

The Year of the Lord's Favour

Luke 4:14-21

Lethbridge Mennonite Church

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When I looked at the worship resources for his Sunday, I saw that the suggested text was Luke 4:16-21. I was puzzled by this as most translations of the bible begin this section two verses earlier in verse 14.

Verse 16 has Jesus entering the synagogue in Nazareth on the Sabbath. But the previous two verses set the stage for what follows in some crucially important ways.

First, as you've just heard, verse 14 begins by saying that Jesus "returned to Galilee in the power of the Spirit."

Among the obvious questions that might occur to us is, "Returned from where?" Well, he had returned from forty days in the wilderness. He had returned from being tempted by the devil, from resisting the siren calls of bread, power, and spectacle.

He had returned from refusing to usher in the kingdom of God in all the ways that human beings crave.

Jesus emerges out of the wilderness "in the power of the Spirit," prepared for his public ministry. News about Jesus is beginning to spread through the countryside. He is teaching in the synagogues. *And everyone praised him* (4:15). Jesus is popular at this point in the story.

This is the context in which Jesus goes to Nazareth on Sabbath, goes to church, and reads from the prophet Isaiah. He reads a powerful passage about the future hope of his people:

"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.**

This is what the people have been waiting for—the year of the Lord's favour! It hearkens back to the book of Leviticus and the year of Jubilee. The Israelites were to sow and harvest their field for six years, but the seventh year was to be a Sabbath year where the land lay fallow.

And every seven Sabbath years there was to be a year of Jubilee. This was to be a year of liberty for all. It was kind of a “reset” year. Slaves and prisoners would be freed, debts would be forgiven, the land and the people would rest.

“The year of the Lord’s favour” came to be an expression of more generalized hope in the imagination of Jesus’ people. Wrong things being made right. God showing up to forgive and restore and reclaim and redeem his people.

So, Jesus reads these powerful words of hope echoing the law and the prophets. Then he rolls up the scroll, sits down (it was customary in the synagogue to stand to read Scripture and sit when you were beginning to teach), and says “Today, this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing.”

Wow. This is sort of the ancient equivalent of the mic drop.

Despite the staggering nature of Jesus’ claim, people are still feeling pretty good. “All spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his lips,” it says.

Then things take a turn. I said that our suggested reading started too late; it also ended too early. Let’s pick it up where we left off in verse 23.

Jesus said to them, “Surely you will quote this proverb to me: ‘Physician, heal yourself!’ And you will tell me, ‘Do here in your hometown what we have heard that you did in Capernaum.’”

24 “Truly I tell you,” he continued, “no prophet is accepted in his hometown. [oh-oh, what’s Jesus doing here...?]

25 I assure you that there were many widows in Israel in Elijah’s time, when the sky was shut for three and a half years and there was a severe famine throughout the land. 26 Yet Elijah was not sent to any of them, but to a widow in Zarephath in the region of Sidon. 27 And there were many in Israel with leprosy in the time of Elisha the prophet, yet not one of them was cleansed—only Naaman the Syrian.”

28 All the people in the synagogue were furious when they heard this. 29 They got up, drove him out of the town, and took him to the brow of the hill on which the town was built, in order to throw him off the cliff. 30 But he walked right through the crowd and went on his way.

A few verses ago, the devil was urging Jesus to throw him off the high point of the temple to give God a chance to miraculously save him and wow the watching crowds. Now the crowd want to drive Jesus off a cliff themselves.

Why? What happened to the “gracious words” that came from Jesus’ lips? What happened to everyone praising Jesus and speaking well of him? How could things change so rapidly in Jesus’ hometown?

Well, it seems that people didn’t appreciate Jesus’ linkage of the prophecy from Isaiah about “good news for the poor” and “the year of the Lord’s favour” with the wrong sorts of people.

What is he doing bringing up these uncomfortable historical reminders about how God was at work outside the people of Israel even back in Elijah’s and Elisha’s time?

