



Christ United Methodist Church

301 Wooster St. · Marietta, OH 45750 · 740-373-1512
www.christumcmarietta.org

Date: January 27, 2019

Sermon: In Our Poverty We Have Much to Give

Text: Luke 4:18-30

Speaker: Pastor Cheryl Arnold

Today, Jesus is living every preacher's worst nightmare—he's back in his hometown, at worship, delivering the sermon. The text he's chosen is this: "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 favor."

Last week we explored what these powerful prophetic words meant for Jesus' calling, and for our own calling, as his followers. But we left out that last phrase—the one about proclaiming the year of the Lord's favor—because it is arguably the most contentious in the entire passage.

After reading, Jesus sits down—the teaching posture for rabbis—and he says, "Today, this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." Seriously? Or am I the only one who finds that a bit brash?

Now *we know* this is God's son speaking—so we might cut him some slack. But the crowd doesn't know that. What starts as everyone being amazed, impressed or marveling over Jesus' gracious and elegant words, quickly turns into a mob that tries to kill him.

Why? Well, many believe, and the text suggests, that the Nazarenes expected miracles and healings from their hometown hero. But when Jesus reminds them that Elijah and Elisha—their prophetic champions—performed miracles and healings for *Gentiles*, those hated outsiders, they realize that Jesus has no intention of favoring them. So they turn on him.

And that may be true. But in Luke's telling, Jesus doesn't do any healings or miracles until *after* this story.

My current Course of Study class has us reading and thinking about the discrepancies between what we think scripture says and what it actually says. For example, consider the birth stories of Jesus, found only in the gospels of Matthew and Luke. They agree that Jesus was born in Bethlehem to Mary and Joseph—but not on much else.

Or think about the disciples—most of us automatically picture 12 men. But Luke's gospel and his sequel, Acts of the Apostles, clearly state that Jesus selected these twelve men from *a much larger group of* disciples, a group that also included women.

So as I've been studying for class, I've begun to wonder if the crowd turns hostile because Jesus challenges their understanding of Hebrew scripture.

I suppose that just like we often do, the Nazarenes remembered their Holy Scriptures selectively—not recognizing their own poverty, their own captivity, their own blindness, their own oppression. They understandably considered themselves the chosen ones. But they likely forgot God's promise through their ancestors to also save the Gentiles, and even God's commandments to care for the vulnerable among them.

When Jesus reads and interprets for them their own scriptures, they begin to remember, and realize, what proclaiming the year of the Lord's favor would mean. And it's not exactly good news for everyone.

Scholars tell us that the Year of the Lord's favor is another name for the Jubilee Year, which is described in the Hebrew Bible.

According to our OT book of Leviticus, chapter 25, every 50th year was a Jubilee year—essentially, it hit once in a lifetime. During the Jubilee, things were supposed to revert back to how they had been when Joshua brought the people into the Promised Land.

What would this mean? Chaos. Specifically, all debts were to be forgiven, all slaves and indentured servants were to be set free, and all land was to be returned to the families who first worked it.

Effectively, the Jubilee would redistribute the wealth and give everyone in society a fresh start.

I suppose that initially, when these desert wanderers finally settled down, the Jubilee seemed ideal because everyone was in the same boat.

But the boats changed over the years. It's like after you finally were able to buy yourself a competition bass boat, or even a pontoon boat, now you're going to have to trade it in—without refund—for a canoe and a paddle.

Interestingly, there's no historical evidence that shows the Jubilee was ever practiced by the Israelites. And if you don't practice it, then it's not a threat. But now here's Jesus—that annoyingly smart kid from down the street—who reminds them of God's intention and acts like he's going to make it happen.

Now make no mistake—reading the scriptures by ourselves is important for our spiritual growth. But something holy happens when the scriptures are read, recited, and interpreted in public. Maybe this is why, in our increasingly secular society, scripture still plays a central role in funerals and weddings.

Scripture itself reveals the importance of this practice.

For example, in 2 Kings chapters 22-23, the Hebrew Scriptures were “re-discovered” during King Josiah's rule. Huldah the prophetess confirmed the scroll as real, and the King publically read its words to all the people of Judah and the citizens of Jerusalem. It wasn't painless—but the people made a new covenant with the Lord, promising to follow God's instructions.

And in Luke's gospel, two unnamed disciples walk with the risen Lord on the Road to Emmaus. Jesus disappears after they finally recognize him and they say to one another, “Weren't our hearts on fire when he spoke to us along the way, explaining the scriptures for us?”

Personally, I believe it can always be holy when people read and discuss scripture together because we're exposed to different perspectives than our own. We don't have to agree with everyone's interpretation. But we can always learn from the conversation.

We have plenty of opportunities for this here at Christ, even if we hold off on discussion until donut time or lunch. Last week I highlighted the Christ Church outreach ministries you can be involved with. Today, I also invite you into a discipline of intentional spiritual growth through ministries like these.

In addition to our two readings during worship, and the sermon--the interpretation--our Sanctuary Choir frequently *sings* the scriptures as the poetic words and moving images are displayed on the big screen.

Our Radio Ministry "Good News from Christ" condenses our service to roughly a half hour program, which is broadcast on AM, FM, and posted on our church's home website, so anyone can listen anytime.

Between services, and during the week, we have several groups that read, study and interpret scripture--check out our adult, youth, or children's Sunday School classes, God's Girls, or the Rary's Monday Night study.

Children's Church, which takes place during late worship, is teaching our young people how to read their Bibles this year--what a gift for the kids and adult volunteers alike.

Our Wednesday Holy Communion and Prayer service focuses on the upcoming Sunday's readings. Worship is open to anyone--just show up at noon. We have folks from all sides of the political, social and religious spectrums--and we've come to love one another as we honor people's different insights and pray for one another's burdens.

For nearly two decades, our church has provided worship at various nursing homes. A typical service includes song, prayer, scripture, a short devotional, and sometimes Holy Communion. This isn't only meaningful to the residents and their families, but for staff who work weekends, it may be their only chance to attend church.

Christ Cares, our team visitation ministry, often shares the scriptures with our seniors who can no longer easily attend here. Even people who are struggling with Alzheimer's will join in reciting the Lord's Prayer, which is found in the gospels of Matthew and Luke.

And if you wind up joining our Extended Table team, where our laity serve Holy Communion to some of our seniors and during Children's Church, then you too may find that something stirs inside and your heart becomes on fire while beginning our service with words like these from Holy Scripture:

"When the hour came, Jesus took his place at the table, and the apostles joined him...."

Lord, we thank you for this holy mystery of Holy Communion, where we become one with you and you become one with us. Show us how to live more fully into your word by loving you, loving others, and caring for all that you have created. Use your holy scriptures to move us closer to the people you want us to be.

Today we ask your special blessing on these people/situations:

Surround them with your presence, care, and love, and help us do the same. We pray this in the name of your Son, our Savior, Jesus the Christ. Amen.