

The Commission of Jesus

^{NRS} **Deuteronomy 10:17** For the LORD your God is God of gods and Lord of lords, the great God, mighty and awesome, who is not partial and takes no bribe,¹⁸ who executes justice for the orphan and the widow, and who loves the strangers, providing them food and clothing.¹⁹ You shall also love the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt.

^{NRS} **Luke 4:14** Then Jesus, filled with the power of the Spirit, returned to Galilee, and a report about him spread through all the surrounding country.¹⁵ He began to teach in their synagogues and was praised by everyone.¹⁶ When he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, he went to the synagogue on the sabbath day, as was his custom. He stood up to read,¹⁷ and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written:¹⁸ "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,¹⁹ to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."²⁰ And he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down. The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him.²¹ Then he began to say to them, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."

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It's odd how some things kind of come together. I've heard some of you remark that "There's no such thing as coincidence." Maybe, but many of you know that I don't see that as always being the case. To my ears it sounds too much like God is micro-managing my life, leaving me very little room to make good choices – or bad ones. In any event, several things seemed to converge this past week. After Marquis Ramsey proposed the idea, Jonathan Conrad and Ivan Peden quickly signed on, and so Tuesday night we had four ministers from Baptist, Lutheran, Methodist, and Presbyterian traditions leading worship. The music was gospel, traditional, African, and contemporary Christian. Some hymns were old; one was only a few days old. It was a wonderful ecumenical worship service.

Wednesday morning I came into the office and began thinking about today's worship and today's sermon. I was starting the process two days later than usual. The current loose plan for sermons is to preach from the gospel of Luke, concentrating on the words of Jesus, the red letters, one might say. I felt like the remarks I made Tuesday night had just skimmed the surface, like they were just the bare bones of what needed to be said, but it didn't seem fair to flesh out that message and re-present it this morning. So, I went on to study this story about Jesus teaching in Nazareth. Two weeks ago was the baptism of Jesus, when the Holy Spirit came to rest on Jesus and claimed him. Last week was the temptation in the wilderness, where the Holy Spirit led him, and empowered him to say "No" to wrong choices and false options for his ministry. Today's text is about Jesus in the synagogue in Nazareth, and again the text notes that he is filled with the Holy Spirit, giving him power and direction for his ministry. All three stories are Holy Spirit stories. The coincidence is that today's text has a pointed message about the disaster in Haiti.

Luke begins by telling us that Jesus is a teacher, a rabbi. He's going around the region of Galilee, teaching in the synagogues, and Jesus comes to his hometown where he was raised. On the Sabbath, he went to the synagogue, as was his custom. Lest we forget, Luke reminds us that Jesus was a Jew – and he was faithful in attending worship. It was his custom to be in the synagogue on the Sabbath. He stood up to read, and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. Jesus read from the scroll of Isaiah, then rolled it back up and returned it to the attendant. Then he sat down and everybody looked at him. In those days, a rabbi, a teacher, sat down to teach. So, having read scripture, Jesus sits down to teach, and everybody looks at him to see what the hometown boy has to say. Jesus begins by declaring, "Today, this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."

Many times, when this passage is read, what we hear is that Jesus proclaims that he is the predicted messiah, the anointed one of God. We read this as a proof text about the identity of Jesus. See,

Isaiah predicted that a messiah would come and Jesus has laid claim to making that prediction come true. This proves who Jesus was, we say. If that's all we get out of this story, then we've cheated ourselves out of an important lesson.

You see, not only does Jesus say that he is God's anointed, but he also declares what sort of ministry he's called to perform. Jesus reads from two passages in Isaiah. ^{NRS} **Isaiah 58:6** Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke? ^{NRS} **Isaiah 61:1** The spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me, because the LORD has anointed me; he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners;² to proclaim the year of the LORD's favor, [and the day of vengeance of our God; to comfort all who mourn;] This is the keynote to the entire ministry of Jesus. He says, "This is what I'm here for. This is my purpose. My ministry is to the oppressed, the suffering, the brokenhearted. This is what I'm about! This is the central theme, the center of the gospel. These are the core values and the foundational tasks. These are issues that Mary sang about in the Magnificat while she was pregnant with Jesus. Just as she proclaimed in that song of praise, now Jesus is saying that this is his life's work, his mission statement.

I had the rather odd experience in seminary of having a classmate who was a Jew. He was a brilliant student and he was fond of pointing out that much of the teaching in the New Testament is also found in the Hebrew Scriptures, in the Old Testament. He was quite right in this claim. Jesus read from the scriptures that existed during his lifetime, the books of the Old Testament. These issues weren't new by any means. The law of Moses, in the passage from book of Deuteronomy that we heard awhile ago, speaks of justice for the helpless members of society, and care for the stranger.