Why is he talking about a widow in Zarephath (in modern day Lebanon) and Naaman the Syrian? Why is he pointing out that even in the past God’s favour extended beyond his chosen people, even, at times, *instead* of his chosen people?

Isaiah wasn’t talking about *those* people in that passage that Jesus stood up to read! He was talking about us!

The people in the synagogue in Nazareth were quite delighted with Jesus when they thought he was telling them that their team had good things coming to them.

But when Jesus suggested that “the year of the Lord’s favour” extended beyond their borders and boundaries? Well, then they wanted to get rid of him.

Well, of course we know that Jesus would indeed insist upon living and teaching and healing and forgiving and dying not only for his people but for all. For his friends and for his enemies.

A lot has happened since Jesus did the scripture reading in his hometown synagogue and shocked people with his interpretation of these ancient words.

Today, the gospel is proclaimed in countless languages around the world. It is lived out in China and Thailand and the Philippines and Burkina Faso and Colombia and Ethiopia and countless other places.

Good news has been proclaimed to the poor.

Freedom has been proclaimed to the prisoners.
The blind see. The oppressed are freed.
Those who mourn are comforted.
Love and forgiveness are extended in the name of and in imitation of Christ.

Not fully or finally, of course. Not this side of eternity. Our witness is still decidedly imperfect.
Creation still groans in anticipation of its final redemption.

But two thousand or so years after Jesus' time on earth, "the year of the Lord's favour" has indeed been fulfilled in the person of Christ, and been proclaimed by his body on earth, the church.

And this body of Christ is now a big, beautiful, multi-ethnic family of faith. Christ's praises are sung in virtually every tongue under heaven. A tiny little Jewish sect has become a global faith.

I think we sometimes take for granted how truly remarkable this is. We forget how deeply the Rabbi who stood up to read Scripture in that synagogue in Nazareth has altered history.

Our deepest and most admirable assumptions about the value and dignity of each human life (even the "weak") are unintelligible without the beatitudes and the prophetic tradition Jesus' teaching builds on of caring for the stranger, the widow, the orphan.

So many of our most cherished institutions from hospitals to universities to science to human rights proceed out of Christian assumptions about the nature of God, the nature of humanity, the nature of reality.

None of these things were inevitable. They exist only because Jesus Christ altered the course of history and because his church has imperfectly borne witness to this.

And on this Sunday where we think about our church's international witness, we give thanks that many still answer the call to extend God's love beyond their own borders and boundaries, wherever those might be and whatever they might look like.

Bearing witness may look different in 2021 than it did in previous years. It's much more collaborative and multi-dimensional. It is hopefully humbler and more willing to learn from others. It hopefully carries far fewer colonial and imperial assumptions along with it.

But fundamentally the nature of the task of witness remains the same.

Wherever and whenever, the church is called to proclaim what Jesus proclaimed in the synagogue two thousand years ago.

Good news to the poor. The year of the Lord's favour, here and now. For all.

I want to end with a story. It has nothing to do with Mennonite Church Canada or International Witness, although I hope to make a few connections.

It's a story I came across this week in an essay called "Death and Forgiveness" by Joseph Keegin.¹

Keegin tells the story of visiting his dying father in New Mexico. His dad was a pretty terrible human being. A heroin addict, a serial philanderer, a lapsed Catholic who had long since given up on religion. He was fond of conspiracies and could be viciously cruel to everyone around him.

In his life, he had shown little interest in any of his kids, and they had returned the favour. Keegin was the only one who would have anything to do with him as he lay dying.

After his father died, Keegin found himself thinking about what it all meant and how he and his siblings would all move forward in the aftermath of such a sad ending to a sad and hurtful life. Here's what he says:

It made perfect sense that the hurt [my siblings] felt would beget anger. Why, then, couldn't I shake the sense that this account, however reasonable, was wrong? There was some crucial principle we were all missing that could have helped us overcome our animosity and frustration toward one another, that could have granted some sense of unity to our fragmented family—something, I suspected, like forgiveness. We needed to find a way to forgive our father, and each other. So, in order to figure out what forgiveness might mean, and what its origins might be, I turned—as I always do—to the books.

