

A Mission to Light Your Way

January 27, 2019

Luke 4: 14-21

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."

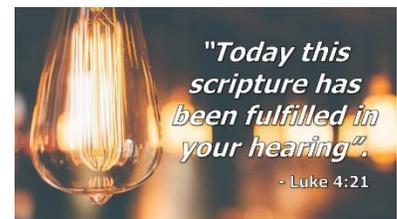


Let us pray...

Jesus has been baptized, spent forty days in the wilderness preparing for His ministry, and has begun to do a little preaching at some towns in Galilee. His teaching was being noticed. Today we read, "*a report about him spread through all the surrounding country*". It was a good report. Luke goes on to write that Jesus was "*praised by everyone*".

It is at this point that He now comes to His hometown synagogue to give his inaugural address. Using the scroll containing the Book of Isaiah, Jesus reads a passage to His audience. The passage asserts that the Spirit of the Lord is upon Him – yes, we saw it descend upon Him at His baptism. He has been anointed – yes, at His baptism God also spoke, anointing Jesus as His Son, a son in whom He was well-pleased. The passage that Jesus reads from Isaiah is a passage that is synonymous with God’s character as it is revealed in the Old Testament. Some of the key tenants of Jewish faith were also caring for the poor, bringing justice and relief to the oppressed, freeing people from the captivity of sin, and celebrating the Lord’s favor and blessing upon the people. The Messiah would come and champion all of these causes; it was good theology. These practices remain good theology today.

Jesus closes his inaugural speech with these stirring words: *"Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing"*. It is a powerful, one-sentence summary of His



life’s purpose. It was also a moment of truth. These moments happen in our lives as well. For instance, they happen right here on these steps when a couple says, “I do”. They also happen in real life. For example, in the title office when we sign our name on the dotted line as we purchase a home.

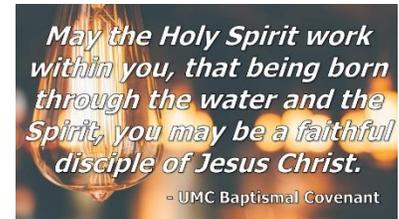
For those in Jesus’ audience that day, these words from Isaiah were words that they would have certainly heard many times before and would have been familiar with. When they have heard these words – *"He has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the*

captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor"— they would think of both how they lived out their faith and of the promise of the Messiah. They would be reminded of what the nation of Israel has been waiting for. Waiting for a long time. And here sits Jesus, the boy who grew up just down the street, the young man who learned alongside His father how to be a carpenter. And then He makes this statement: *"Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing"*. It is a moment of truth for His audience. It is a moment that they can choose to accept and live into, a moment that they can choose to believe Jesus and cast their lot with Him. Or it is a moment that they can say, "No, he's just the carpenter's son..." It is a moment of truth.

Today we come to the same place. Today we have the same choice to make. The scriptures have been fulfilled in our presence as well. Jesus came and cared for the poor, brought justice and relief to the oppressed, freed people from their sins. We too have come to a moment of truth. Will we decide to leave this statement alone? Or will we choose to believe it, to imitate it, to live out in our lives?

It is something we all committed to or were committed to by our parents. We first commit to being a disciple of Jesus in the covenant made at our baptism. Truth be told, for most of us, it was a commitment made for us at baptism. But we choose to renew our commitment each time we baptize another into the faith. In case you need a refresher course, here are those words we say at a

baptism: *"May the Holy Spirit work within you, that being born through water and the Spirit, you may be a faithful disciple of Jesus Christ"*. In that same baptismal covenant, we renew our vows to be faithful with our time, our talents, our gifts, our witness, and our service. Now that we have been reminded, I ask again, are we each living as a faithful disciple of Jesus Christ? Are we imitating Jesus - caring for the poor, bringing justice to the needy, offering relief to the oppressed, and freeing people from their sins? Is my life and your life a living testament our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ?



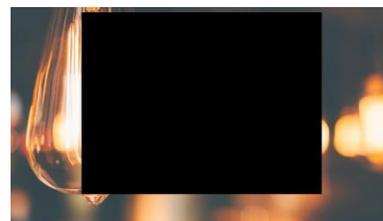
To help us envision what this looks like, I would like to share illustration that gives us one image of what this can look like. It was the winter of 1947 and it was exceptionally cold in Paris that year. The monastery had opened its doors to the poor and to the outcasts. One of the abbots, a man named Pierre, was out one night and found a young family still out on the streets. He gathered them up and brought them to the monastery. But it was already full. As he looked for a place for makeshift beds for this young family, there was not room in any of the regular rooms, so he took them to the chapel. He promptly removed the sacred items from the altar area and placed them in the unheated side room. He placed the family's bedding on and around the altar. The other monks were shocked at such irreverence. Pierre replied, "Jesus Christ is not cold in bread and wine, but He is absolutely cold in the body of a little child". This priest knew that his mission his mission was not to be the protector of church building and its rituals, but to open its doors to those who Christ made it mission to serve. Knowing his

mission enlightened the path that he was intended to take, and it led him to that young family in need. Jesus then showed him what to do. Knowing our mission will also light the path we are intended to take. So, the question for us, for all Christians, for all churches, is: what is our mission?

