

“Hard to Hear” – Luke 4: 21-24, 28-30

Unfortunately, today’s scripture picks up mid-story, so in order to truly appreciate what is going on, we need a little context.

After being baptized, Jesus goes into the wilderness for forty days and nights, where he is tempted. He emerges from that and begins his public ministry in the region of Galilee. He preached in the synagogues and was praised by everyone. Nazareth, where Jesus is from, is a small town in the region of Galilee, so everyone there hears about this Jesus. He returns to Nazareth, his hometown, and as the scripture says, he went to the synagogue on the sabbath day, as was his custom. He was invited to read from the scroll of the prophet Isaiah. Jesus unrolled the scroll, and read the following words.

*‘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.’*

Very powerful words. Maybe even challenging and upsetting words that set the tone for Jesus’ public ministry.

Jesus then rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down. With this everyone was looking at him. The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on Jesus. Can you imagine the thoughts, the wondering, the questions? What was next? This is where today’s scripture picks up.

After sitting down, Jesus says, ‘Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.’ In effect, Jesus is saying I am the one. Your hometown boy is the one. No wonder, ‘all spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his mouth.’ I suspect some in the crowd were skeptical. Others were probably hopeful. Others still thought, if he is one of us then we are golden. God will show favor on us. God will bless us. After all, God has chosen, anointed one of us! Then they say it out loud. “Is not this Joseph’s son?”

Anticipating all of this, Jesus responds, ‘Doubtless you will quote to me this proverb, ‘Doctor cure yourself?’ And you will say, ‘Do here also in your hometown the things that we have heard you did at Capernaum.’ Then Jesus gives them some rather disturbing news, ‘Truly I tell you, no prophet is accepted in this prophet’s hometown.’

What was not read this morning is a series of examples of where former prophets, Elijah and Elisha, were not able to minister in their hometown, because the people were unable or unwilling to accept their message. Today’s reading then ends with the people’s reaction. They were filled with rage and forced Jesus out of town, lead him to a cliff where they intended to hurl him off. But, Jesus just walked past them and went on his way.

Hearing this story, we may think of Thomas Wolfe’s line, ‘You can’t go home again.’ Our thinking of this line causes us to miss the larger message in today’s story. The more significant and challenging message, is found in the meaning of Luke’s text, which includes those words quoted from Isaiah.

Jesus' focus is on bringing healing and justice to those on the margins of society, those on the outside longing to be welcomed. In these words, Jesus is,

Presenting a description of who he is and what he is about. They form his purpose or mission statement, (his) agenda for ministry.

(Ernest Hess, Feasting on the Word, Year C, Vol. 1, pg. 285-287)

These words Jesus speaks are hard words for us to hear, because we are not among the marginalized. We are not on the outside longing to be welcomed and included. In some ways we hear these words and think that our way of life is being threatened, so we choose to ignore them, or water them down, or spiritualize and gloss over them. It is very tempting to do this, and it certainly is what the mega-churches do.

We live in a time when everyone seems to want to know, on both the local and national level, *How are we doing as a Church?* Certainly this question is very relevant in the UMC, as later this month, delegates from around the world will gather for a special General Conference to address the issue of human sexuality in light of our theological differences. Something will happen, and whatever happens some will leave the General Church and some will stay.

In asking the question, *'How are we doing as a Church?'* Is the focus is on numbers and dollars? I am not saying that these things are not important, but focusing too much on them, prevents us from asking another a more important question, *'What are we doing for God, both individually and collectively?'*

I find Jesus' statement, *'Today, the scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing'* very interesting.... It can be interpreted in two ways. The first is to hear it as being about Jesus. Jesus is the fulfillment, or was the fulfillment of God's promise, so, we don't have to follow in his footsteps.

We leave (Jesus' pronouncement) as the past teachings of an historical Jesus, for (that) time and place, with little or no demand on those who hear (them) anew, hear and now.

(Karoline Lewis, dearworkingpreacher, January 20, 2019)

Such thinking is simply passing the buck, and ignoring what we are called to do and be about it.

The second, is to hear them believe Jesus' pronouncement is ours to carry on. We will not finish the work Jesus began. Others who follow will need to also carry on, but that is not an excuse for not our carrying on the work, and proclaiming message Jesus' proclaimed in Nazareth. Faithful discipleship recognizes that *this inaugural sermon of Jesus is ours to preach* in word and deed. *(Karoline Lewis)*

Yes, the message is hard to hear. Prophetic messages always are, but, if we can, let's move beyond our defensiveness and hear this message not as one of judgment, nor as one of vengeance, but rather, as prophetic grace that needs to be proclaimed today. Then, maybe, just maybe, we can hear it differently. This message of prophetic grace invites us to honestly and openly look at our privilege and entitlement and the ways such privilege and entitlement cause us to lose sight of what Jesus is calling us to do.

Doing this becomes easier when we remember that we are welcome at the Table of Grace, because when we trust in God's grace, and believe that from God's perspective *nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ*, we can begin to ask ourselves the tough questions.

Questions that can allow us to look at our lives, and reflect on what we can do to move closer to God's will for our lives by,

*living more simply, loving more generously, caring more deeply,
speaking more kindly and justly and more often leaving the rest to God...*

Doing this, I believe, is the first step toward understanding that God's call for healing, justice, mercy, and love is not a threat, but rather an affirmation of what can be, when we, in faith, seek to carry on the work Jesus began. Believing that when we rely on the love and grace God offers, we can join with others in continuing to strive toward the day when more will live in ways that, *proclaim the year of our Lord's favor.*