

January 24, 2010  
The Federated Church of Hyannis  
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## **NEWS CONTROVERSY**

Luke 4:14-21

Galilee is significant because of its insignificance. Jesus did not grow up in Jerusalem, the center of Jewish life and religious practice. Instead, he grew up in Galilee, the hinterlands, a place where many non-Jews lived and where the Middle Eastern conflicts of today festered. Jesus carried out the major portion of his ministry in this region of Galilee.

He went to Nazareth where he grew up and was greeted as a local boy who had made good and already received a lot of notice. He went to the synagogue as was his custom. For those who believe they can follow Jesus but not show up in church to worship each week, take notice. If you follow Jesus you follow him right into Sabbath worship. It is in the mix of other worshippers where the scripture is read and his gospel proclaimed he is to be found. If you want to follow Jesus, that is where you have to be. You can do less and just learn about Jesus. You can study what he said and nod in agreement. But if you want to follow Jesus then follow Jesus and show up for worship.

In the first century Jewish worship took place in two locations. One was at the Jerusalem temple and the other at synagogues in each community. Temple worship in Jerusalem focused on ritual and sacrifice. Synagogue worship in small towns like Nazareth involved prayers, scripture readings, and teaching. For most Jews, temple worship in Jerusalem is something that they experienced, at best, a few times a year. Many Jews could only hope to make one Jerusalem pilgrimage in their lifetime. Local synagogues meet their need for regular worship.

In the synagogue, there was no paid clergy. The president of the synagogue invited someone to read and to comment on the scriptures, especially visiting rabbis. There was no book to flip through. Instead, a bulky scroll is brought to him, and placed on the lectern. The reader would stand to read it.

Jesus was handed the scroll of the prophet Isaiah. The book of the prophet Isaiah is long and rich with many messages, some of judgment, others of

grace. He unrolled it to a place near the end of the book and chose these grace-filled words to describe his ministry. These were words first sent to Jewish exiles in Babylon, who were as desperate as the people of Haiti are today.

It was then rolled up again and handed to an attendant. The one speaking would sit down. Those present would have known Jesus and his family. Most would have seen him grow up. They were familiar with the procedure in the synagogue. They would have heard words from the prophet Isaiah familiar to them. It was nothing new, yet the news Jesus proclaimed caused controversy. The controversy began when he announced the prophet's words had become fulfilled in their hearing.

Two millenniums ago Jesus read these words and said they were fulfilled, but we know that the poor are still with us and are often treated badly. There is a story told of two businessmen who were traveling by train to an important business meeting. In the seat opposite them was an old man with a shaggy beard, dressed in a tattered sweater and jeans. Throughout the ride, the two told each other crude jokes about bums and tramps, with particular reference to the man in the next seat.

When they arrived at the meeting, they discovered this "tramp" was a world-class scholar and the meeting's keynote speaker. Realizing he had heard everything they said on route, they apologized. "It is not my forgiveness you need," he responded, "but the forgiveness of all the common people you hold in such disdain."

Jesus proclaimed a gospel of love and care for the marginalized, not a new set of mystical principles or eloquent philosophy. These are not talking points to discuss. This is an announcement. This is the heart of Jesus' ministry. He described a society where those on the margins are brought to the center. He did not formulate a new intellectual understanding but a new human freedom – the release of captives. This is not a new word from God but the ancient promise that the oppressed will go free. It is a testimony to a living God.

"The year of the Lord's favor," is a reference to the jubilee year, the fiftieth year. It was intended to be a time when all debts were forgiven and land returned to its original owners who may have lost them through foreclosure. It was to be the time servants were freed. Some slaves were captured in

battle; others sold themselves or were sold into slavery to pay debts. When Jesus' words are truly heard, all debts are forgiven.

It is the introduction to Jesus' ministry that turns the world upside down. It stands as a proclamation and a challenge. What do you believe? What do you practice? There is a story passed around that during the Cold War when communism still had a grip on Eastern Europe, Queen Elizabeth of Belgium made a state visit to Warsaw. She was assigned a Polish protocol officer to accompany her to Mass. As they traveled to the church, she asked him, "Are you a Catholic?" "Believing but not practicing," he replied.

"I see," she said. "Then you must be a Communist." "Practicing, your majesty," he said, "but not believing." He claimed to believe one but not practice it while he practiced the other without believing it. What do you believe? What do you practice? Can they really be different? Those were the issues that surfaced at the very beginning of Jesus' ministry. And it was his good news to the poor that caused and causes such a conflict.

Poverty, captivity, and blindness all have physical and spiritual dimensions. It is bad to have an empty wallet, but worse to have an empty soul. Captivity is terrible, but it is possible to remain free in the midst of political captivity. And supposedly free people are enslaved by addictions. Jesus spoke to poor people in Nazareth where there was no real medical care. They were all captives and oppressed by the Romans. He came to tell them and us that God cares about our life and cares about whatever most troubles our life.

