

A Commitment to Listen
Luke 4:21-30
First Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)
February 2, 2025
Rev. Jill Cameron Michel

Those of you who worshiped with us last week might have noticed that our reading today picked right up at the end of last week's reading. So, let's remember what we heard last week as that is the context for today. Jesus had begun his ministry in Galilee; he had returned home; when he went to worship at the synagogue in his hometown he was given the scroll to read and the opportunity to teach.

He was handed the scroll of Isaiah and he read the passage from Isaiah 61 about bringing good news to the poor and release to the captives, offering recovery of sight to the blind and setting free the oppressed, proclaiming the year of the Lord's favor.

And last week we ended with verse 21 which says: *Then he began to say to them, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing"* (Luke 4:21, NRSVUE). He claimed those priorities as his mission.

But have you ever thought about the gathered community? Can't you just imagine their joy at this point in the story? Scripture being fulfilled in their midst? A celebrity among them? How did they get so lucky?

Luke writes: *All spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his mouth. They said, "Is this not Joseph's son?"* (Luke 4:22, NRSVUE).

The excitement is almost palpable.

And we can name any number of reasons why that is so.

We know what it is to be star struck. Have you ever come in contact with a famous athlete or actor or musician, someone you admired? I'm a bit of a church nerd and I have to admit that I tend to get more star struck by theologians and leaders in ministry. In fact, the congregation I served in Indianapolis was filled with well known people in our denomination. I remember one night, when our dinner group from church was at my house, saying to a former Disciples' General Minister and President, who was in that group, how remarkable it was to watch him sitting at *my* dinner table building a relationship with *my* kids. I was as star struck by him as if he had been some grammy award winning musician. I suspect we all know what it is to be amazed when we are close to a celebrity. And I suspect that was some of the excitement in the synagogue that day.

Then, when that famous person comes from *your* town, or from *your* faith community, or from *your* family...when you knew them "back when" or when you watched them grow up, still the excitement takes on yet another layer.

And, if we are honest, there might be something else at play here. Because it is not unusual for us to come close to fame and to want something from it, to hope to get a taste of that fame by association. And it becomes clear that the people gathered in the synagogue that day felt some of that, too. After all, not only was Jesus becoming famous, but the work he was doing just might benefit them. And that had to be exciting.

So, it was in the midst of this tangled mess of feelings and hopes that the mood of the room changed. Because while the people were busy looking at Jesus with stars in their eyes, he started making it clear that his mission was bigger than his hometown and that the benefits would be spread much wider.

He reminded the people of stories from scripture, stories of *outsiders* getting healed, of *outsiders* becoming heroes. And suddenly the people who had been marveling at Joseph's son wanted nothing to do with him.

In fact, Luke tells us: *all ... 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* (Luke 4:28-29, NRSVUE).

We hear that and we are shocked. We read this story nearly two thousand years later and we quickly side with Jesus. We are sure we would never be like the people he was worshipping with that day.

And yet, how important it is to be honest about all the possibilities. How important it is to remember those moments when we have heard Jesus say something unexpected and found our instinct was to push back. How important it is to pay attention to how we feel when our beliefs are challenged, especially when they are challenged by our very own Jesus.

See, it's easy to be a critic when it is someone else we are criticizing. But, what happens when we are the ones who struggle to hear Jesus' word?

Last week I reminded us that "for too long we have sat comfortably with Jesus. We have experienced him as an easy house guest who blankets us in gratitude and praise...[But if we are honest] sometimes Jesus and his priorities make us uncomfortable. And, if we are honest, [that is just what] we need" ("Fulfilling Our Mission" sermon for January 26, 2025 by Rev. Jill Cameron Michel).

This matters - it matters because when we claim to be followers of Jesus, then we need to be ready for Jesus to challenge us and to push us out of our comfort zone. We need to be open to hearing a word from Jesus that comforts the afflicted and afflicts the comfortable. And we need to be willing to acknowledge that we have had the privilege so often of being those who are comfortable.

Friends, we live in a time where we have to be able to have honest conversations about what following Jesus really means.

As a congregation of predominantly white, middle class, educated people, we have to keep learning to name the places where we have experienced the benefits of white supremacy even when we didn't prescribe to it.

As a congregation filled with people who have experienced, yes, life's joys and sorrows, but who have mostly lived pretty charmed lives, lives where the systems worked for us and defended us, we have to confess the times when we have diminished the voices of others in order to keep ourselves comfortable.

As a mainline Protestant congregation who has largely benefited from - or at least not been harmed by - the ways civic and religious life have intertwined, it is time for us to have the hard conversations about how we and our systems have contributed to Christian nationalism. These are the conversations we are having in Faith Formation right now.

And none of this is easy.

But it is the work of following Jesus.

Because if we are honest there is much that Jesus would critique about the values and systems in which we comfortably live. And if we can muster up the courage, not to react with anger, but to engage the conversations and to look honestly at who Jesus was and who Jesus asks us to be, then we will be able to live more fully and faithfully.

This is hard work. And it is the work our world needs from us.

While we might have evolved quite a bit, still there is a basic instinct in humanity that pushes back on anything that threatens our comfort, our security, our understanding of ourselves. But when we are able to stay engaged in the conversation and listen to the critique, when we are able to choose the ways of Jesus even when they require risk from us, when we are able to see beyond our doorsteps out into a world loved by God, when we are able to choose love instead of fear, then we will grow more fully into the people we are created to be.

I wonder what would have happened that day had the people gathered with Jesus listened from a place of curiosity rather than insecurity.

I wonder what would have happened had they asked questions and listened to learn instead of reacting and clearing the room when Jesus' voice challenged their assumptions.

Friends, these continue to be invitations to us...to do the good work that we have been doing together and that so many of you are doing in other ways, but also to listen to the ways Jesus challenges us to continue to grow...to embrace the mission of Jesus with a desire to be part of it...to be willing to listen and learn even when it is easier not to do so. These are our invitations and when we accept them, when we are willing to listen to even a difficult word from Jesus, then we join in his mission of caring for this world. Amen.

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