

Songs of Commitment and Action
Luke 4:16-30
First Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)
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So, who is this Jesus that we Christians claim to follow? Is he a shepherd tending lovingly to his flock? Is he a savior, or even a superhero, whose purpose is to swoop in and help us? Is he a sacrifice, given because we can't redeem ourselves from our own sin? Is he a symbol of God's love? Is he a door through which we enter heaven?

Or perhaps you would answer this question differently altogether. Because, after all, there is not one right answer...there is not one answer that either Christians today or throughout the ages have agreed upon. And, in fact, as is true of you and I and every other human, Jesus was complex...he was not just one thing...he did not serve just one purpose...he did not have just one quality or priority.

But all too often when we think about who Jesus is, we limit our perceptions because we tend to answer this question in connection to ourselves. So, we sing "Jesus loves me" and we cozy down in the personal truth of that claim. Or we say that he was born to die because of our sin without ever considering how that claim places great value on our lives, but not nearly as much value on his. We talk about his humanity when it is good for us - when we need a friend, but we defer to the claim of his divinity when we have screwed up and need saving.

Yet seldom do we really look at who he was in his day to day life...in relationship to his community...in relationship to the leaders around him...in relationship to God's good world. Not often enough do we look at the parts of Jesus that weren't about making our lives better either today or in some far off place someday, but that instead were about changing the world in his time and place.

And that is the Jesus we get in today's text. Here he is, and Luke has positioned this story near the beginning of his ministry, although scholars tend to believe that may be less about chronology and more about the message of the passage from Isaiah.¹ In other words, it is clear by references in this story to the ministry that he has already been doing, that this is not Jesus' first day as a public figure. Rather people are already talking about the difference he is making.

So, it is likely Luke positions this story here because of the message that is shared.

¹ Fred Craddock, *Luke from the Interpretation Series*, 61-64.

Jesus, as was the custom for Jewish men, was at the synagogue in his hometown. There, again as was common for those in attendance, he read from and commented on the scripture² - that day reading what we know as the opening verses to Isaiah 61.

And, again, sometimes we focus on the wrong thing. Christians have too often read this passage and only heard Jesus say, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."³ Too often Christians have heard this as proof of Jesus' messiahship, as evidence that Christianity was designed to replace Judaism.

But what if we listen to the words that he said were fulfilled - the words that Luke seems to position here at the beginning of Jesus' ministry because they appear to be a mission statement for the work he will do.

We are told that Jesus "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.'"⁴

In the reading of those words, Jesus sets the tone for his ministry. He is clear about the work to which he is called. And he is clear that this work isn't about the powers that be, but is instead focused on the oppressed, the pushed aside, the disenfranchised. He is also clear that this isn't just about giving a crust of bread to the hungry or a bit of pocket change to the poor, but about changing the systems and the world in ways that no longer hold people captive in those positions.

Friends, Jesus is many things, but it is unfaithful on our part if we ignore this part of him...if we ignore that his ministry was not about coddling the rich and powerful while tossing scraps to those who were struggling, but instead was about changing the systems and making the world an equitable place for all. So, maybe it is clear why we - and by "we" I mean Christians in general - talk less about this facet of Jesus than the others. After all, if we understand him to be an all powerful divine force who swoops in to save the day, then we can let ourselves off the hook a bit.

But, if we take seriously his human mission to make the world what God intended and to set people free from systems that held them captive, then - as his followers - we are called to make that our mission as well.

² Craddock.

³ Luke 4:21b, NRSV.

⁴ Luke 4:17b-19, NRSV.

That's why we are looking at this text as we also sing the song, "Will You Come and Follow Me." Because that song reminds us that we are not Jesus' admirers, but his followers and that means that our claim of Christianity should change not only our lives, but the lives of other people - especially people who are disenfranchised.

Do you remember those words we sang?

"Will you leave yourself behind if I but call your name? Will you care for cruel and kind and never be the same? Will you risk the hostile stare should your life attract or scare? Will you let me answer prayer in you and you in me?"

"Will you let the blinded see if I but call your name? Will you set the prisoners free and never be the same? Will you kiss the leper clean and do such as this unseen, and admit to what I mean in you and you in me?"

"Will you love the 'you' you hide if I but call your name? Will you quell the fear inside and never be the same? Will you use the faith you've found to reshape the world around, through my sight and touch and sound in you and you in me?"

This is what Jesus asks of us - that the mission of our lives match his.

And friends, it is hard work. Remember, the passage we read didn't end with Jesus rolling up the scroll and telling them it was fulfilled. Rather the passage went on with Jesus in some ways picking a fight. He didn't leave the conversation with people admiring him, but he pointed out to them how difficult this had been in their past. After all, this mission wasn't new to Christianity - after all, remember Jesus wasn't a Christian. It wasn't new for Jesus, but this is the heritage of Judaism. And, even if his momma would have preferred he not say anything more, Jesus had to be honest and name the times when their ancestors had missed the boat and when outsiders had been more faithful than them.

So, that is part of our calling as well - to name truth even when doing so is difficult, even when it causes friends to turn on us, even when, as happened that day for Jesus, it means our lives are at stake.

We like to be comfortable and feel good, but that's not really a priority for Jesus. It's not that he's opposed to a good time or a joyful memory, but his commitment is to building the kin-dom, a world in which all are treated equitably.

And this work remains for us to do. Unfortunately, in direct contradiction to Jesus' willingness to hold the authorities accountable, there came a time when the church went to bed with the empire, when we shifted the identity of Jesus

from being a prophet and a protestor to being someone who was here to save us from ourselves and secure our ticket into heaven.

And yet, Jesus' voice continues to call us. Jesus continues to ask us if we will follow and continues to remind us that answering "yes" means that we are committing to change the world, to change our systems, sometimes even to change our circumstances so that those we have comfortably "othered" are given steady footing on our same solid ground.

Will you follow Jesus if it means giving up some of what you have to share with another?

Will you follow Jesus if it means risking your white body for a black body?

Will you follow Jesus if it means making others uncomfortable with a truth that must be spoken?

Will you follow Jesus if it means changing systems that you know and learning a new way to be?

Following Jesus is not easy. But we are all invited. How will we answer?