

## A Tradition and Future of Serving

Luke 4:16-21

October 25, 2009

Jesus had been out in the desert – been tempted – offered the world – invited to side with evil. He'd been hungry and dirty and tired – but the evil arguments that entered his mind only served to fine tune his understanding of who he was and how he was to live his life.

He began his ministry in Galilee according to the way the author of the Gospel of Luke reports it. Bible scholars note it was a really good move on the part of Jesus – a strategic move – to start in this little area of Palestine surrounded by non-Jewish nations. Because of its location it had developed into one of the least conservative and most forward thinking areas of Palestine. New ideas, new styles, new messages were constantly at its borders. The great historian Josephus described the people as “...ever fond of new innovations and by nature disposed to changes, and delighted in seditions. They were ever ready to follow a new leader who would begin an insurrection.”<sup>1</sup>

And the author of the Gospel of Luke informs us that Jesus taught in the synagogues – not in the wilderness like wild John the Baptist, but right smack-dab in the center of the religious life in Palestine. The synagogues were the places where the Jews worshiped God and where they were taught. Each synagogue was free to invite anyone to share during a service they wanted to. As word spread about Jesus he was often asked by the synagogue leaders to share.

He had the opportunity to return to his hometown of Nazareth one Saturday. You know, the place where they knew him as Mary's and Joseph's son – the boy who had worked alongside his dad in the carpentry shop – the boy who had roamed the streets with their children.

Now, Nazareth was a town of about 20,000 in a little hollow in the hills on the lower slopes of Galilee. Many noteworthy events of history were associated with it. Jesus was not brought up in the backwaters of the world. His hometown was a town steeped in history and much of the world's traffic passed through it. With the author of Luke's comment that he went to the synagogue as was his custom he was making sure we understood that Jesus was a Jew.

When he showed up in the Nazareth synagogue he was asked to read. The synagogue leaders handed him the scroll of Isaiah. When it was presented to him, he unrolled it until he found the place where it was written: “The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.”

And he closed the book, gave it to the attendant, and sat down to speak as was the custom in that day. Everyone's eyes were on him because they were eager to hear what he had to say about this passage. He said: “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.”

At first those who heard him only heard what they wanted to hear. They could only see in front of them Mary and Joseph's son. But he went on, and by the time he was finished they weren't at all happy with him. One preacher observed that in his 40 years of preaching he has discovered “that people don't get offended at Bible readings – in fact they barely hear them. The trouble comes when you begin to spell out what the text means.”<sup>2</sup>

They stormed the front of the synagogue where he sat and escorted him out of the building – in fact, they drove him out of town.

You see, what upset his neighbors was the compliment he seemed pay the Gentiles in what he said. They were starting to understand that there were some things in this new message from this young itinerant preacher they didn't agree with. Who did he think he was to suggest that Gentiles were favored by God in the same way they were?

So, what is the message in this story for us? Does it have anything to say to us about who we are as the church?

The first thing that should strike us is that the Jesus of Luke is not the Jesus pop religion paints him out to be. He is not some warm and fuzzy guy walking around trying to make everyone feel good. He isn't just for those who look like him – are of the same nationality or race - come from the same social or economic class as he does.<sup>3</sup> He doesn't appear to be out to keep us “safe and secure from all life's cares” or make us rich monetarily or even be on the side of those of us who have enough to live on.

The Nazareth community was upset because the things he said made it apparent he was not going to fit the box they had already put him in. His ministry wasn't going to be for the purpose of meeting their needs – protecting them – putting down those who were not like them. The recipients of the good news were the poor and prisoners and slaves – the sick, blind, and uncomfortable to be with – the oppressed and disenfranchised. His friends were going to be prostitutes, sinners, tax collectors, and alcoholics.<sup>4</sup>

Now, here's the news, friends – here's where the rubber hits the road. His mission is our mission. We are the body of Christ – the physical presence of Christ in this day – and it is through us that those in need experience the new life Christ opens the door to. We're not here to maintain the status quo – to keep people in their place and out of our vision. We're here to mend and heal and love and forgive and offer grace and food and bandages and bus passes and brown bag lunches and winter coats and breakfasts and clothing and to oppose casino gambling coming into our state because we care about what happens to families if they do and to open the doors to our building so that recovering alcoholics and their families can meet together, so that people with mental illness in their families can support one another, so that parents can learn how to be better parents, so that people in Louisiana and South Dakota know that Christ cares about them because of our hands, hearts, and sweat. It's a tradition of caring – of mission and service that we have been the recipients of and that moves us to look forward to the future of possibilities of risk-taking mission and service this tradition has made part of our DNA.

Where will we go – what will we do in the future that will continue this tradition of caring so that the lives of others might be better?

Some of Jesus' followers were wondering some similar things and he offered: “I was hungry, and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me” (Matthew 25:35-37). “Want to know who is going to be in and who is not? Care for me. And you care for me, when you care for those with needs: ‘Feed the hungry – quench people's thirst – welcome strangers – clothe the naked – care for the sick – visit prisoners’ is where it's at – is what it means to follow me – is what it involves when you say yes to church membership.”

