

Title: A Sense of Mission
Text: Luke 4: 14 – 21
Date: January 27, 2019

I consider this to be quite an important passage, so it should be no surprise that I have preached on this a few times before. Even so, I'll be taking this in a slightly different direction this morning, to keep myself stimulated, as much as anything else. In any event, this passage - recounted in all three of the synoptic gospels - defines the launch of Jesus' ministry. I don't think it is too much of a stretch to view this as Jesus' mission statement. According to *The Interpreter's Bible*, Jesus' reading and interpretation of the words of Isaiah function **"as a keynote to the entire ministry of Jesus, setting forth the perspective from which it is understood."**

The angle that has me thinking today is "what's missing?" Every time there is a lectionary reading, every time there is a "mission statement," it is worthwhile to think not only about what is *there*, but also think about what is *not there*. In doing so, you become conscious that some significant decisions have been made. Whenever I read the assigned lectionary text for the day, I routinely look at the verses that come beforehand, and the verses that come later. I may or may not add or subtract verses, but at least it is an informed decision.

For starters, our passage today does not tell the whole story. The story *seems* to end on a high note. Jesus is called upon to be the worship assistant of the day, he selects a powerful passage from Isaiah, does a good job with his delivery, then concludes by adding, **"Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."** (v. 21) On the surface this sounds good, but it doesn't tell the whole story. To fully appreciate this story you have to come back next week. You see, there was an extreme reaction that is missed by just ending where we did today. *Something's missing.*

Something is also missing from the passage that Jesus read. While he was handed a scroll of the prophet Isaiah, it seems clear that he exercised some intentionality in selecting the specific verses from Isaiah 61. Beginning with verse 1 it reads:

**"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;
to proclaim the year of the LORD's favor."**

While you have probably heard this passage read many times, it is likely that you are not conscious of what is *missing*. It seems that Jesus intentionally dropped the ending of this last line. You see the full reading is that the Spirit is upon him,

**to proclaim the year of the LORD's favor,
and the day of vengeance of our God.**

Isn't that interesting! When we are aware that Jesus consciously dropped off the part about vengeance, that makes us appreciate what is left all the more: a focus on healing and justice; a heart for the oppressed, the brokenhearted, the captives, and the prisoners. Jesus is modeling what might be called a Christ-centered interpretation of Scripture, as opposed to a rigid rendering.

Seventeen years ago Rick Warren wrote a wildly popular book entitled *The Purpose-Driven Life* that has sold over 30 million copies. Anyone here ever read that book? It is intended to answer

the all-important question: *What on earth am I here for?* It strives to lift up the importance of knowing and clarifying one's purpose, and consciously working towards fulfilling that purpose. One of the notable features of this book is that it is absolutely swimming in Bible quotations. It seems as though there is a quote for everything! What is striking, however, is what is missing. With the absolute plethora of Bible quotes, nowhere is Luke 4:14-21 quoted. Isn't that interesting! With a Christian book that is intended to help you clarify the mission of your life, it somehow overlooks the passage that Jesus uses to highlight the mission of *his* life. While surely there is much good in his book, it is quite telling to be aware of *what is missing!* That alone should make you stop and think.

And now that we are on a roll, let's consider *The Apostles' Creed*, long-considered one of the foundational creeds of the Christian faith. It reads, in part, **"I believe in Jesus Christ . . . who was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died, and was buried."** Whoa! Did you ever stop to think about *what was missing?* That is quite a leap from **"born of the Virgin Mary"** to **"suffered under Pontius Pilate."** It has been pointed out that the only thing separating the two is a coma. Did you stop to think about *what is missing?* The very life and teachings of Jesus, which was launched by the mission statement that we read this morning! Perhaps this highlights our tendency to think in abstract theological terms, which is easier than *praxis* – putting our faith into practice.

One of the more extreme examples of "something is missing" is commonly referred to as *The Jefferson Bible*. Thomas Jefferson completed *The Life and Morals of Jesus of Nazareth* in 1820 by cutting and pasting with a razor and glue numerous sections from the New Testament as extractions, most notably excluding any reference to miracles or the supernatural. Whatever you think of that, at least he was forthright about what he was doing.

Last year I became aware of another disturbing example of this. In a new exhibit in a museum in D.C. a copy of the so-called "*Slave Bible*" sits on display. This Bible used by slave holders in the early 1800s, is quite different than the one in the pew in front of you. While the typical Bible has 66 books, this one contains all or part of about 14 books. It contains the story of Joseph being sold into slavery, but it skips the part about God leading the Israelites out of slavery. In the New Testament, themes of being submissive are highlighted. The part in Galatians 3 that says, **"there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus"** (3:28) is nowhere to be found. The whole book of Revelation is left out, so there is no new Kingdom, no new world, nothing to look forward to.

Consider how different this is from the vision that Jesus highlights saying,

**"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.**

Frederick Douglass, the escaped slave who became a prominent activist, had this to say: **"Between the Christianity of this land and the Christianity of Christ, I recognize the widest possible difference—so wide that to receive the one as good, pure, and holy, is of necessity to reject the other as bad, corrupt, and wicked."**

Interestingly enough, it was a Baptist theologian by the name of Robert Parham who wrote, **"Luke 4:18 – 19 is one of the most ignored, watered down, spiritualized or glossed over texts in many Baptist pulpits, evading or emptying Jesus' first statement of his moral agenda."** He goes on to summarize that in these verses **"Jesus said the gospel was for the poor**

and oppressed, speaking to those at the margins of society. Jesus was announcing that he came to liberate from real oppressive structures the marginalized – the impoverished, the war captives, the poor in health, the political prisoners. Jesus came to turn the economic structures upside down.”

This is serious business, but it is totally consistent with something we read a few weeks back, which is found in the first chapter of Luke. In a passage known as the *Magnificat* Mary says, **"My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior . . . he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts. He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty."** (Luke 2:46-55)

All this leaves us with an uncomfortable question. If this passage does indeed highlight Jesus' sense of mission, what does this say about our sense of mission? What does this say about our church's sense of mission? Does it resonate, or is it something we might be just as inclined to leave out? These are hard questions for a people who are finding themselves comparatively comfortable with the status quo. Archbishop Oscar Romero troubles the waters further when he says, **"A church that doesn't provoke any crises, a gospel that doesn't unsettle, a word of God that doesn't get under anyone's skin, a word of God that doesn't touch the real sin of the society in which it is being proclaimed . . . what gospel is that?"**

Lucky for you I am not going to force you to answer that question this morning, for we are going to continue this discussion next week. For now, let me conclude with a quote that I have always found thought-provoking. See if you think it relates. G.K. Chesterton wrote, **"Christianity has not been tried and been found wanting; it has been tried, found difficult, and been set aside."**

Amen

Luke 4: 14 – 21

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

¹⁶When 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, ¹⁷and 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 let the oppressed go free,
¹⁹to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."

²⁰And 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. ²¹Then he began to say to them, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."