay we have this new program and it's called Needs Among Us. We're going to be collecting needs from these families that we don't know from Bright Point and if you have a need, no, we're not going to collect that. We're just helping outside the church. No one in here is going to get any help. It's just for the outside. How well do you think that program would have kicked off? Not so well. Not because we're evil, but because we're human. Because there is a brokenness in us that thinks about – us. And that was exactly what was happening in Nazareth in the story that we read today.

Even all these years later, about once every two to three years a little thing creeps up. It's a little rumor that starts going through the church and it sounds something like this. "Well, I heard that with helping all those families from Bright Point that we don't have enough money or volunteers to help out our own people in the church anymore." And that's not true. I don't know how. Someone wonders. Someone thinks and then someone says it. And then it sounds real and then we have that fear, maybe we're not taking care of our own folks. Too much attention to those other families. Then we explain that's not true and then it goes away. But it's always there, ready to creep up on us, that worry that we're not getting enough hometown blessings.

Look, God sees that, and God understands it. We're human beings. We have weaknesses and worries, but we're working at it. We're working at it because we don't want to limit God's grace quite like that.

People tend to hear God's grace, the good news that is given to them according to their own pre-existing beliefs, and filters, and fears.

This passage that we're going through today. This is one of those where people go like, "Yeah. But . . ." and put limits on it. We live in a society that demands that you pick a team – politically, ideologically, and that you make everything else in your life fit into that pattern, including your faith.

If you are conservative, you have to have this kind of faith. If you are a liberal, then you have to have this kind of faith. There is never a point in our lives when we are meant to make the gospel of Jesus Christ a slave to your political party or a slave to your ideology. The gospel of Jesus Christ, the mission that Jesus puts us on is above all those other ideas that we come up with, all those other systems that we invent.

Folks, I am not here to push MSNBC News. I am not here to push FOX News. I am here to push the good news and that is going to be in opposition sometimes to this crowd and sometimes to this crowd and your loyalty belongs to the gospel and the good news not to an identity or a party.

If at some point you find yourself where your religious beliefs always lined up with either one of those labels, or one of those political parties, either you have magically found the group that has nailed the gospel message 100% of the time, or you are bending the gospel to fit your thoughts and ideas. And we're guilty of it on all sides. Some of you are thinking like, "Yeah. Those people do it all the time." It's like no no no no. Start in the mirror.

You take this passage today and I'm going to show you how either side will drag it down and turn it into a half gospel. You take this passage that the Lord has declared good news to the poor, to the imprisoned, to those who are suffering or blind and those who are oppressed and your liberal circle will go "Yes! That's why we need programs. We need programs for all these things."

And yes, but there's also the good news of salvation that Jesus Christ has died for your sins and it will become a blueprint for a great not-for-profit organization, but not the good news that Jesus came to reveal to us of grace and forgiveness. The spiritual gospel will be thrown to the side for the sake of building a great not-for-profit organization. That's over in that extreme.

But wait! This sides got its own stuff. On this side they'll say, "Aw that's just the social gospel. Social gospel, that's nowhere in the Bible."

We just read it. We just read that about helping the poor and the afflicted and it's meant to be action. And so on this side what will happen is they'll say, well it's all about. . . it's the spiritual gospel. It's not a social gospel. So on this side there won't

be the programs, won't be the organization, won't be the mercies that get emphasized as much. And the truth is, this is not the truth. This is not the truth.

The full gospel is a social and a spiritual gospel. We are all victims of a world that wants to put labels on you and then you accept it and then you bend the teachings of Jesus Christ to fit which ever place you fall in this spectrum and that has got to stop.

Good news has to rise above and every once in a while, if you are over here, you have to say, "Hey, I think we're missing something and maybe they found something over there." And someone over here has to think, "hey, I think we're messing up something according to the faith that I follow and maybe they have something over there that is a good idea."

It's just time for the people of God to have full loyalty to the gospel message. However you truly interpret it and I realize that we're going to end up in different places and different conclusions, but it's not just the spiritual gospel. It's not just the social gospel. It's a full gospel, so let's not leave God out of it and let's not leave mercy out of it, because otherwise we just take our biases and we flip through the occasions of life and we see value in the things that we identify with and in the things that just don't seem to fit us or a part of us, we say it has lesser value and it's time for that to stop.

What would happen if we took our understanding of Jesus' teachings and put it above everything else? What's the possibilities that could happen in this world and I don't mean just for our country and politics. That's too small. I mean for our world. I mean for our relationships, our families, our friendships, our personal communities. What happens if we made sure that we're living that full gospel of social and spiritual goodness that God has for us? That's a world that I would fight for. That's a world that I would stand up for. That's a world that Jesus Christ died on a cross so that you could have it.

To God be the glory.
Halleluiah and Amen.