The children of four suburban women went to college. Their mothers decided they wanted to do some volunteering. They enrolled in a training course for literacy tutors. Then they contacted the pastor of a church in a low-income housing project about seeing what they could do to help the high drop-out rate in the community. They were introduced to several children and their mothers seeking basic literacy and English language classes. Every Friday the four women “spent two hours teaching, listening, laughing, crying, and interweaving their lives with people they would otherwise never have come to know. They supported each other, worked as a team, made contacts that drew their own congregation into greater engagement with the mission church, and felt God’s Spirit reshaping their perceptions about poverty, race, and language. It was a world they would never have considered entering if it were not for their relationship with Christ. Later one of the women said, ‘I didn’t want to do it, but God pushed me through the door. I receive more than I give. Now I wouldn’t trade my time with these young people for anything.’”<sup>5</sup>

Lucas is a frequent volunteer in his church. He is a small business owner and has a young family. He went on a Walk to Emmaus retreat and had a spiritual awakening while on it. As a result his prayer life began to include a time of seeking a way to respond to the call of God in his life to make a difference. He wanted his life to be marked by greater service to Christ. He became part of a group of men who met weekly for months to plan a prison ministry, Kairos, to provide spiritual sustenance to those serving time. The team of men signed waivers and received permission to spend seventy-two hours in a maximum security facility for violent offenders. He described the experience as life-changing for himself and those incarcerated.<sup>6</sup>

About this time I’m guessing there are some voices going off in a few of your heads, “He’s surely not suggesting that I should go visit prisoners, is he? Or, work in a dangerous part of town?”

In Robert Schnase’s book *Five Practices of Fruitful Congregations*, which I’ve referenced before during our *My Hands Are Christ’s Hands Stewardship Campaign*, he addresses our thoughts. “Not everyone has the spiritual gifts, the personal temperament, or the physical stamina to step beyond the edge of ordinary service. Not everyone works the front lines where the church engages the most intransigent and difficult of society’s challenges. That’s all right. In the Body of Christ are many members, and ‘not all the members have the same function’ (Romans 12:4). Those who courageously and faithfully take on bold or audacious ministries for the sake of the church require the support and encouragement of many members. For Lucas to succeed with the Kairos prison ministry required financial resources, the cooking skills of a large team, the willingness of people to support his endeavor with printing materials, and the hosting skills of many other volunteers as the team prepared. This experience will become the seed for larger church engagement. Within months of the women beginning their literacy tutoring, plans were underway for other volunteers to work alongside members of the mission church to offer Vacation Bible School. Dozens of people served by preparing meals, serving refreshments, leading music, providing transportation, and teaching.”<sup>7</sup>

A visitor with a special needs child attended a worship service in a small rural church with an average worshiping attendance of just over thirty one Sunday. The child demanded almost around-the-clock medical care and supervision. Some folks were a little uncomfortable at first. They weren’t too sure a family with the depth of needs of this one could be helped by a church as small as theirs. Some were a little disturbed by the amount of attention the family drew. Slowly, some of the members began to see the presence of this family as God’s call to help. Several adults received training to help care for the child so the mother could get some much needed rest once in awhile. Some of the men went to work on some of the accessibility issues in the family’s home. Both the mother’s life and the life of the congregation were changed as a result.

In Sue Nilson Kibbey's book Ultimately Responsible she notes: "The powerful truth is that when a person makes a decision for Christ, the old life is gone and the new life of Jesus fills the believer. No longer is serving a choice based on convenience. It is a lifestyle in which you now live every moment. The life of Jesus in you will lead you to join in where God is working, wherever God needs your hands, your feet, and your gifts. Nowhere does Scripture validate the mistaken belief that a Christian's purpose is simply to read and learn the Bible and hang out with other believers having potluck dinners and Sunday School classes. Those activities are intended only to prepare you for your real mission: to serve."<sup>8</sup>

A man mistakenly walked into a Quaker meeting. As is the practice, no one was saying anything. It was really quiet. Everyone was just sitting – listening – silent. He sat for awhile but didn't really understand what was happening. Finally, he gathered up the courage to nudge the guy sitting beside him and said, "Pardon me. When does the service begin?"

And the man whispered, "When we leave."<sup>9</sup>

It's time to leave – it's time to serve.

Let us pray.

1. William Barclay, The New Daily Study Bible: The Gospel of Luke (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), pp. 57-58.
2. Charles H. Bayer, "Defining the Mission," When It Is Dark Enough (Lima: CSS Publishing Company, 1994), 0-7880-0001-2, [www.esermons.com](http://www.esermons.com).
3. Ibid.
4. Ibid.
5. Robert Schnase, Five Practices of Fruitful Congregations (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2007), p. 90.
6. Ibid., p. 89.
7. Ibid., p. 90-91.
8. Susan Nilson Kibbey, Ultimately Responsible (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2006), pp. 62-63.
9. Gary L. Carver and Tom M. Garrison, Sermons for Sundays in Advent, Christmas, and Epiphany: Building a Victorious Life (Lima: CSS Publishing Company, Inc.).