

"Growing in Compassion"

Saint Mark October 18, 2020

Luke 4:16-22

I always seem to notice church signs by the road- you know those with the changeable text that you can have a few lines of welcome or a clever or funny saying. On my street there is an independent church that has some pretty corny ones - you know, like "Sign broken, come inside for message." This past week for October they actually had one I liked: it said, "Get rich quick scheme: Count your blessings" You have to think about that one for a minute ...

With all these church signs attempting to be clever and funny, it is no wonder that cartoonists have a lot of fun with pretend, made-up church signs. One was in an issue of a monthly Christian magazine - it showed a drawing of a church signboard out on the lawn, and it read: "Welcome to the Lite congregation - we have fewer commitments than other congregations, shorter sermons and worship services, only 7 commandments, you choose, we are everything you want in a church and less!"

That is certainly not us here at Saint Mark!

But the inspiration behind the cartoon is no doubt America's love of Lite products: Less fat, fewer calories. Not just Lite beer, but lite yogurt and mayonnaise. Lite salad dressing, lite potatoes chips, low fat ice cream and so on. The cartoonist seems to be saying in such a culture as ours, is it any wonder we would be interested in Lite religion. A kind of religion that doesn't ask too much of us, or require a

lot of responsibility. Especially it seems responsibility for those who are in need of medical care, health insurance, food or shelter or just friendship.

Contrast that idea of Lite Christianity with what Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote in "The Cost of discipleship." As he resisted the efforts of the government in Germany in the 1930's to control the message of the German church he famously noted that "Jesus died on a cross and Jesus says to his followers to pick up your cross and follow me."

I don't suggest this is a new topic - those great Old Testament prophets like Isaisah, Amos, Jeremiah and Micah - they were always concerned that the children of Israel were engagng in a kind of surface religion - not going deep into spirituality.

The prophets said, "The people honor God with their lips but their lives are far from God."

Further, the prophets said, "everyone wants to enjoy being God's people without remembering that God called Isarael to be a blessing to those in need."

That passge from Luke was a kind of throwback to those prophets, especially Isaiah. It was, as one person called it , Jesus' Inagural Address as Messiah, and we could see right away what his priorities were, and he would not be advocating a Lite religion.

Let's try to picture ourselves in the congregation that day. In Luke chapter 4, Jesus goes to his boyhood home, the town of Nazareth. Most scholars place him at about 30 years old.

If you ever visit the place where you grew up (or maybe you are still here) you see so many places you recognize, you remember people as they were, and places as they were and maybe they remember you, but as a small child.

Imagine Jesus in his boyhood home. Wasn't he Joseph's son, they might say. The carpenter. They might recall him helping his father as a youth. But now he is a man, and according to Jewish custom, has the right and privilege to stand and read scripture in worship, just as we do with laypeople in the church today.

So Jesus gets up and unfurls the scroll that the scriptures are written upon - of course the Bible as we know it in book form would not come for another 14 centuries - rather they were contained in scrolls of parchment.

So he picks up Isaiah's writing and here in front of his hometown reads: "The Lord has appointed me to preach good news to the poor, recovery of sight to the blind, release of the captives, and proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord"

Then they watch as he rolled it up, and sat in the chair next to the altar. All eyes were fixed upon him. Then he said, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."

The men who saw him were amazed. "Isn't this Joseph's son?" they asked. The men were stunned he would say something as blasphemous as the scriptures are fulfilled, because that meant Isaiah 61 was about the coming of the Messiah.

They began to put it together that he was the one who would be a suffering servant, who would release the

captives, preach good news to the poor, he was to be the Messiah.

Their anger began to grow, and they eventually ran him out of the synagogue, out of town, and almost threw him over a cliff. All on his inaugural address!

So today would you take these words of Jesus, and ask, "What would it mean for us as individuals and as a church if we really took these words to heart? What if this is the real focus of his messianic ministry? That we as his followers are to be involved in acts of compassion such as caring for the poor and oppressed, those in captivity?

