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Luke 4:14-21

A Dangerous Sermon

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Luke 4:14-21 Common English Bible

Jesus returned in the power of the Spirit to Galilee, and news about him spread throughout the whole countryside. He taught in their synagogues and was praised by everyone. Jesus went to Nazareth, where he had been raised. On the Sabbath he went to the synagogue as he normally did and stood up to read. The synagogue assistant gave him the scroll from the prophet Isaiah. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written: The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me. He has sent me to preach good news to the poor, to proclaim release to the prisoners and recovery of sight to the blind, to liberate the oppressed, and to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor. He rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the synagogue assistant, and sat down. Every eye in the synagogue was fixed on him. He began to explain to them, “Today, this scripture has been fulfilled just as you heard it.”

 It is always hard to come home. People except you to be the same, but you have changed. I remember at my tenth high school reunion in Houston talking to this one person. I could not remember who she was, but she was nice and we talked about our lives. After we were done with our conversation, I talked with someone that I did know and I asked her who I had been talking with. She informed me that I was talking to a cheerleader! She didn’t look like a cheerleader now! She had changed and I had expected her to be the same.

 Today we heard part one of the story of when Jesus returns home. Next week we hear the aftermath. Spoiler alert, Jesus is not received with open arms when he comes home. What sticks out to me from the scripture that we read is Jesus’ words, “Today this scripture has been fulfilled just as you heard it.” Not will be but the ongoing, even repetitive, and definitely re-occurring perfect tense.[[1]](#footnote-1) Jesus is saying, “Today this Scripture is fulfilled and continues to be fulfilled and will keep being fulfilled and therefore will keep needing to be fulfilled in your presence.”[[2]](#footnote-2) We look around at our world and Jesus’ vision isn’t a reality. There is no good news for the poor, the captives are not freed, the blind can’t see, the oppressed are not liberated, and it is not a year of the Lord’s favor. Those words from Isaiah 61 seem impossible, like they will never become true.

I grew up in the United Methodist Church and the faith that I was shown was about making the world be a better place. It was about mission trips and making blessing bags for the homeless. Mission trips were about getting to know people and relationships. It was about building ramps for people in wheelchairs or painting houses. If we talked about Jesus that was a bonus, but it wasn’t the main thing that we were doing.

Do you know Matthew 25 where Jesus talks about the shepherd separating the sheep from the goats? There were people who fed the hungry and gave water to the thirsty. There were people who welcomed the stranger and gave clothes to the naked. There were people who took care of the sick and visited those in prison. If you did those things then you would have eternal life and if you didn’t there would be eternal punishment. A number of years ago I worked as a youth minister and I took a group of junior high kids to Houston. We were going to volunteer all day long and it was hot. The work was going to be tiring and I knew that the kids would complain. I thought if I read them this story, then they would be scared into serving with joy. They wouldn’t complain because they knew that if they didn’t serve the poor, the alternative was eternal punishment. It was not my finest hour. Guilting people into serving is not the best idea. We want people to serve others because they want to, because they find happiness in feeding the hunger, giving water to the thirsty, welcoming a stranger, giving clothes to the naked, taking care of the sick, and visiting those in prison.

It begins with Jesus and continues with you and me. When Jesus mentions proclaiming the year of the Lord’s favor, you might need some background on what that means. Jesus is referring to the year of Jubilee which is an idea that every fifty years the Lord would set everything and every one free. Every fifty years the slaves would be set free, the debts would be written off, all the prisoners released, everyone given freedom, and every person returned to their original property and family. The land would lay fallow and be returned to its ancestoral roots. However, there is no evidence that the year of Jubilee ever happened in reality. Maybe it never happened because people who had bought lands and slaves didn’t want to give them up without any compensation. No government official was going to risk their job by trying to force this on people. The wealthy didn’t want to turn the wealth over, they didn’t want to give the land back.

Following Jesus isn’t easy. Preacher Karoline Lewis tells about visiting the Holy Land and visiting a chapel by the Sea of Galilee that commemorates Jesus appearing on the shore, making a meal for his disciples, and inviting them to come and eat. There is a plaque at this chapel that says these words, “The deeds and miracles of Jesus are not actions of the past. Jesus is waiting for those still prepared to take risks at his word because they trust his power utterly.”[[3]](#footnote-3)

Jesus preached a dangerous sermon because it makes us look at our own prejudice. Nelson Mandela famously said, “No one is born hating another person because of the color of his skin, or his background, or his religion. People must learn to hate, and if they can learn to hate, they can be taught to love, for love comes more naturally to the human heart than its opposite.” We live in a world where one life is worth less than the other. One in three black males born today can expect to spend time in prison during his lifetime. Our African-American brothers in this country are more likely to be arrested, more likely to be executed, more likely to be killed.

