

# The Least, the Last and the Lost

Luke 4 :16-30

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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, and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written: "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." 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. Then he began to say to them, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." All spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his mouth. They said, "Is not this Joseph's son?" He said to them, "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.'" And he said, "Truly I tell you, no prophet is accepted in the prophet's hometown. But the truth is, there were many widows in Israel in the time of Elijah, when the heaven was shut up three years and six months, and there was a severe famine over all the land; yet Elijah was sent to none of them except to a widow at Zarephath in Sidon. There were also many lepers in Israel in the time of the prophet Elisha, and none of them was cleansed except Naaman the Syrian." When they heard this, all in the synagogue were filled with rage. They got up, drove him out of the town, and led him to the brow of the hill on which their town was built, so that they might hurl him off the cliff. But

he passed through the midst of them and went on his way.

**Introduction.** A few weeks ago, many of us were part of an inspiring service here that was led by our youth. Near the end of that service, the seniors were introduced and told where they were going to college. In a few weeks, those students will be off on a new adventure. They will be scattered to various places, including the institution next door, UTC. After a few weeks at school, they will discover what most of us know, "When you go away from home, it is never again the same."

Here in Luke we find a story of Jesus returning to his hometown in Nazareth. His experience of return is not unlike what we often experience. Even though he was committed to his mission, he did not garner the level of respect he deserved from the hometown community. He was still little "Joey" the son of Joseph.

## Jesus' Mission.

When Jesus returned home he continued his weekly religious habit of attending synagogue services. This was Jesus' custom and he was committed to its observance. (If Jesus was committed to attending weekly services of worship, it is a practice that would benefit each of us to model.)

During the service, Jesus was invited to read the scripture and comment on it. According to Luke, he read from Isaiah 61 – *The Spirit of the Lord is upon me* . . . For Luke these words are the central theme of his gospel and the interpretive key for his book. For Luke, Jesus came to deliver the last, the least and the lost.

After reading the text, Jesus tells his audience that the scripture is fulfilled in their hearing. In other words, the words of Isaiah are accomplished through Jesus' presence.

There are three phrases used from the Isaiah quote that tell the audience who Jesus is and the authority he has. "*The Spirit of the Lord is upon me*" – Jesus comes as one not in his own authority but in God's authority. The Spirit is guiding

him. Luke is pointing his readers back to Jesus' baptism when the Holy Spirit descended and came upon Jesus. Jesus has this direct connection to the Father in heaven through the Spirit. He is not acting on his own initiative but that of God the Father.

Not only is the Spirit upon him, but God has *anointed Jesus*. The idea of anointing carries with it Messianic significance. The special One that God would send into the world to bring the new order would be the anointed one, the Messiah (Hebrew), the Christ (Greek). This is an announcement of Jesus' Messianic mission.

Isaiah wrote that this one was "sent." The Greek word is ἀποστέλλω which means to be sent with a mission. It is the source of our word, apostle. Jesus was sent with a special mission. His mission was to share and to announce good news to people in need.

Speaking of speakers, once a safety officer delivered a presentation to a PTA group. After the program, the chair of the PTA gave him a check for \$50. The speaker said, "Giving these presentations is part of my job. Could I donate the money to one of your causes?" "That would be wonderful," she gushed, "We have just the program that could use it. We're trying to raise money so we can afford better speakers."

Jesus' mission as outlined in the quote from Isaiah is a deep and rich gold mine. Personally, I would enjoy spending a few months digging around in it. This summer as we explore unique stories in Luke, we will uncover more of its riches.

Jesus came to *bring good news to the poor*, those who were destitute. Think for a moment, what would be good news to those who are poor? Let me offer 4 suggestions:

1) Good news would be for the poor to know Someone is on their side. They have an advocate. Luke so magnificently shares this message when he records Mary's song (The Magnificat). In the song, the pregnant Mary tells how God not only looked with favor on her low estate but the low

estate of the poor. Jesus comes to share that God is on the side of the poor.

2) Good news for the poor is they will be accepted and invited in and not rejected because they are poor. In our world, poor people are often excluded because they are poor and lack resources. They are unable to eat at certain restaurants, cannot attend particular institutions of higher learning, cannot join exclusive clubs and are even shunned in some churches. But Jesus announces they are welcome to participate in the heart of what God is doing. "Blessed are the poor, for theirs is the kingdom of God."

A few weeks ago, a special banquet was held in the Oak Street Center. Child care and activities were planned. Several influential people, including the city mayor, attended. But this event was not about them. It was for the poor – the homeless. A few business people and religious leaders developed this idea of having a banquet for the group which is not normally invited to banquets. It was a "Jesus good news" event for the poor.

3) Good news for the destitute is that people are going to give them aid. People who are destitute lack the resources to help themselves. They need assistance. Jesus in his ministry not only offered help but called and expected those who would follow him to serve the poor. On one occasion, a rich young ruler came to him who had interest in deeper spiritual matters. Jesus called him to sell his possessions, give to the poor and to follow. When we follow Jesus, there is an inherent call that comes to us to help those who are poor.

