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Luke 4:21-30

Letting Go

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Luke 4:21-30 Common English Bible

He began to explain to them, “Today, this scripture has been fulfilled just as you heard it.” Everyone was raving about Jesus, so impressed were they by the gracious words flowing from his lips. They said, “This is Joseph’s son, isn’t it?” Then Jesus said to them, “Undoubtedly, you will quote this saying to me: ‘Doctor, heal yourself. Do here in your hometown what we’ve heard you did in Capernaum.’” He said, “I assure you that no prophet is welcome in the prophet’s hometown. And I can assure you that there were many widows in Israel during Elijah’s time, when it didn’t rain for three and a half years and there was a great food shortage in the land. Yet Elijah was sent to none of them but only to a widow in the city of Zarephath in the region of Sidon. There were also many persons with skin diseases in Israel during the time of the prophet Elisha, but none of them were cleansed. Instead, Naaman the Syrian was cleansed.” When they heard this, everyone in the synagogue was filled with anger. They rose up and ran him out of town. They led him to the crest of the hill on which their town had been built so that they could throw him off the cliff. But he passed through the crowd and went on his way.

Jesus reads from Isaiah 61 and says, “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.” Jesus rolls up the scroll and then says, “Today, this scripture has been fulfilled just as you heard it.” At first people are impressed with Jesus, he is a hometown son who makes good. He is just like them, he is one of them and they are so proud. But Jesus can’t leave well enough alone.

Jesus wants his hometown friends to know that he didn’t come for them. Jesus talks about the widow of Zarephath, a Gentile. The prophet Elijah healed her and she wasn’t Jewish. Jesus talks about how Elisha wasn’t able to heal the king of Israel but did heal Naaman the Syrian. The people gathered that day knew that salvation only extended to the Jews, and here Jesus is telling them that they can’t stop the grace of God. God sought out and healed despised foreigners, outsiders. God’s love cannot be contained. When the people hear this, they start to shift in their seats. This good news wasn’t just for them? The people rush to their feet, drive Jesus out of town and try to push him off a cliff!

People are offended that Jesus is for those whom we would rather forget. People are offended because they can’t control God’s grace and love. We want to hold back this light that Jesus wants to share with the whole world. We want to deny seeing God in everyone, but we don’t get to decide who God loves. I prefer to pick and choose Scripture that I can find on pinterest or write in calligraphy, put in a frame, and hang on my wall. I don’t know if I really want the fulfillment of the biblical vision. I liked Christianity more when it was easy and safe. When it didn’t require too much of me. It is more comfortable to live a Christian life where I can be judgmental and decide who God loves. I preferred Christianity when it didn’t get into my business and into the way that I live my life. I want to have faith that is just me and Jesus. But Jesus demands more. Jesus is about loving your enemies, serving the poor, welcoming refugees, making peace not war, doing justice and loving mercy, and caring for all of God’s creation.

God has come to save all, even those we fear or despise. God challenges the walls that we make. It reminds me of that childhood game, Red Rover Red Rover where two teams line up opposite each other. The first team agrees to call one player from the opposite team, and chants, “Red Rover, Red Rover, send \_\_\_ on over!” The person called runs to the other line and attempts to break the chain of hands. God calls everyone’s name and lets everyone break through the chain of hands.

The Gospel is hard to hear. It is hard to hear that our worth is not dependent on our voting record or our political ideology. All liberals are not evil. All conservatives are not Satan.[[1]](#footnote-1) The Gospel is about giving the same grace you want given to you. It is about worrying about others the way you want others to worry about you. It is about caring for others as you care for yourself. Can we get to a place of having compassion for other people? Jesus said to him, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets” (Matthew 22:37-39).

Following Jesus isn’t easy. Do you remember Judas? He heard all of Jesus’ teachings. He witnessed all of Jesus’ miracles. Still, it was money and greed that ruled him. It was money and greed that were his Lord and master. We don’t want to hear that though. So, we find a scripture to downplay how harmful money is. We say that money isn’t bad, it is the love of money that is so harmful. It is the love of money that is the root of all evil, that’s what the Bible says (1 Timothy 6:10).

