

“Claim Your Purpose”

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Scripture:

Luke 4:14-28 (NRSV)

The Beginning of the Galilean Ministry

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

The Rejection of Jesus at Nazareth

When 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, and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written:

‘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,
to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favour.’

And 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. Then he began to say to them, ‘Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.’ All spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his mouth. They said, ‘Is not this Joseph’s son?’ He said to them, ‘Doubtless you will quote to me this proverb, “Doctor, cure yourself!” And you will say, “Do here also in your home town the things that we have heard you did at Capernaum.”’ And he said, ‘Truly I tell you, no prophet is accepted in the prophet’s home town. But the truth is, there were many widows in Israel in the time of Elijah, when the heaven was shut up for

three years and six months, and there was a severe famine over all the land; yet Elijah was sent to none of them except to a widow at Zarephath in Sidon. There were also many lepers in Israel in the time of the prophet Elisha, and none of them was cleansed except Naaman the Syrian.’ When they heard this, all in the synagogue were filled with rage.

The Sermon:

When I finished seminary, the first church I was called to serve was in a little mining and farming community in Weeping Water, Nebraska. Only 1,100 souls.

Amid the huge fields of corn and soybeans, there nestled this little town, in a dip in the land, with Weeping Water Creek flowing through it. The limestone layers were exposed along the creek, it was a nice little rambling walk along there. The limestone also provided jobs in mining. You have no idea probably, how many things need limestone to work! Fertilizer, baby powder, concrete...all sorts of things!

So the people of Weeping Water had jobs. That was a blessing because farming is very difficult and financially-unstable work. But the mine gave a lot of steady jobs.

Still, Weeping Water had no “rich” people, really. We had no significant tax base to help beautify or improve the city. Until...

A brother and sister who farmed outside Weeping Water, who never married or had children, who farmed successfully but never traveled anywhere or spent their wealth on fancy cars or big houses...well, they both died.

And they left all their life savings, in trust, to the little town of Weeping Water.

Weeping Water was gifted with trust money that helped them build a park, with a grandstand, and camping spots by the creek. Suddenly, Weeping Water had money for a decent library, to expand their little museum of local history, including giant fossilized shark teeth from the depths of the limestone mining. Weeping Water put up lights along the streets, and cleaned up the pond in the park, and held a big celebration “Limestone Days” every summer.

This little town was vastly improved by that brother and sister.

I think that maybe the folks of Nazareth looked at Joseph's boy...and listened to him declare a new day of peace and well-being, freedom and prosperity...quoting right from the prophet Isaiah, and saying that the prophecy has been fulfilled this very day...and they got all excited like Weeping Water got all excited.

Jesus was declaring that he had brought them their greatest hopes and dreams. What's not to love?! They "all spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his mouth". (vs.22)

Yet there is a pivot, a sudden turn, as Jesus continues to speak, interpreting the words of the prophet Isaiah; speaking of the breadth of the good news, telling them that the release of the captives, the good news to the poor, the recovery of sight to the blind...isn't simply for Nazareth. It is for Capernaum, and foreign people, and other lands.

Nazareth, his "hometown", or in another translation of that word, his own "country" is not the sole beneficiary of God's call to freedom from oppression that Jesus reads in the scroll of Isaiah. It isn't just the folks of that region who will be liberated, who will no longer be enslaved, who will be healed and whole, and have their sight once again.

And then, xenophobia, and rage rise up in the people who had thought so highly of him. How dare he challenge their selfishness, their smug assurance that sees no need to share with the "outsiders?"

How often is this true, all around the world, and in our own town and among our own people?

We think we deserve wealth, and security and freedom; "but you from other lands, and you seeking safety on our shores...we will not share our bounty with you. We will let you drown in rubber boats, we will build huge walls to keep you out, we will mock your children in school, tear off your women's headcoverings, and deny you housing and jobs. Go away. The blessings of God are for us, for us, for us."

This litany of greed and selfishness is being played out in 30 of our United States and in many other places as well.

But if we say we will follow Jesus then we have to accept the challenge of the broadness of his vision, his unequivocal message of comfort to the poor, freedom for the oppressed and the promise of life and safety beyond local borders, local prejudices.

If we would call ourselves followers of Jesus then we have to see, in this story, and in the recurring theme of Jesus' concern for the poor, the sick, the downtrodden and oppressed...his mission, his clarity of purpose, his call.

And in that vision and mission is ours.

Be a generous neighbor, a broadly welcoming American.

Be a Christian full of love for brothers and sisters of other languages, lands and names.

Be a human being, who has said we will walk the path that Jesus walked, and it is a path of broad welcome, a generous vision, believing there is enough, and more than enough to share; that our purpose is sharing the promise of healing and restoring and welcoming that is for all people.

As a UCC pastor, I stated in my ordination that I would serve people of all faiths, and no faith, without partiality.

This is not in my ordination vows because I am a progressive Christian, or a political liberal, or even, just a nice person!

It is in my ordination promises because I vow to walk the path that Jesus walked. I will try to build my life in his image. I find my purpose in following his teachings and his model.

And it is made clear from this text, and from others, that the life I lead will include getting people angry with me, yet nonetheless, still staying focused on the work of good news to the poor, release to the captive, sight to the blind.

There are many kinds of poverty, many kinds of captivity, and many kinds of blindness.

The poverty of bigotry, the captivity of fear and hatred of others, the blindness of greed.

If I find purpose in following Jesus, I will remind myself over and over, that Jesus calls us to be free of this, and help set others free of these evils.

To love without borders, to serve without selfishness, to rejoice in the goodness and vast generosity of God and live in that model.

Only then will the “good news” of the gospel, be really good, and really good news to our world and its peoples, children, elders.

Only in a truly expansive love without borders, will this be good news to the animals, the seas and the land.

If that is not what we are trying to do here at the corner of 4th and Washington, then we have not found our true purpose.

Let us make the words of Jesus our words, and his purposeful work of peace, and love in unity, and freedom from oppression...our work, our purpose. Not just for ourselves, or our town, or our friends...make his work our work throughout the land.

There is a great deal of rage swirling around us in this time, and it will take courage to stand in the face of the anger and intolerance, the misunderstanding of the Bible, the distortion of our American story. But if you cannot stand up at a picket line, maybe you or I can take a stand in the grocery line, with our own family, or coworkers. Maybe we will speak up, just to one other person, about the need for generosity and trust, welcome and safety. Maybe we will live into our own true purpose, not in the halls of power, but in the halls of work or school. But we must speak. The message we have to share, in the face of racism, and homophobia, transphobia, xenophobia. We must stand strong, and we must stand together with all people of good will, and people of peace.

The need of this is very great. Let us begin now. Continue strong. And never give up. For this is our purpose. Aligned with the purpose of Jesus.

Amen.