

The Response

Part 2 of: *Jesus' Mission & Ministry - and Ours*

Luke 4:21-30
College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa

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January 31, 2016

I want to begin with a few words of introduction before I read this morning's assigned lectionary Gospel Reading from Luke 4, which is a continuation from last Sunday's reading. As you can see by its title, this is Part 2 of the sermon I began last week, *Jesus' Mission & Ministry - and Ours*.

We explored the meaning of the story where Luke presents his **overarching pre-understanding** of Jesus' ministry, which serves as a mission statement, if you will. We then looked at the benefits of a well-written **mission statement**, in that it can help:

- **define** an organization's identity, purpose and function
- **focus** its work, priorities, and commitments
- **provide guidance** in making future decisions.
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Next, we compared and contrasted College Hill's Mission Statement, which is again printed on the cover of this morning worship bulletin, with Luke's understanding of Jesus' mission and ministry. The parallel points of connection include **an understanding of salvation and good news in terms of both divine and human acts of compassion, mercy, empowerment, liberation, inclusion and social justice.**

That brings us up to this morning's biblical text, which presents the dramatic response to Jesus' comment that he is the fulfillment of the prophet Isaiah's words that the Spirit of God has anointed him to bring good news to the poor, release to the captives, recovery of sight to the blind, and let the oppressed go free.

~ READ: Luke 4:21-30

The initial response to Jesus' ministry and message is awe. Those in his hometown synagogue in Nazareth were "amazed" at his grace-filled words of compassion in describing the purpose of his mission. This is followed by the comment, "Isn't this Joseph's son?" This question is often misinterpreted as a put-down of Jesus. Instead, it's not intended to belittle Jesus, but rather as a compliment to point out that Jesus is a hometown boy, one of their own, a member of their clan - he's family, and they're proud of that. This point is absolutely crucial to having a fuller understanding of this story. Here's why.

Cultural and societal norms dictated that being a member of a particular clan or tribe involved certain obligations. Most prominently, it was customary for any person to give preference and show partiality to one's own family and village. The local folks have heard about the great things Jesus has done in the nearby fishing village of Capernaum, located on the northern shore of the Sea of Galilee. They expect,

therefore, even greater things from Jesus now that he is back at his home village of Nazareth, about thirty miles to the southwest.

When Jesus reveals that playing favorites isn't going to happen, things get ugly. Luke has Jesus quoting to them what was a common and familiar proverb that prophets are not accepted in their own hometown. **Jesus declares that his role as a prophet will not be governed by giving preference to just his own people.** And here's why that was such a problem.

In a culture dominated by honor and shame, they believed that Jesus had shamed them, and it is that sense of shame that turns the hometown crowd against Jesus. **In an ironic twist, Jesus, as an insider, suddenly becomes an outsider.** In essence, Jesus is stating that his mission is broader than in-group/insider loyalties. Instead, we learn that Jesus is governed by the broader purposes of God.

This story exposes quite a dilemma for organized religion today, and begs the questions: **Does the church exist to serve primarily its own members (an inward-focus), or outsiders (with a prominent outward-focus)?** Or, using the language of family systems therapy, is the church a closed system or an open system? **Where would you put the life and ministry of College Hill along that continuum of being closed or open?** Perhaps is more of a both/and than an either/or.

David Ostendorf, a biblical commentator, offers the following warning, "The God we proclaim and worship will not be domesticated, 'homebound,' shut in, confined by our temples, and stagnated by just our stories."

Let's go back to our biblical text for a moment. Jesus cites two Old Testament examples of how ancient Hebrew prophets (Elijah and Elisha) helped not their own people (insiders) during hard times, but instead marginalized Gentiles (outsiders). Realizing the parallel implications of what Jesus was implying to their own community in Nazareth, the response of the folks in that synagogue is dramatic and violent. They run him out to the edge of town with plans to hurl him off a cliff. This near-tragic story ends with the announcement that Jesus somehow slipped away and escaped harm. And according to the gospel of Luke, Jesus never returns to his hometown of Nazareth.

Luke makes a very strong point here. **Jesus does not go elsewhere to minister because he is rejected by the local insiders; Jesus is rejected by the insiders because he tells them he is going elsewhere to minister.** Since they feel abandoned by Jesus, they decide to abandon him. But Jesus will not place himself and his ministry under the control of his hometown people and religious community, or even his own family.

When it comes to church work there is often a similar dilemma. **There is always a struggle to balance what we might term "pastoral" work (ministering within and among ourselves) and "prophetic" work (ministering outside of our own community of faith). It's a delicate balancing act, and not without risk** – especially for clergy when a congregation feels their pastor isn't giving them all of his or her time and attention. But Luke warns us that since God's work *necessarily* involves reaching out to outsiders, there will be some insiders (i.e. church members) who might get perturbed from time to time, perhaps because they feel abandoned. Reflecting this tendency, biblical commentator Brian Stoffregen writes:

The people in Nazareth recognize and marvel at Jesus' 'gracious words' (v.22); but when illustrations of God's grace to *outsiders* are given, their feelings turn to rage. They are also hearing that God does not act the way they want God to act.

Do we really want a gracious God? Certainly we do – for ourselves; but can we have a gracious God if we don't believe that the same grace is given to those sinners outside our church doors, outside our faith, outside our boundaries of acceptability?

This story reveals:

If you join Jesus in living a life of compassion that is inclusive and without prejudice against the despised and feared, you will be living the life of the Spirit and you will be courting danger. If you start hating the sources of danger and thus dehumanizing the enemy, you have become part of the problem.

The mission and message of Jesus according to Luke is about **undermining the dehumanizing categories** wherever they have been applied [usually to people seen as threatening]. This is not about a naïve denial of danger where it exists, but it is about **living out the freedom that love brings so that people never lose their value, are never written off.**

So here's a tough question: **Who are the people that you and I, through our own prejudice and fear, are tempted to devalue and write off?**

That brings us full circle to where we began last Sunday – with the importance of College Hill's Mission Statement. And since we emphasize much of the same crucial ministry of liberation, inclusion, compassion and justice – including to 'outsiders' – it does indeed seem logical that our faithful discipleship, from time to time, may lead to risks along the way. Perhaps another way to look at all this is that if our church work and ministry *isn't* risky at times, just as it was for Jesus and his disciples, then perhaps were not fully doing all that God would have us do. **Perhaps we, like Jesus, need to be with and even to become the 'outsider'.**

I know that previous ministry choices throughout the history of this congregation has often put College Hill into the realm of being the outsider, both within this presbytery and town. And that's a good thing! All of these things should help influence how we, as a congregation, go about trying to fulfill and live out **our Mission Statement:**

- *Build an inclusive community of faith;*
- *Receive and openly share the love of God;*
- *Reach out with a compassionate voice for peace and justice.*

Our mission and ministry is all about extending God's love and grace and compassion to others – both inside and outside this congregation – so that no person is ever written off, but rather seen as a valued and beloved child of God. And yes, sometimes this is risky business. But we also believe this is our calling.

Amen.

Resources:
 Brian Stoffregen. Faith Lutheran Church, Marysville, CA.
 William Loader; www.textweek.com
 Feasting on the Word