

Sermon for FPC Gardena – Sunday January 24, 2010

Luke 4:14-21

His was a familiar face there in the synagogue in Nazareth. After all, he was one of them. Yes, there had been that confusion at the time of his birth, but that was old news by this time, thirty years later. They had seen young Jesus grow up, helping his father, Joseph, in his carpenter's shop; assisting his mother, Mary, with his younger brothers and sisters. They knew him to be an honest fellow, kind, and patient. He had been away for a few months recently, and stories had begun to reach them about his teachings in synagogues around Galilee. The reviews were positive, and the folks of Nazareth were feeling proud—'home town boy makes a name for himself in the world'!

So, you can imagine that this Sabbath day was a special one for the congregation there in Nazareth. Now they would see and hear for themselves the result of Jesus' upbringing—in which they had played no small part. The mood would have been excited, expectant, and positive as the service began.

The age-old rules, however, would have been the same as they had always been. Some of them were good and helpful rules, like the ten commandments, which admonished against attitudes such as envy and against behaviors such as stealing.

But then there were the other rules—like those from the Levitical Codes. Many of these had addressed specific situations faced by the Israelite people back in the time of the exodus. And many of these laws had become less appropriate or applicable over time, yet they had become even more rigidly enforced by certain groups of people. And so, the Jewish people at the time when Jesus’ was beginning his earthly ministry, were fettered by rules regarding who was clean and who was unclean; who was acceptable within society and who was not; even who was ‘holy’ and who was not.

All of these rules, and the overly enthusiastic enforcement of them by some folks in power, created a number of noticeable divisions right there in the house of worship. The women were separated from the men—with the women at the back, usually separated from the men by a large barrier of grillwork. The very poor and those with physical or mental afflictions were usually excluded even beyond that. And the scribes and the Pharisees, among others, kept sharp eyes out for anyone who didn’t belong or who didn’t follow the letter of the law.

Surely, even as some of the folks relaxed a bit, looking forward to hearing from their native son, those rule-keepers were on the alert for any words or actions which might offend their finely tuned sensibilities.

The scripture he read was familiar enough, from the prophet Isaiah. It was Jesus' comment *after* reading the scroll that would have been the shocker, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." That's all it would have taken to put *everyone* there on red alert! For Jesus was personalizing this prophecy—he was saying that he, himself, had been anointed by the Spirit of God, to bring change to the world as they knew it. And not just any change—but radical change—change which would overturn the hierarchy which had become such an asset to the rich and powerful, and which had effectively silenced those without money, health, or freedom. Jesus also noted that he knew that his hearers would not receive his message well.

And indeed, the people of there, at least the ones with power, status, or wealth, did not want to hear another word from this man. Perhaps he wasn't really one of them after all. For surely he was speaking blasphemy! After all, rules are rules! And didn't God grant wealth and power to those who deserved it? What was all this about release to the captives and letting the oppressed go free? Best to get Jesus back *out* of town before he caused an uprising.

At this point, the atmosphere of excitement and expectancy would have turned to fear and anger on the part of many, and while some might have been curious, they would have been careful to hide it.

We know, all these centuries later, that Jesus' comment on the Isaiah scroll was just the beginning. He *had* been anointed by God to overturn the systems of power which placed some people above others, and which allowed a select few to prosper at the expense of masses of folk who were poor and oppressed. Jesus' ministry was a beginning of such changes—as he broke down the barriers which separated human beings one from another, pointing out the flaws in the old ways as he reached out to befriend the outcast, to heal the sick, and to forgive the sinner.

We also know that Jesus' work is not yet complete. We continue to live in a world where the evils of prejudice, poverty, and rigid hierarchies continue to preside in too many places and circumstances. Jesus passed on the work of his ministry to his disciples, first the twelve, more recently to us. Truly, if we call ourselves Christians, the Spirit of God is upon *us* to bring good news to the poor, to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, and to let the oppressed go free. A tall order, true. But in it lies the key to bringing the community of heaven to life here on earth.

