

To Start With

A Sermon for Pilgrim Congregational Church, UCC, Lexington

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Luke 4:14-21

14 Then Jesus, in the power of the Spirit, returned to Galilee, and a report about him spread through all the surrounding region. 15 He began to teach in their synagogues and was praised by everyone.

16 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, 17 and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written:

18

“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 set free those who are oppressed,

19

to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.”

20 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. 21

Then he began to say to them, “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.”

*“God’s time [Emancipation] is always near. He set the North Star in the heavens; He gave me the strength in my limbs; He meant I should be free.”* —Harriet Tubman

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Last Sunday evening I was talking with a relative who said, hey, I assume you’ll be watching all the goings on tomorrow. I responded, no, at the time of the goings on, I’d be at Lexington’s MLK Day celebration. But I could just have easily said, no, those are not the inaugural remarks I’d be studying on Monday. Given this week’s lectionary text, I’d be pondering *Jesus’* inaugural sermon. For that is what we have in Luke 4:14-21 that Duncan read for us - Jesus’ first sermon, offered in his hometown of Nazareth, in the synagogue, as his Galilean ministry began. As Luke remembers it, there are more words of Hebrew scripture than Jesus’ own words, and that is probably just right. Jesus was deeply rooted in the scripture of his Jewish faith. Not only that, but as we hear the Gospels, we should know that when the Gospels record Jesus referencing one or two verses, it’s likely often an abbreviation. A pointer to a longer whole that the earliest followers of the Way, many of them also rooted in Jewish tradition, would recognize.

Luke is saying, you know how this one goes...

For us, “The Lord is my shepherd....” gets us started on a whole psalm.

When Jesus said, the two great commandments are Love God, love your neighbor as yourself - his followers would have been able to recite the full verses from Deuteronomy 6 and Leviticus 19.

But, generally, we don't have as many scripture verses memorized, so here are the verses Jesus is quoting in today's Gospel reading:

Isaiah 61:1 & 2

The spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me  
because the LORD has anointed me;  
he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed,  
to bind up the brokenhearted,  
to proclaim liberty to the captives  
and release to the prisoners,

**2**

to proclaim the year of the LORD's favor

Isaiah 58:6—>

Is not this the fast that I choose:  
to loose the bonds of injustice,  
to undo the straps of the yoke,  
to let the oppressed go free,  
and to break every yoke?

**7**

Is it not to share your bread with the hungry  
and bring the homeless poor into your house;  
when you see the naked, to cover them

and not to hide yourself from your own kin?

As much as Jesus is saying something about what his own ministry will look like, even more he's saying this is what the world should look like, what the world will look like.

While this is Jesus' first sermon in Luke, it is not the first prophetic word in Luke's gospel. That honor is given to Mary, when she declares,

for the Mighty One has done great things for me,  
and holy is his name;

**50**

indeed, his mercy is for those who fear him  
from generation to generation.

**51**

He has shown strength with his arm;  
he has scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts.

**52**

He has brought down the powerful from their thrones  
and lifted up the lowly;

**53**

he has filled the hungry with good things  
and sent the rich away empty. (Luke 1)<sup>1</sup>

And the second instructions in Luke are offered by John the Baptist,

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.washingtonpost.com/religion/2018/12/20/marys-magnificat-bible-is-revolutionary-so-evangelicals-silence-it/>

And the crowds asked him, "What, then, should we do?" **11** In reply he said to them, "Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none, and whoever has food must do likewise." **12** Even tax collectors came to be baptized, and they asked him, "Teacher, what should we do?" **13** He said to them, "Collect no more than the amount prescribed for you." **14** Soldiers also asked him, "And we, what should we do?" He said to them, "Do not extort money from anyone by threats or false accusation, and be satisfied with your wages." (Luke 3)

What is true for each of these early words - and all of Luke's gospel - is that they have to do with the world, the common good. They are concrete and oriented to the good of the neighbor. And they imagine a world of compassion, mercy, justice and grace - and call followers of Jesus' way to build that world. Jesus lived in a time when Rome's occupation of Israel kept his neighbors on the edge of subsistence and poverty, under the heel of an oppressive force. Jesus envisioned a different way.

What is also true for these early words is that powers and principalities have been distressed by them for 2 millenia.

The scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing. That's not, I don't think, Jesus saying I'm the messiah who will supernaturally change everything. That's Jesus offering a mission statement for a movement. His movement is nonviolent but it is not submissive to the cruelties of Rome. And it is a movement, the way of Christ, that is, should, must still be changing the world today.

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The gospel of Jesus Christ is not neutral. The good news of Jesus Christ applies to the common good of all people, not just our individual salvation. The scripture that Jesus quotes and the sermons Jesus preached were of God's kingdom on earth. The Gospel of Jesus Christ is not neutral. Its implications are at times political, in that it calls us to moral account as we work for the polis, the community, the common good. The Gospel is not neutral. From the moment Jesus spoke of

bringing good news to the poor.  
proclaiming release to the captives  
recovery of sight to the blind,  
freeing those who are oppressed,

the good news has been on the side of those who are the most vulnerable in our midst.

