



"When Jesus Was the Guest Preacher"

Rev. Dr. Scott Field

Luke 4: 14-21

January 27, 2019

9:15 AM Service

"Then Jesus returned to Galilee, filled with the Holy Spirit's power. Reports about him spread quickly through the whole region. He taught regularly in their synagogues and was praised by everyone. When he came to the village of Nazareth, his boyhood home, he went as usual to the synagogue on the Sabbath and stood up to read the Scriptures. The scroll of Isaiah the prophet was handed to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where this was written: "The Spirit of the LORD is upon me, for he has anointed me to bring Good News to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim that captives will be released, that the blind will see, that the oppressed will be set free, and that the time of the LORD's favor has come." He rolled up the scroll, handed it back to the attendant, and sat down. All eyes in the synagogue looked at him intently. Then he began to speak to them. "The Scripture you've just heard has been fulfilled this very day!""

Luke 4:14-21 NLT

Why Bother With Religion?

The section of the Gospel of Luke to which we give our attention today focuses on Jesus visiting his boyhood home town of Nazareth. Nazareth was a village of maybe 200-300 people; about the size of Greenwood, IL and less than half the size of the bustling metropolis of Ringwood, IL.

The peasant families who lived in Nazareth eked out a living, paid their taxes, were observant Jews who celebrated Passover, did not work on the sabbath, and traveled to Jerusalem as pilgrims for annual festivals. It was a nondescript dot on the map, apparently held in some contempt (see John 1:46), and easily overshadowed by the luxurious Greek-style capital of King Herod Antipas was building at Sepphoris, just about an hour's walk away. In fact, there is some thought that Joseph and Jesus, as a craftsman and apprentice son, worked in Sepphoris since it was a public works job that paid well enough to supplement the crops of their subsistence farming at home.

The account has Jesus returning to his boyhood home, as the gospel describes it, filled with the Holy Spirit's powerful anointing. He had already gained a reputation as an engaging teacher and miracle-worker. He goes to the synagogue on the Sabbath and took part in leading the synagogue service. This passage in Luke 4 is the oldest known account of a synagogue service. The typical synagogue worship would include private prayer as people entered, a public confession of the Jewish faith using the words of the Shema, followed by prayers. The center of the service was the public reading of the Scriptures. A passage from the Pentateuch, according to an established cycle, was read by several members of the synagogue and then, because most of the local spoke Aramaic, it was paraphrased in Aramaic. Then there was a reading from the prophets -- though it is not clear if there was a fixed cycle of readings. More likely, it seems from this account, is that if there was a person competent to teach (See Acts

13:15), that person selected the passage from the prophets. After the reading from the prophets there was a sermon or commenting upon the Scripture. The service would conclude with a prayer of thanksgiving and a benediction.

Jesus, the hometown boy with a growing reputation for teaching and miraculous demonstrations of the power of God, was asked to select the passage from the prophets, read it, and offer the sermon.

Jesus chose to read from the prophet Isaiah, Chapter 61.

There are a LOT of chapters in the prophets. By my count, with the four major prophets and the twelve minor prophets in our Old Testament, there are 235 chapters. The chapter markings were added after the time of Jesus, but I think you can get the sense of proportion here. There are 235 chapters from which Jesus could choose. He chose this one chapter and just one and a half verses in that chapter. So, they must be very important. And they are; these verses define the mission of Jesus.

"The Spirit of the Sovereign Lord is on me, because the Lord has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim freedom for the captives and release from darkness for the prisoners, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor..."

Isaiah 61:1-2a NIV

In the writings of Isaiah, the Prophet, there is someone called The Servant of the Lord. This servant is left unnamed, but is a coming, promised, chosen Holy Spirit-anointed One to fulfill God's long-standing promise of salvation and deliverance. The verses refer to The Year of Jubilee (see Leviticus 25). You are familiar with the weekly calendar of a Sabbath. You may be familiar with the yearly calendar with its religious festivals. You may not be as familiar with the Jubilee provision that every fiftieth year would be the year of jubilee. In that year three things were to take place:

1. All property reverted to its original owners or their families.
2. Anyone who had sold themselves as a slave to someone else was set free
3. There was to be no planting or harvesting or pruning of vines, but people were to live off of what the land produced "on its own."

These stipulations were intended to express the realities that God's people belong to one another and are equal, that the land belongs to the Lord for the benefit of people, and that God can be trusted to provide so we can give ourselves and the land, too, a sabbatical year. The jubilee was intended to be something of a rehearsal for the great jubilee of God, the era of salvation, the answer to our prayers that "thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven." There is actually no evidence that the Jewish people ever actually practiced the Jubilee provisions. And, no matter if you are a capitalist, a socialist, a communist, or a libertarian, this seems completely unrealistic. But it is a symbol of God's great freedom, liberty, and redemption.

This passage of scripture Jesus read announces the time of God's salvation for all the world. And it is, to me at least, particularly interesting that Jesus did not read the second part of Isaiah 61:2. He left out the part about God's vengeance against Israel's enemies.

And then Jesus sat down -- which is to say, he moved to the chair of the rabbi, in order to teach. And he gave a one sentence sermon: "Today, this very day, this Scripture has been fulfilled." That is, Jesus himself was the long-awaited Spirit-anointed Servant of God foretold by Isaiah and the time of God's jubilee, the era of salvation, the beginning of the new heaven and the new earth, had begun.