4) Good news for the poor offers a way out of their poverty. Following Jesus and what he taught often leads many along a path that leads them out of the clutches of poverty. Our faith advocates a good work ethic, places us in a community where people encourage and support one another and leads us to give which opens heaven's gates for God's blessings. Often, being a faithful follower of Jesus will help one escape from poverty.

Jesus proclaimed that he came to free the *captives* and the *oppressed* (or those who were downtrodden and broken). The verb used in our text has a rich meaning which includes pardoning, forgiving, releasing from bondage and leaving a situation. Jesus comes as a herald to the captives and broken with this message of liberation.

I grew up in a Christian culture where we tended to use the idea of release of captives and oppressed in a more figurative fashion. People were captive to sin, vices and bad habits. We occasionally would talk of people being oppressed by spiritual forces. Jesus came to set people free from these and to pardon their sins.

When we read through the gospels, we see that Jesus did deliver people from these types of captivity and oppression. But he was also concerned about those who were literally prisoners. He was concerned regarding matters of justice for the prisoners and meeting their needs.

Jesus proclaimed he came to give sight to the blind. In scripture there are two types of blindness – literal blindness and spiritual blindness. Luke shares two instances during Jesus' ministry where he restored the sight to those who were blind (7:21; 18:35ff). In the gospels, the act of healing was central to Jesus' ministry. He healed not to get attention or draw a crowd but out of his compassion for people.

People were blind to the truth. Many of the religious folks did not "get it." People outside the faith did not understand. Of particular concern were many of the religious leaders. Jesus asks the question, "Can the blind lead the blind?" They just did not get it. Jesus sought to shine light into their worlds so they could see.

Finally, Jesus' mission included the proclamation of *year of the Lord's favor*. While this may have been a reference to the Jewish Year of Jubilee when all debts were forgiven, this is more likely understood by Jesus as announcing the presence of God's kingdom among the people. The time

of this new reality of the kingdom of God has come.

### The People's Reaction.

I imagine most of the people in the synagogue in Jesus' hometown had some level of understanding what the words of Isaiah were saying. They probably perceived that Jesus was saying a new day had dawned. Their initial reaction and what followed is enlightening.

When Jesus claimed these words were fulfilled in their hearing, the people reacted with a typical church type response: "That was a nice message, good job!" (Nearly all preachers want to hear a few people give that comment as people exit the sanctuary.) But their response was rather shallow.

Something turned sour in this situation and by the end of the scene the people are ready to lynch Jesus. The crowd asked a seemingly innocent question, "Is not this Joseph's son?" to which Jesus seems to over-react. Either something is missing in the story or Jesus reads their minds or he wants to pick a fight. I have discovered that reading the story from Mark's perspective is helpful (6:1ff) because Mark tells more about how the townspeople were questioning Jesus' authority and ability because he was one of them, Joseph's boy.

Perhaps the conflict that transpires comes not so much when the people question Jesus' authority but when people react to Jesus' message conveyed in the text.

Jesus uses two OT stories that touched a nerve in the people's hearts. He alluded to the time when there was a severe 3½ year draught in Israel. God sent his Prophet Elijah to a widow in Zarephath and provided for her and her family. He told of the healing of the Syrian official Naaman's leprosy. Neither of these two characters was Jewish.

Jesus was clearly communicating that his mission was not exclusively to the community of Nazareth nor even the Jewish nation. Jesus' mission to the poor, captives, blind and oppressed extended beyond the

boundaries of their own people. It was to people for whom they had little or no regard. It was a ministry beyond the walls.

As long as Jesus' message and mission was for the hometown folks, then they were OK with it. They could say, "Great message." But when they learned that his work extended to places and to people with whom they were not comfortable, they reacted negatively. They were ready to stone him.

### **Application.**

There is a two-fold application to this lesson.

Jesus' mission is not just for our group and the people like us. His ministry is directed toward the whole world. He has acted to minister to the poor and captives who live in a different neighborhood from us, on the "other side of the tracks," and the other side of the world. He reaches out to those who have different political and theological views than we have. He loves the people in the church, the synagogue and the mosque down the street. He wants all to experience the fullness of the year of God's favor. His ministry is even directed toward those who consider us enemies and we consider to be our enemies.

Secondly, when we follow Jesus, we enter into a covenant to take on his mission – to the poor, the captive, the blind and broken. We are the body of Christ in this world. This ministry is not just for those who are part of this congregation or our United Methodist tribe or the Christian community. This is the ministry to the world. If we follow Jesus, we must follow him outside of these walls to some places that will make us feel less than comfortable and to some places where we do not want to go.

### **The table.**

This table that is spread before us is not just for us, it is for the world. Let us eat and drink and take the grace we receive to the world around us.