Here in the little synagogue in the little town of Nazareth in the hinterlands of Galilee in his home town with those who remembered him as a boy, Jesus announced that he is the one upon whom the spirit of the Lord has come. He read words that announced the heart of his ministry. It is to be a ministry to the poor, the captive, and the blind. This is the heart of the gospel but even in church sometimes it is treated as of secondary concern.

In a book entitled *Holy Sweat* by Tim Hansel, he tells of a guest preacher in a rather large church who began saying, "There are three points to my sermon." He began to lose their attention immediately. "My first point is this. At this time there are approximately two billion people starving to death in the world." The reaction through the congregation was that they'd heard that sort of statement many times before.

And then he said, “My second point...” Everybody sat up. Only 10 or 15 seconds had passed, and he was already on his second point? He paused, and then said, “My second point is that most of you don’t give a damn!” He paused again as gasps and rumblings flowed across the congregation, and then said: “And my third point is that the real tragedy among Christians today is that many of you are now more concerned that I said ‘damn’ than you are that I said two billion people are starving to death.” Then he sat down. Bringing good news to the poor can still cause controversy.

I do not want to romanticize the poor and the prisoners and what is involved in caring for the sick and disabled. Most just need some help and direction, but it is no easy matter to know just what to do. The poor can be desperate, dirty, dangerous, and dishonest. Last week there were two young men who came to the church with a story about their mom dying, and they needed to get bus tickets to go out of town to her funeral. We put them in touch with the Cape Cod Council of Churches outreach worker. It was a sad tale they told and he was able to help them get tickets – until he found out they were just going to sell the tickets for cash. They were not brothers. There was no deceased mom. It was just a scam.

Jesus did not suggest we abandon reason and hand cash to someone who just wants money to buy drugs. That is giving bad news. Ours is good news. Sending good news to the poor can be costly to those who want to deliver that news. Seeking release for captives can be dangerous. Helping the disabled can be somewhere between annoying and boring. But God has a way of reminding us that, however inconvenient, the poor are still with us.

The disaster that struck Haiti made the world aware of this poor nation facing disaster and the opportunity to fulfill the words of Jesus. We are taking an offering to help through the Salvation Army. The offering from the MLK service held here last Sunday afternoon, which would normally go to scholarship, went to Haitian relief. Locally, the Hyannis Rotary is taking a special collection for Haiti. People all over the nation are taking up special offerings. In our nation so bitterly divided between parties, two presidents from opposing parties have joined together to work on relief efforts.

As our world changed at the moment of Jesus’ announcement, the world changed the moment the announcement was made that Haiti was devastated by an earthquake. A lot of the stupid, petty celebrity news that was front and

center got pushed to the back where it belongs and up front was the painful reality of life for Haiti. A lot of the whining about being stuck inside in cold weather became a petty complaint seeing those with no home to be in. In one of the poorest nations in the world, the poor have been devastated.

It is good to see so many responding with aid like the Red Cross, Doctors without Borders, and countless others. I saw American Soldiers – 82<sup>nd</sup> Airborne? – who landed and did what soldiers really want to be able to do, to rescue a nation without a bullet being fired. But a year from now it will still be a terribly poor nation and there will be a news special or two recalling the tragedy. Then it will go back to being a nation mired in poverty.

Recall that after Hurricane Katrina there were many government and service organizations who responded. But who stayed and who continues with little notice to keep going back to help in New Orleans? With little notice, it is church groups like the Salvation Army, Catholic Charities, Church World Service, and Habitat for Humanity that continue in their service to the people who were victims of Hurricane Katrina. A year from now it will be church groups that will continue with little notice to bring good news to the poor of Haiti because that is what those who follow Jesus are to do.

Over two thousand verses of Scripture call upon us to stand up for the poor, to feed the poor, to bring justice to the poor. Two thousand verses direct us to concern ourselves with the poor. When we as a congregation get closer to that kind of ministry, we get ourselves closer to the teachings of scripture and the heart of God and the Good News Jesus proclaimed.

Maybe you identify yourself with the poor. Maybe you struggle with the basics of life. Jesus wants you to be delivered the good news. Maybe you are captive to an addiction or captive to a bad habit or captive to a destructive relationship. Jesus seeks to free us from whatever holds us captive. Maybe you have a visual impairment or maybe are just blind to what is really important in life and you need to see. It is the promise of God from the Son of God that hope is here. The plane has arrived, the ships are being unloaded, the workers are getting in place, the hospital is being erected, hope has arrived.

Jesus continues to bring good news to the poor because those who follow him are bringing that news. If we follow him into worship then we also

need to follow him into service. Captives are being released because those who follow him are bringing that news. The blind receive sight, whether it is cataract surgery at a church hospital or the scales of prejudice falling off the eyes of a bigot. The oppressed are set free, whether oppression from a political regime or a chemical dependence because those who follow him are bringing that news.

People are generally charitable in attitude until the poor actually show up and the blind stumble about and the prisoner needs help starting life again. Jesus is not seeking spectators who listen but disciples who are involved. If a church wants to develop a mission statement or establish goals or determine priorities, they do not have to depend on their own creativity. Rather we should listen to these words of Jesus and follow where he leads us.