It is a question that I have wrestled with here in Winner. We are not a church totally devoid of mission. There are many ways that we are in mission and most involve the giving of something. We make and bring fudge and treats to the jail. We give to the Food Bank with in-kind donations and financially to many agencies through the Blue Bucket and Christmas Eve offerings. We give out Christmas dinner baskets. We collect underwear and hats and gloves and mittens and school supplies and various items for health kits and we pass all of these items along to the proper agencies. Many people benefit from the generosity of this church. Yet each of these missions is missing a key ingredient that we find in the example set by Jesus: relationship, personal interaction, a loving touch and connection.

When I served the church in Rapid City, for the last two years we wrestled with an issue that involved the giving not only of our resources but also of our time and our facilities. There is a sizable homeless population in Rapid City. As many of you know, I volunteered at the HOPE Center on Friday afternoons. The church that I served at closed at noon on Fridays and that open time seemed like a good opportunity for me to give back to the community. Again, as many of you know, the HOPE Center is a day center for the homeless and economically

disadvantaged. While volunteering there, I got to know many of the clients - people who were homeless and who struggled with poverty, addictions, and mental health issues. There is a homeless shelter in Rapid City. Due to a variety of factors, those factors just mentioned as well as others, there is a segment of the homeless population who cannot or will not use the services of the shelter. It is a reality. Yes, there are solutions. Yes, people could not use drugs or alcohol. Yes, yes, yes. But the reality is that there are people who spend the night on the streets every night. And it gets cold in Rapid City. So, every year people freeze to death during the night. When the news comes that someone has died this way, it seems so senseless. It feels like such a preventable tragedy. I knew some of the people who froze to death. To help you connect with this issue, please watch this short video:



This video illustrates what people were wrestling with. One person freezing to death was one person too many. For each of the last two years that I was serving in Rapid City, faith groups in the community and small groups of people at the church asked these questions: What can we do about this? What can we do to prevent people from freezing to death? I personally wrestled with and prayed over these questions. It was one of those "moment of truth" experiences for me – something had to change, something had to be done to prevent one more person from dying this way. It was a moment of truth, a moment of conviction from the Holy Spirit. I knew that I needed to try and be a part of the solution to this issue.



To me, the most obvious and simple solution was to open our doors to those in need. But it is just not that simple. Just like the addictions and mental health issues and other things that a large portion of the homeless population deals with, the solutions to this issue are complex and difficult. In the community in general, there was a real heartfelt connection to the need and to solving the need, but there was gap between the need and the solution. Over the course of those two years I was involved in many conversations and I also learned a great deal. Plans were being thought through and worked on, progress was being made on some fronts.

There was also opposition. There were some barriers. For example, some members of our church felt that this was not an appropriate way to use our church facility. To be fair, the church recently had what many viewed as a negative experience with this demographic of the population. Other people felt that enabling those dealing with issues such as addiction undercut what the shelter and city were trying to do. The city and the police were both strongly opposed to churches opening their doors to this segment of the homeless population. It is a difficult issue to tackle. During the two years that this was a topic of discussion, our church never came to the place of being a part of a solution.

Fortunately, two winters ago a handful of churches began to open their doors on the coldest of nights. Through the guidance and leadership of the ministerial

association, each of the participating churches took turns hosting and caring for the homeless. Several churches were a part of meeting this need in the local community. Much like the abbot Pierre, they were able to see, feel, understand, and then meet the need that God had placed before them. They saw that the church – the people who make up the church, not the actual building itself – is made up of people who follow Christ and make it their mission to serve those in need in the community and neighborhood.

So, Winner United Methodist Church, where is the mission that God us calling is to in our community? Who do we know that needs to experience the light and love of Jesus Christ through and with us? We do not have a significant homeless population in Winner. The story of abbot Pierre finding space for the homeless family and my experience in Rapid City just give examples of needs that have been met by faithful followers of Jesus Christ living out the gospel imperative that Jesus quoted from Isaiah and that He lived out during His ministry.

Once again, the gospel imperative is this: caring for the poor, bringing justice to the needy, offering relief to the oppressed, and freeing people from their sins. Jesus



provided us with a model for how to do these things. He engaged those in need, met them right where they were at, and entered into a relationship with them. Step one to bringing people to Christ and helping them grow deep in Christ is getting to know them and their needs. Step two is helping them by addressing their basic needs or by walking alongside them as they overcome their struggles.

This is how we model Christian love. We choose to be present with people in their lives. Only once these gospel imperatives are met can we possibly go on to the step of sharing our faith with others.

To close today, I again ask you the questions that I asked just a moment ago: Winner United Methodist Church, where is the mission that God is calling us to in our community? Who do we know that needs to experience the light and love of Jesus Christ through and with us? It is my hope and prayer that you consider these questions today and throughout the week ahead. It is my hope and prayer that you wrestle with your own personal call to be the light and love of Jesus. It is my hope and prayer that the Holy Spirit will work in you to see a need and to feel compassion and love for that person or group of people. It is my hope and prayer that my life and your life are living testaments to our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. May it be so for you and for me. Amen.



GPS – Grow, Pray, Serve

- 1) What "moment of truth" have you experienced in your faith journey? How has that growth spurred you to better follow Jesus?
- 2) Who do you know that is like the young family that abbot Pierre took in? Pray that God will show you how to open the doors of love to them.
- 3) Jesus lived out His baptismal anointing by living a life of mission. How are you serving others as a means to live out your baptismal covenant?