

Sermon on Luke 4:21-30

This week's Gospel reading starts where last week's ended. Last week we talked about how bringing good news to the poor, releasing the captives, freeing the oppressed is only good news if you are able to admit that you are poor, captive, and oppressed. But to admit that is to admit the truth to yourself and the one thing we don't want to admit is the truth. But as much as we hate the hearing the truth, the person who tells it to us we hate even more—even if it's Jesus telling it to us. We have that in common with the people of Nazareth in the synagogue that day Jesus read from the scroll of Isaiah.

I may have already told you that the first Gospel reading I heard when I worshipped in my home congregation after graduating from seminary was the one about a prophet not being welcome in their hometown. But I had run into that reading years before I went to seminary.

I went to our synod's lay school of ministry to gain a deeper knowledge of the Bible and my Lutheran faith. I had no desire to go to seminary. What I had planned to do; what I wanted to do was to work part time for my home congregation. I told you last week that I didn't think I needed to be freed from anything. So, I put together a plan of what I wanted to do and presented it to the church council. I knew that many of the council members were interested and excited about what I was presenting. So, you can imagine my disappointment when they told me no.

I was mad at our pastor, my mentor; because I felt that he had convinced the council not to hire me because he thought I should be in seminary. That was part

of the truth but the reason he gave me has stuck with me all these years. He told me that I would be really good at the job because I knew most of the congregation so well. Then he also told me that I would be a bad choice for the job because I knew the congregation so well.

It was a place where I had grown up; where I had many relatives still worshipping there. Many wouldn't be able to see me as a pastoral presence because they would look at me and see the little girl who had been baptized and confirmed there. They would see me as someone they taught in Sunday school and confirmation. They would remember some of the pranks that I had pulled. I was their organist, a confirmation teacher, an organizer of worship services, but I was not someone they saw as a pastoral presence for them.

Then there was the flip side. I had grown up with these people. I knew a lot about their lives too. I knew who they really were and they weren't comfortable with that. And that's where I can relate to this Gospel reading. As well as the people from Jesus' hometown think that they know him; Jesus knew them even better. And Jesus doesn't hesitate to tell them the truth about themselves.

When Jesus reads that he has been sent to bring good news, release and freedom; he isn't just thinking about Nazareth or even Israel. He's thinking about all of God's creation and that included people that Israel didn't want God to favor. Jesus tells them the truth, the truth about their pettiness and prejudice, about their fear and shame, their willingness to get ahead at any cost—even at the expense of another.

Sound familiar? If Jesus were to preach about change, equality and release today; he'd get the same reception as he did some two thousand years ago. Jesus has this habit of pointing out the truth to us and if there's one thing we don't want to hear it's the truth!

But Jesus doesn't just tell us the truth about ourselves; he tells us the truth about God. He reveals a God so passionate for us that God became one of us and lived as we live; a God who loves us enough to die for us and comes back to give us a word of forgiveness and grace; about a God who desperately, passionately, relentlessly loves all of God's children—including you and me.

When Jesus tells us the truth about ourselves we have to quit pretending that we have it altogether, that we don't need any help. When Jesus tells us the truth about ourselves we need to die. But when Jesus continues to tell us the truth, to show us the truth on the cross about God—we come alive again! We come alive in the Spirit of a God who knows us better than we know ourselves and still loves us; who loves us so much that God will go to any length to redeem us from all the pettiness, shame and fear that overrun our lives.

It is when we are alive in the Spirit of God that we can proclaim, free, comfort and release. Don't think it's possible? Ask Paul, the author of the hymn to love from our Corinthians reading today, who started his career as a persecutor of Christians. Tell it to John Newton, author of the hymn Amazing Grace, who was a slave trader before Christ won him over. Each and every one of us here today can overcome our fears, prejudices and shame to speak and do God's word to everyone we meet.

How? Because God has made us a promise; a promise that because we have been baptized into Christ we have died with him, and because Christ is raised from the dead so also are we alive, raised to a life of grace and good works. Because the time of God's favor that Isaiah predicted and Jesus announced in our reading is still being fulfilled in our hearing, even here, even now, even by us.