From a Christian perspective, faith goes in two directions. By faith, Jesus Christ comes into our life. That idea is in the Bible four times. That is me and Jesus faith. We just sit back and are saved through God’s grace. Or we have the idea that by faith, we enter into the life of Jesus Christ. That idea is in the Bible 164 times. That is me and Jesus plus faith. Jesus Christ coming into our life is important but us entering into the life of Jesus Christ is a game changer[[2]](#footnote-2). It is scary and hard and overwhelming. It is living a life that is dedicated to preaching good news to the poor, proclaiming release to the prisoners, recovery of sight to the blind, liberating the oppressed, and proclaiming the year of the Lord’s favor.

In his book Christianity Rediscovered, Vincent Donovan says these words, “Do not call them back to where they were, and do not try to call them to where you are, beautiful as that place may seem to you. You must have the courage to go to a place that neither you nor they have ever been before.” There is great value in being an outsider to something because it gives you fresh eyes and perspective. It allows us to be amazed rather than have our vision clouded by all that has come before us. To those on the inside, Jesus is seen only as Mary’s son, but to those on the outside, Jesus is God’s Son.

There are so many people who have used the Bible to hate, which is crazy because the Bible is filled with story after story of outsiders. People like the Ethiopian eunuch who meets Philip on the road. They talk about Jesus and as they pass by a river, the Ethiopian eunuch asks what prevents him from being baptized? There is nothing so he is baptized. Or in Acts 10 when Peter has a vision of unclean animals coming down from heaven as he hears a voice telling him to kill and eat. The voice comes to Peter a second time and says, “What God has made clean, you must not call profane.” The Message translation says, “If God says it’s okay, it’s okay.”

We divide people into categories to understand the world around us. The danger comes when we create echo chambers that cause us to question God’s grace right in front of us. We have to let go of our categories of who fits in and who doesn’t. Let’s let God figure that out, okay? You know, I don’t blame the people of Nazareth for their struggle to understand Jesus in a new light, but I feel sad that they were so ingrained in their way of thinking that they couldn’t see the new thing happening right in front of them. It is really hard to overcome our fear of people who are different than us. It is so easy for us as Christians to forget that something radical and extraordinary is being asked of us. We look at the way that Jesus was treated in Nazareth and we say that we wouldn’t have responded that way. We wouldn’t have wanted to push Jesus off a cliff. But I’m not so sure. We need to listen to new voices to help us let go of holding on to the way that things have always been.

God calls us all blessed and loved and forgiven and sends us out into the world to share that message of love and hope. May we learn from Jesus and love. May we let go of all of our ideas about who is worthy and who is not. All are fully welcome. All can fully serve. God’s light shines in the darkness to outsiders and to insiders. Jesus preaches and teaches things that shock and amaze and challenge all of us. Jesus says, “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.” Jesus rolls up the scroll and then says, “Today, this scripture has been fulfilled just as you heard it.”

Too many churches and too many Christians ignore this mission. What if we at Greenland Hills were to ask who in our community is oppressed and why? What enslaves people? Alcohol? Work pressure? Outsized expectations? Work environment? Racial prejudice? How can we make it our business to join Jesus in his business of bringing good news to those places and to those people to work for freedom and recovery?[[3]](#footnote-3) That would be the Gospel, that would be the Good News right here. It begins with radical humility because radical humility makes it impossible for me to look down on someone else. This is about grace. This first sermon of Jesus is ours to keep on preaching and living and ours to make sure that it keeps on happening. It begins with Jesus and continues with you and me. Every day we are called to live a life where we are working to bring good news to the poor, freeing the prisoners, giving sight to the blind, and freeing the oppressed. We do that by fighting 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.

I like Christianity more when I don’t have to feel uncomfortable or worry about my obligation to other people. I like Christianity more when I don’t have to sacrifice anything. It is easy to understand why everyone in the synagogue was filled with anger and tried to throw Jesus off a cliff. But Jesus passed through the crowd and went on his way. Let’s let God be God and let go of our desire to control God. Let’s have an open hand instead of a closed fist. Let’s enter into the life of Jesus Christ and work together to bring good news to the poor, release to the prisoners, sight to the blind, liberation to the oppressed, all of it. Me and Jesus plus faith. Let’s go! Amen.

1. https://www.facebook.com/maria.dixon [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. https://twitter.com/danielhill1336/status/1086350808533422081 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. https://jameshowellsweeklypreachingnotions.blogspot.com/2018/01/what-can-we-say-january-27-3rd-after.html [↑](#footnote-ref-3)