But where do we even begin? I think that that long-ago congregation in Nazareth gives us some clues. We start by breaking down the barriers which separate God's people from one another.

We begin by considering, not the differences between ourselves and other human beings, but with an awareness of our many similarities. We begin by finding—and building upon—common ground.

I wonder if the four congregations sharing space here at First Presbyterian Church of Gardena might be an example of this? For while we each define ourselves as part of different denominations, we all love and serve the same Lord and Savior. While we worship in a variety of languages, we all recognize one another as sisters and brothers in Christ. Each of our congregations surely has its own ways of being the church, but each of us serves God in the same ways.

Each Christmas, Western Presbyterian Church's women share with us large boxes of handmade knitted sweaters made throughout the year. Women from our congregation add quilts and lap robes they have made. And then we pass them on to older folks in the community who are in need, through an organization called Home Instead and its Santa to a Senior program. Some of our members help to pack and wrap those gifts. Such collaborations by our congregations allow us to serve Christ in unique ways which we could not necessarily do on our own. This helps to build relationships between our congregations and with people in the community at large.

Just last weekend, members of this congregation joined with a large number of members of Comunidad Cristiana for a work day here on the church property. By working together, we were able to accomplish far more than we could have on our own...I'm sure you have all noticed the results of the gardening, scrubbing, painting, and polishing that went on here last Saturday! By keeping our place of worship and work clean and inviting, all four congregations will benefit, and hopefully more people from the community will feel drawn to worship in our midst.

What an excellent opportunity our four congregations have to work and worship side by side for the glory of God! But this is a fairly easy example—as we all like and respect one another and are committed to working together.

Things can be more challenging when people—even those who care for one another—find themselves separated by deep divisions in their theology and their understanding of how to interpret and practice Christ's teachings. Next Saturday, our presbytery, the ruling body of our denomination in this area of Southern California and Hawaii, will meet here at our church. It may be a long and challenging meeting, for a group of our sister congregations will be proposing to separate from the presbytery along theological lines, most of which have to do with ordination standards.

What I have always loved about our presbytery is that there is room for all points of view. We are an amazingly diverse group in many ways, yet our love for Christ and for one another has always prevailed. If this or any presbytery or congregation splits along theological or any other lines, soon enough they too will discover new differences in their midst. Jesus called us to break down barriers between human beings, not to build them up—particularly not when it comes to how we love and serve him!

When there are differences within groups or congregations, or when there are divisions between them, rather than magnify the differences and try to decide who might be ‘right’ or ‘wrong’, and certainly rather than to separate, I think that there is far more wisdom in seeking common ground. I believe that is what Jesus was suggesting when he read the Isaiah scroll in Nazareth on that day. I believe that he was suggesting that rather than focusing on excluding the poor, the infirm, the ‘other’, that those gathered as a worshipping community join together in making a difference in the lives of those less fortunate. As he would do throughout his earthly ministry, Jesus was calling God’s people to ministries of healing and reconciliation and love for all humankind.

And Jesus is calling us to do the same.

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Sadly, we don't have to look very hard to find vast numbers of people in today's world who are victims of prejudice, of oppression, of poverty. The devastation in Haiti is a prime example. For if we dig beneath the rubble of collapsed buildings we will find that they were built on the terribly unstable foundation of deep poverty.

People the world over are finding common ground in Haiti as they send medical supplies, personnel and other basics to survivors there. As with the tsunami in Indonesia and the floods in New Orleans, people are reaching out with compassion to alleviate suffering in the wake of terrible natural disaster.

But what if we could do even better than that? What if people from all over the globe, whatever their heritage, their faith, their social status, could work together to reach out to eradicate poverty so that such natural disasters wouldn't have the power to do such widespread damage?

Christ has called us to serve as healers, as mediators, as those who are to proclaim the good news of the gospel. In Nazareth's synagogue, Jesus was preparing the way for a new set of rules to take precedent—rules like 'judge not', and 'love one another'. These are the scriptures which we are called to fulfill. May we do so in the loving name of Jesus. Amen.

Luke 4:14-21

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. 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 favor.” 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.”