Here in Dallas we have been rated as the most segregated city of its size in the nation. African-American workers in Dallas earn 54 cents on the dollar compared to whites. If you doubt that we live in a world where black life is seen as less than white life, check out your neighborhood next door website where people are afraid when they see a person of color walking down the street and they complain about all of the homeless asking for money.

This first sermon of Jesus is ours to keep on preaching and living and ours to make sure that it keeps on happening.[[4]](#footnote-4) We here at Greenland Hills are seen as a progressive church because we believe that the lives of LGBTQi people are just as important and valued and worthy as the lives of heterosexual people. We believe that the lives of women are just as important as the lives of men. This is Jesus’ message in the Gospel of Luke. He overturns every human category that we have made of who is worth more. Jesus takes us back to Jubilee where the color of your skin is not a stigma.

Jesus words were dangerous because they challenge the way that things have always been. I heard a new phrase this week, the comfort of apathy. That phrase made me think of a person that had been visiting our church and they stopped coming after one of our members shared his transgender journey. I called this person because I had been missing them and they said that hearing the testimony of our transgender member made them feel uncomfortable. For them church wasn’t supposed to make them feel uncomfortable. But it is harder to hate up close. Often we don’t hate someone who is different than us, but the comfort of apathy means that we never get to know about their life, we never get to hear their story because we never have relationships with people who are different than us. Our neighborhoods are filled with people who look like us, our work places are filled with people who have a similar economic status as us, our schools are filled with people who know what our lives are like. We have to really work to be in relationship with people who are different than us. We live segregated lives.

I joined Jesus because I want to be a part of his story. I want to live a life where I am working every day to bring good news for the poor, freeing the captives, giving sight to the blind, and freeing the oppressed. I want to be a part of that story. I want to be a part of a story that is about relationships and listening to people who are different than me. “Being listened to is so close to being loved that most people can’t tell the difference.”[[5]](#footnote-5) I want to be a part of a story that demands my physical presence, to come close, and take a stand for what is right.

I am still waiting for justice to “roll down like water, and righteousness like a mighty stream.” I am still waiting for my elected officials to “do justice and love mercy and walk humbly”. Until that day, I am called to fight so people earn a living wage, have affordable housing, have a just criminal justice system, and even the most vulnerable members of society are treated with respect and honor and love. We are called to stand up against unjust laws and inequitable policies because if we don’t we have the comfort of apathy. So, email or call your elected officials, get outside of your comfortable routine, and get close so you can develop a relationship with someone who is different than you.

A few years ago my friend Rev. George Battle asked for some volunteers to come paint some houses in south Dallas by Fair Park. So, we got a big group together from Greenland Hills and we painted and had fun, but my friend George lamented how easy it is to get groups together to come for a day and visit south Dallas. He said that he prayed for people to come to south Dallas and develop relationships.

Robin diAngelo is an author and also leads racial equity workshops for American companies. She said that she gives participants one minute, uninterrupted, to answer the question: “How has your life been shaped by your race?” This is rarely a difficult question for people of color, but she said most white participants are unable to answer. She said that some give up altogether and wait out the time, unable to sustain 60 seconds of this kind of reflection. She said that if someone cannot tell you what it means to be white, then they cannot understand what it means not to be white. They are unable to affirm an alternate racial experience. Too often white people assume that niceness is the answer to racial inequality and we expect that niceness to be reciprocated. This past May a white California woman even called the police when a group of black Airbnb guests did not return her smile.[[6]](#footnote-6) If we allow ourselves to accept this as okay,we are wallowing in the comfort of apathy.

It is dangerous when we acknowledge that we are racial beings with a particular and limited perspective on race. We can attempt to understand the racial realities of people of color through authentic interaction rather than through the media or through unequal relationships.[[7]](#footnote-7) We can insist that racism be discussed in our workplaces and commit to racial equity with by actual outcomes. We can get involved in organizations working for racial justice.[[8]](#footnote-8) This takes courage, but we follow dangerous Jesus. Remember, Jesus’ words were dangerous because they challenge the way that things have always been. Today is just the beginning. Things do not have to continue as they are. We can break out of the comfort of apathy. Thanks be to God, Amen.

1. http://www.davidlose.net/2019/01/epiphany-3-c-declaration-promise-and-invitation/ [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. http://www.davidlose.net/2019/01/epiphany-3-c-declaration-promise-and-invitation/ [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. http://www.workingpreacher.org/craft.aspx?post=5277 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. http://www.workingpreacher.org/craft.aspx?post=5277 [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. ##  Quote by [David W. Augsburger](https://www.goodreads.com/author/show/388167.David_W_Augsburger)

 [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2019/jan/16/racial-inequality-niceness-white-people [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2019/jan/16/racial-inequality-niceness-white-people [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2019/jan/16/racial-inequality-niceness-white-people [↑](#footnote-ref-8)