You might be thinking to yourself that a one-sentence sermon is a smashing idea! But you might not be aware that this particular one sentence sermon was indeed smashing -- and the smashing was going to be done by mob action of the worshipers in the synagogue. And the one they were furiously planning to smash was Jesus. They surged forward to take hold of him, carry him to the edge of town, and throw him off the cliff.

Speaking of a cliff-hanger, we will take up that part of the account next Sunday. There is quite a lot to the rest of the story. For today, however, I want to point out and invite you to something which is so important in developing and maintaining a connection with God that Jesus himself included this in the routine of his own life. It is so important we might have completely overlooked it in this account of Jesus' sermon in Nazareth.

Core Exercises for our Faith

What may have faded into the background of this account are the foundational, routine practices of the faith. We so easily dismiss the value of routine practices because, well, because they are routine. We've been trained to pursue the next bright shiny object. We seem to prefer novelty; the latest, most, biggest, fastest, and so on. This consumer mentality has infected our spirituality, too, for we seek the most novel experience available.

Jesus himself, who could, I think, rightly skip the routines is Exhibit A of the importance of routine spiritual practices. Luke records that Jesus went to the synagogue on the Sabbath "as usual." That was his regular pattern of behavior. And, when he was asked what scroll he would like for reading to the congregation, he knew it was Isaiah and he could find his way to what we call Chapter 61. That is, Jesus had learned the Scriptures. These routine parts of Jesus' life are important pointers for us if we are to experience a vital, strong, and abiding relationship with God.

For those of us who engage in physical exercise as part of our personal efforts to be healthy, we are aware that core exercises are not only "all the rage", but are foundational to almost all upper and lower bodily movement: bending, sitting, lifting, standing -- all depend upon muscles related to the core. The core supports and stabilizes the spine and directs power to the arms and legs. Core training focus she's on four areas: strength, mobility, flexibility, and stability. Each of these plays a vital role in maintaining the body's overall health and ability to function.

Kevin Vanhoozer, a professor of systematic theology at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School in Deerfield, has suggested that there is a parallel in the core training of our soul. (See Kevin Vanhoozer, "Core Exercises: How Focusing On Our Theological Center Helps Us Remember Who We Are". *Christianity Today*, November, 2018, pp. 46-50) I would adapt his suggestions like this:

1. Core Stability: Cognitive Exercises
2. Core Strength: Volitional Exercises

3. Core Flexibility: Relational Exercises
4. Core Mobility: Serving Exercises

Core Exercises for Vibrant Faith

Core Stability: Cognitive Exercises

Corresponding to the body's stability are certain beliefs, based in God's Word, the Bible. The Apostle Paul cautions against teaching or holding "a different doctrine" that "does not agree with the sound words of our Lord Jesus Christ... (1 Timothy 6:3). The cognitive exercise of engaging the Scriptures, getting acquainted with the overall story of God as recorded in the Bible, builds our core stability by providing a foundational perspective through which we view the world, ourselves, and the situations in which we find ourselves. This is the renewing of our mind that keeps us from being squeezed into the mold of the world's ways.

Core Strength: Volitional Exercises

Having correct doctrine, however, is not adequate on its own. James reminds us, in his letter (James 2:19) that even the demons believe correct doctrine. Correct concepts *of* Jesus Christ are not a substitute for genuine faith *in* Christ. The exercise of our will either draws us closer to or pushes us farther from the Lord. The Psalms and Proverbs present life as a series of decisions to walk either the way of wisdom, which leads to life, or the way of foolishness, which leads to death. Joshua placed the choice squarely before the Hebrew people: "Choose for yourselves today whom you will serve" (Joshua 24:15). As C.S. Lewis put it in *Mere Christianity*: "Every time you make a choice you are turning the central part of you, the part of you that chooses, into something a little different from what it was before." Our core, that is, our soul, most resembles Jesus when we choose along the line of "not my will, by yours be done" (Luke 22:42).

Core Flexibility: Relational Exercises

Christian faith takes place within community. It is not a solo journey or a self-improvement program. To be in a spiritual community, a network of relationships, particularly a multi-generational network, stretches me beyond my individual self. This is the crucible in which I will experience love and grief, the ability to forgive and the gift of forgiveness from others. Staying within arms' length of others build the core strength of faith in Jesus.

Core Mobility: Serving Exercises

The fourth of the core exercises is the practice of serving others. We can be reminded each week that we are sent out together under the influence of the Holy Spirit for the healing of the world in Jesus' name, but unless we are actually, practically, personally active in serving others on a regular basis, that "healing of the world" is just wishful thinking.

Just before we turn the page on this first month of the new year, you are invited to attend to the core exercises, routines followed by the Lord Jesus himself, as characteristics of a strong, vital, fruitful relationship with God. That is your true self.

So - being the journey or extend your journey of engaging the Scriptures. Begin the day with the prayer, "not my will but yours be done today." Regularly gather with other believers for worship, prayer, and dreaming the dreams of God's Kingdom. And specifically, practically, personally put your time, attention, resources, and effort into serving others in Jesus' name.

Then you will be fit for every good thing to which the Lord leads you in the year ahead.