Jesus could have tied the core of his mission to many, many passages. He could have read from Leviticus 19 that we're to love our neighbors as ourselves. He could have read about issues of compassion for those with no power in society and those who are suffering in several of the prophets, including Ezekiel, Zechariah, Malachi, and Amos. He could have read from the first chapter of Isaiah, "learn to do good; seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow." He could have read from Jeremiah, "amend your ways and your doings, if you truly act justly one with another,⁶ if you do not oppress the alien, the orphan, and the widow, or shed innocent blood in this place, and if you do not go after other gods to your own hurt,⁷ then I will dwell with you in this place." (Jeremiah 7:5-7)

Do you hear this? In the gospel of Luke, Jesus declares that these issues are the agenda for his ministry. No wonder the writers call it gospel - good news. These same issues have been dealt with in the Law of Moses and by many of the prophets. So why is it that one evangelical scholar said that this text in Luke chapter four "is one of the most ignored, watered down, spiritualized or glossed-over texts in many . . . pulpits, evading or emptying Jesus' first statement of his moral agenda."¹ As an example of how this text is ignored, this succinct and powerful statement of Jesus' own purpose is never quoted in the immensely popular book, *The Purpose-Driven Life*. The point is, as followers of Jesus, the purpose of **our** ministry should be aligned with the purpose of Christ's ministry. Obviously, people have to begin by believing in Jesus, but at some point, it's appropriate to say, "I believe! Now what?"

In his description of God's judgment in Matthew 25, Jesus reinforces the message that our purpose is to relieve suffering in its various forms. The only issues raised as a **basis** for judgment in that passage are whether or not we fed the hungry, clothed the naked, cared for the sick, welcomed the stranger, and visited those in prison. Not one word is said about what you believed or how you worshipped. Judgment appears to be entirely dependent on how well we loved our neighbor as ourselves.

Just as it's significant to note what is not listed as the basis for our judgment before the throne, it's significant to see what Jesus didn't say as he read from Isaiah there in the synagogue in Nazareth. Jesus read, "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,¹⁹ to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." And there he stopped. The next phrase in the Isaiah text is, "and the day of vengeance of our God." Jesus doesn't seem to feel that vengeance is a focal point of his

¹ Robert Parham, *The Agenda & Lessons from Luke 4: Study Guide* (Nashville, Baptist Center for Ethics, 2007)

ministry. In fact, as you read about the actions of Christ, not only is he relieving suffering everywhere he goes, but he's forgiving people, putting himself between them and the consequences of their actions. Even on the cross, he says, "Forgive them, because they don't know what they have done."

I began by remembering the ecumenical worship service last Tuesday night. The divisions among Christians are a stain on our faith. We need to find commonality and rejoice in it whenever possible. But there is a time when it's necessary to speak against false doctrine, to expose that which is toxic to our faith. There are those who have proclaimed that the earthquake in Haiti is God's judgment.

First of all, it is very presumptuous for someone to claim that they know how God will judge any specific person or any specific situation. Who would have thought that God would choose a pagan king to be the means for the children of Israel to be released from bondage? But Cyrus of Persia was declared to be God's own anointed, God's messiah. Who would have thought that God would choose one of the most enthusiastic persecutors of Christians to become the most widely traveled apostle for Christ, but Saul went from putting Christians in prison to putting Christ in human hearts as Paul the apostle.

Second of all, scripture is filled with examples where God has resisted sending catastrophe upon the righteous along with those who deserve punishment. The story of the flood and the story of Sodom and Gomorrah come to mind. When the world was filled with wickedness, God took pains to save eight people, Noah and his family. When Sodom and Gomorrah were known for their wickedness, God promised to not destroy the city - if ten righteous people could be found there. There weren't even ten, but God saved the few who were. I might add that in both cases, those who were saved were not entirely pure and sinless. They were flawed, but were saved nonetheless.

Third, telling people that God is punishing the people in Haiti - or New Orleans - or New York City - because a large disaster has occurred, is not only mistaken, it also introduces insidious temptation. It is toxic to our faith. Rather than being moved to compassion and encouraged to relieve suffering as scripture clearly calls for us to do, just the opposite comes to mind. Remember how we talked about the subtle temptations that can bubble up in our minds and corrupt our faith and our behavior? Well, if God is punishing someone, who would want to provide relief from God's will? Who would want to contradict God's wishes? Seeing disaster as God's punishment corrodes our compassion and gives us false permission to do nothing - and feel smug about it.

I hope that each of us will leave today with two strong desires. First, that we will stand up to those who would blame the victim for their misfortune and say to those people that such an attitude is not scriptural, nor is it faithful to the character of God. Second, I hope that each of us will be filled with compassion for those who are suffering today, tomorrow, and all of the tomorrows to come. In so doing, we will live a life following in the path of Christ, living a life of service to others. Amen