One of my students said, this week, "The only citizenship that matters in the church is our shared citizenship in the kingdom of God." The prayer Jesus taught us yearns for the kingdom to come on earth. And the laws of that kingdom are laws of compassion and liberation.

There are those who co-opt the Gospel for selfish gain or who condemn the Gospel's preaching because it makes them feel uncomfortable and undermines their claims that they promote a biblical worldview. They claim sole authority for interpreting the Gospels and reject any interpretation with which they disagree.

And there are those who with the goal of not making waves, not alienating the faithful, not appearing partisan, cede the prophetic witness of the gospels. I have sometimes been in this latter camp. But how is silence heard? Shall we be silent when the word of scripture challenges us and our world? Shall we be silent when the wellbeing of the most vulnerable among us is at risk?

If we are silent, then we cannot join in the way of Christ, which proclaims

good news to the poor  
release to the captives  
recovery of sight to the blind,  
freedom for those who are oppressed,  
The year of the Lord's favor.

I was sick for a couple of days this week and thought I might not have the energy to write a sermon. I thought I'd just read the dozens of Bible passages about loving the stranger and the foreigner among us. This is the one I would have started with:

“Thus says the Lord of hosts: Render true judgments, show kindness and mercy to one another; do not oppress the widow, the orphan, the alien, or the poor; and do not devise evil in your hearts against one another.”

Zechariah 7:9-10

(I've included a partial list in the manuscript.)

Amen.

## 22 Bible Verses on Welcoming Immigrants

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‘I am a stranger and an alien residing among you; give me property among you for a burying place, so that I may bury my dead out of my sight.’

Genesis 23:4

You shall also love the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt.

Deuteronomy 10:19

The alien who resides with you shall be to you as the citizen among you; you shall love the alien as yourself, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt: I am the Lord your God.

Leviticus 19:34

‘Cursed is anyone who withholds justice from the foreigner, the fatherless or the widow.’ Then all the people shall say, ‘Amen!’

Deuteronomy 27:19

When they were few in number, of little account, and strangers in the land, wandering from nation to nation, from one kingdom to another people, he allowed no one to oppress them; he rebuked kings on their account, saying, ‘Do not touch my anointed ones; do my prophets no harm.’

1 Chronicles 16:19-22



I was eyes to the blind, and feet to the lame. I was a father to the needy, and I championed the cause of the stranger. I broke the fangs of the unrighteous, and made them drop their prey from their teeth.

Job 29:15-17

The Lord watches over the strangers; he upholds the orphan and the widow, but the way of the wicked he brings to ruin.

Psalms 146:9

For if you truly amend your ways and your doings, if you truly act justly one with another, if you do not oppress the alien, the orphan, and the widow, or shed innocent blood in this place, and if you do not go after other gods to your own hurt, then I will dwell with you in this place, in the land that I gave of old to your ancestors forever and ever.

Jeremiah 7:5-7

You shall allot it as an inheritance for yourselves and for the aliens who reside among you and have begotten children among you. They shall be to you as citizens of Israel; with you they shall be allotted an inheritance among the tribes of Israel.

Ezekiel 47:22

Thus says the Lord of hosts: Render true judgments, show kindness and mercy to one another; do not oppress the widow, the orphan, the alien, or the poor; and do not devise evil in your hearts against one another.

Zechariah 7:9-10

You have heard that it was said, 'you shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy'. But I say to you, love your enemy and pray for those who persecute you.

Matthew 5:43-44

I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me.

Matthew 25:35

Truly I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of my brethren you did it to me.

Matthew 25:40

You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself.

Luke 10:27

Then Peter began to speak to them: "I truly understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him.

Acts 10:34

Contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to strangers.

Romans 12:13

Owe no one anything, except to love one another; for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law.

Romans 13:8

Love does no wrong to a neighbor, therefore love is the fulfilling of the law.

Romans 13:10

In that renewal there is no longer Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave and free; but Christ is all and in all.

Colossians 3:11

Let mutual love continue. Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it. Remember those who are in prison, as though you were in prison with them; those who are being tortured, as though you yourselves were being tortured.

Hebrews 13:1-3

Beloved, you do faithfully whatever you do for the friends, even though they are strangers to you; they have testified to your love before the church. You do well to send them on in a manner worthy of God; for they began their journey for the sake of Christ, accepting no support from non-believers. Therefore we ought to support such people, so that they may become co-workers with the truth.

3 John 1:5

And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "See the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them as their God; they will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them."

Revelation 21:3

<https://sojo.net/22-bible-verses-welcoming-immigrants>