Another way to read this passage is to bring it into the present tense - Today in your hearing - on October 18, 2020, this scripture is fulfilled.

As followers of the one who gave that Inagural address, we are to grow in compassion. Compassion means to walk along side of and suffer with others. To bring joy and healing. Comfort. To bring sight and release from whatever holds them captive.

SO today I ask you to think of ways that you can fulfill these scriptures - no, not as the messiah, but as a follower of Jesus growing spiritually in him, growing in compassion.

We have talked about growing in contentment, in worship, in prayer, in giving. And growing in community. But this may be the real heart of what our faith is about.

Instead of trying to define what compassion is, let me just offer a few thoughts and stories that help me to understand it.

1 First, If we are to grow in compassion, translate the feeling of compassion into specific action.

It is great how children can remind us of this spiritual truth. A oft told story in our family was when our daughter was 9 or 10 years old, we were living in Florida on the west coast. We were coming home from a movie one rainy afternoon, and on the way home we went through a two lane road through some undeveloped land.

Well on that day in the pouring rain, one of those beautiful box turtles was deciding to cross the road. I slowed to get around it, and I said, Man I hope somebody helps that turtle before he gets hit"

And from the back seat, our daughter who loves all animals, says "Dad you're somebody"

Using one of my own sermons against me!

So Caroline and I both get out, she stops traffic in both directions, and I pick up the turtle and get him settled on the other side of the road.

For our simple act of compassion, we received a sitting ovation from three cars.

But the point of this simple story is that I was ready to blow right by it - get home where it is dry, I had stuff to do.

But Anna reminded me - I can be somebody who can turn a compassionate thought into action - and so are you.

We like to always emphasize that love is not a thing - rather it is a thing you do.

2 Second, Compassion may require self sacrifice to stand in solidarity with the poor, the marginalized, the outcast and the oppressed.

When you stand with the outcast the oppressed, it may not be an easy or a comfortable place to stand.

Think of Jesus getting run out of town, almost over a cliff in Luke!

I sometimes think this is what is inspiring people to join in to movements, like Black Lives Matter, or the Me Too movement. It is why there was such outrage about the family separation policy at the border for instance. Because we are called to be standing with the oppressed, those whom powerful people wish to silence. I think that is what Jesus' Inagural address was about as well.

It is such a difficult time in our public life, but also an inspiring time as so many people stand up and have compassion.

Why should followers of Christ be involved in Social Justice issues? Well, just read the Inagural address and see where Jesus puts himself incontext with the prophets.

I know we in Saint Mark provide some opportunities to do this - whether it is earth care as Alison shared last week, or our Anti Racism work, or meals for women's shelters and so many others. I would encourage us to continue that work if possible during this COVID time. As we talked about diversity being a core value of Saint Mark a few weeks ago, I know that this ministry is also of great value and import here.

Jesus says to bring good news to the poor.

I remember another simple story a few years back in a local newspaper. It was a woman named Elizabeth saw a homeless man trying to borrow a book from a public library. The Librarian said we are sorry, if you have no address, you can't borrow anything.

So Elizabeth decided to start a program called Books as Blessings. In essence, anyone who eats in the Salvation Army dining area can borrow a book.

Such a small thing, but Elizabeth said that her work has taught her the value of compassion. The worth of every human being. To look someone in the eye and greet them even if they are homeless.

What was ironic to me was the reporter from the paper asked - "Why bother to do this on your day off?"

Seeming to channel the transactional nature of life that some have adopted. Hey, what's in it for me? Is the attitude that is implied in that question.

And her reply was, "I just do what I think Jesus would ask me to do"

"The spirit of the Lord is upon me because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor."

Jesus said, "Today in our hearing this scripture has been fulfilled"

When we act with compassion and faith that is true. As we continue to find ways to grow in compassion as individuals and as a church, we will translate that feeling into action, stand along side the oppressed and find solidarity with a world in need.

As Gods chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, meekness, humility and patience. May it be so.

Thanks be to God.

Amen.