What follows is a tour through Greek philosophy and Buddhism. Keegin reads and reads and reads but all he can really come up with are a few thin justifications to show mercy in proportion to how it will make things better for ourselves, or advice on how to get rid of desire so as to maintain psychological and spiritual equilibrium.

¹ <https://comment.org/death-and-forgiveness/>

He discovered that to whatever extent philosophy (western or eastern) commends anything like forgiveness, it was mostly in the service of the self.

I complained to a friend—a devout Catholic—that my search for the philosophical origins of forgiveness had come to naught. I received a puzzled look in response. “You haven’t looked in the Bible?” he asked incredulously. All I could say was that it seemed too easy. I didn’t really know what I meant by this except that I had always been suspicious of Christianity as being somehow too good to be true, that it papered over the real ugliness of the world with a happy message about hope and love. As far as I could tell, we are alone in a universe that is slowly dying of its own accord, and all we can do in the meantime is stitch together beautiful stories of various kinds to build a shelter for ourselves from the cold indifference of the cosmos—but the indifference of the cosmos is what is real, not the stories we tell. Religion, I believed, is cowardice, retreat; courage demands facing the facts, owning up to the meaninglessness of things. And the central doctrines of Christianity, of course, are just so implausible: God and man at the same time? What could be crazier?

Indeed.

But then Keegin reads the gospel of Luke. He encounters Jesus’ teaching to love and forgive even our enemies. And he is blown away.

He is even more blown away by what Jesus *does*.

Hanging on the cross, in the process of being tortured and executed, Christ looks down onto the people responsible for his death and prays to God to forgive them. He is not ridding himself of anger to achieve spiritual tranquility; he is not trying to restore the karmic balance of the universe; he is not trying to showcase his own virtue. His concern, in the midst of his execution, is for the good of those who have wronged him. And it is entirely for their sake that he utters his prayer of forgiveness.

Keegin found forgiveness where he didn’t expect it, where he didn’t *want* to find it. He didn’t want to be a Christian, he wanted to be a rational philosopher.

And yet, it is in Christ and no one else that he finds true forgiveness. The article ends with Keegin making his way back to church, sitting in the pews, pondering the weirdness of it all.

I can’t remember exactly what I felt sitting in that pew—but I had heard, it seems, what I needed to hear. I stared at the floor for a while... But when the time came I stood...

walked to the altar, and—“the body of Christ, the bread of heaven”—reached out my hands.

Why do I tell the story? As I said, it has nothing obvious to do with our theme of the morning.

I tell it for two reasons.

First, I think it points to how deeply the Rabbi from Nazareth has shaped our imaginations, even those who know nothing of faith, who have no interest in faith.

We hunger for things like forgiveness and reconciliation, even in hard circumstances because deep down in our bones we know that we need these things. To receive and to extend them.

We are *all* people in need of good news, no matter our tribe or tongue or social location. We are all poor, blind, imprisoned in our own ways. We all long for the year of the Lord’s favour, even if we need the occasional reminder.

Second, it reminds me that the church still has a vital task of witness. Even or especially in a context that seems determined to forget.

Our task these days may be less about explicit proclamation (although there is always a place for this) than about reminding a post-Christian culture the vital truths that it may have forgotten.

I have encountered many Joseph Keegins in my life. People who have no evident interest in God until something happens and life cracks them open. And they are open in new ways. Curious in new ways. Vulnerable and shaken in new ways.

It is at these times—and at *all* times—that our world needs the church, whether it knows it or not, whether it wants it or not, whether it has any interest in it or not.

Our world needs a community willing to bear witness, in our neighbourhoods and around the world.

May God help us to be good news to the poor. May God help us to proclaim, in word and deed, the year of the Lord’s favour.

Amen.

