

The Mission Statement

Luke 4:16-20

A number of years ago an acquaintance surprised me by giving me a Christmas gift. It was very pretty, carefully wrapped and tied with a nice bow, and inside was a box of chocolates. A very nice box of expensive chocolates. Or to be more specific, half a box of expensive chocolates. The half she didn't like, I suspect.

You don't expect someone to give you half of something, unless, of course you are sharing. But today you get half a story. Not the leftover half, just half. We don't normally do that, but in this case we need to because otherwise our tendency is to get caught up in the response of the people of his hometown and if we do we'll miss something important.

Probably we should begin by taking a step backwards, though. In John, Jesus has already begun to gather disciples around him, but in Luke, Jesus is just beginning. He has only now returned from the wilderness, where he has been tempted to misuse his power, to imagine and create a kingdom of his own design. Still filled with the Holy Spirit, he returns to Galilee and begins teaching.

This particular story takes place in the synagogue of Jesus' hometown, Nazareth. The attendant handed the scroll of the book of Isaiah to Jesus, but then he chose his own text. And so, announcing that he would be reading from the 58th chapter of the prophet Isaiah, Jesus read these verses, then sat down to teach.

It's at this point that we would be inclined to jump ahead to the part where his neighbors and classmates from school try throw him off the nearest cliff, but that's why we only have half the story today, because something important has just happened, and we don't want to hurry past it.

The fact that Luke reports that 'all eyes were on him' suggests to me that no one was reading along with Jesus in their pew Bible. No one had taken the trouble to look the passage up themselves. If they had, they would have discovered something interesting. Jesus wasn't really reading from the 58th chapter of Isaiah. He read a cut-and-paste version of it, mixing in a bit of chapter 61, and cutting out a bit of chapter 58. Interesting, huh? But Jesus isn't trying to play fast and loose with scripture. He's making a point, or rather, an announcement.

He isn't just telling them that he is the messiah, he's telling them what kind of messiah he is. This is Jesus' mission statement. When he says, today this scripture has been fulfilled, he's telling them, and us, what he has come to do. He's announcing what his life's work is, and that's the part that really stuck in their craw – but that's for next week.

Here's what he said, or quoted; four things that the Lord had appointed him to:

- Bring good news to the poor;
- Proclaim release to the captive
and recovery of sight to the blind;
- to let the oppressed go free,
and to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.

What I find is that they don't translate well in our world. Bear in mind that Isaiah wrote those words at a time when the people of Israel had been carried off to Babylon and were living in exile. The sick and infirm, including the blind, would have been booted out of their worshipping communities and their towns, destitute and ostracized. Not exactly the world we live in. The poor we have, no doubt, but captives? To the best of my knowledge no one in recent history of the U.S. has been carried off into captivity, exiled in the country of an invading army. And blindness isn't a major health concern anymore, or leprosy for that matter, although Isaiah doesn't specifically mention it here. Oppression, that's a little trickier. Slavery has been abolished. We don't practice child labor anymore, sweat shops are illegal, at least in this country (although I have to think that many of the inexpensive goods we purchase are inexpensive in part because of those oppressive sorts of labor practices). We certainly look like we've cleaned up our act and practice equality and justice for all, but if were to ask a person of color who was pulled over for no other reason than he was driving a Mercedes or BMW, they might have a different story to tell.

And that, I suppose, is exactly what Jesus would point out to us if he were here, today, helping us understand this text. You may need to scratch beneath the surface a bit for it to translate to our world, our day and time. If we take his words literally, Jesus might not have a full-time job in this country today, although bringing good news to the poor alone would probably keep him busy. So what Jesus would probably tell us is to extrapolate, or generalize. If the visually impaired aren't particularly threatened, and if the tables have turned and we are now a superpower, not a vassal state or a people persecuted in any way, how else might we understand those words? What else might it mean to be captive, or blind, or oppressed? Who else might Jesus have in mind?

Maybe the first word in this batch of miseries is a good catch-all: poor. Poor isn't just a financial condition. A quick check in a thesaurus comes up with synonyms like wretched, pitiable, worthless, unfortunate and exhausted. Your health can be poor, you can be a poor excuse for a human being. Life can be treating you poorly. There's all kinds of ways a person can be impoverished, even if they have millions in the bank, 20/20 vision, and they've lived in the land of the free and the home of the brave their whole lives.

In other words, Jesus came to relieve suffering, suffering of all kinds. His life's work was to bring good news to people in need. Whatever the need is, whatever kind of 'poor' they have or are, his work is to free them from it. If that is surprising, that the God who runs the universe should be concerned with the welfare and well-being of each individual, it shouldn't be. As Lutheran pastor, Edward Markquart, states, "God's story is always related to human need. For example, if a woman is dying of cancer, the gospel is God's strong word of resurrection. If a person is permeated with guilt, the gospel is God's assurance of forgiveness. If people experience extreme suffering, the gospel is the prayer: "God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in time of trouble." For the starving, the gospel may be bread. For a homeless refugee, the gospel may be freedom in a new homeland. For others, the gospel may be freedom from political tyranny. The gospel is always related to human need. It is never truth in a vacuum, a theologically true statement which may or may not relate to one's life."

It's too bad that the people in the synagogue that day didn't hear the gospel as gospel, good news. Surely every one of them there were poor in some way, shape or form. Sick, overwhelmed, frightened, held captive by a vice or addiction, filled with hatred or prejudice, lonely, haunted by guilt. Maybe even poor as a church mouse. It's too bad that they couldn't see that Jesus had something for them, that he could set them free from whatever kind of poor they had or were.

But as I said before, what Jesus was doing that day wasn't framed so much in terms of an invitation, but as an announcement. I doubt he would have turned anyone away, but his message that day wasn't 'come to me' but 'this is what my work is. This is my mission.'

So the text's message to us this morning isn't really about what the messiah can do for us, although he certainly won't turn you away if you come to him this morning with your poverty. Instead, it asks us a question: what is your mission statement? What announcement are you making about what your life's work is? Even if you never sit down and write a mission statement for yourself, or stand up in church and publicly declare what you have been sent here to do, your life speaks for you. Your words speak for themselves. You are making an announcement, whether you intend to or not. What do they say?

Are we proclaiming that one verse that Jesus left out, announcing that God's day of vengeance has arrived, and boy-howdy are some of those people out there gonna get it? Or are we proclaiming a made up verse, that 'God helps those who help themselves'? Or do our words and actions announce that we have been given the work of relieving suffering all around us? In Haiti. In Africa. In Northern Ireland. In our own town, and church, and families, and jobs. For persons living with HIV/AIDS, or mental illness, or the lasting effects of abuse. In the harried clerk at the store, or the unhappy kid in class?

Two exciting things happen here today. This morning we will ordain and install four new elders who will join a session that is in the midst of an exciting transitional time in its work. Then tonight we'll gather back together to hear about how God is at work here. It is a good day as a church and as leaders to ask ourselves this question: what is it we are announcing in our meetings and projects and concerns and budget that our mission is, what God has put us here to do? Do we say that we are here simply as receivers of God's mercy, or are we also sent?

But the question isn't just for the Church. It's for each one of us to ask ourselves, too. What do our words and actions and budgets say about us? That we are disciples of the kind of kingdom that the devil tried to sell Jesus on out in the wilderness – self-serving, self-promoting – or the Kingdom of God?