

**Luke 4:14-30:**

*Then Jesus, filled with the power of the Spirit, returned to Galilee, and a report about him spread through all the surrounding country. He began to teach in their synagogues and was praised by everyone. When Jesus 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, and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written: "The Spirit of the God is upon me, who has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. Who 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 God's favor."*

*And Jesus rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down. The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on Jesus, who began to say to them, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."*

*Then Jesus began to say to them, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." All spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his mouth. They said, "Is this not Joseph's son?" Jesus said to them, "Doubtless you will quote to me this proverb, 'Healer, cure yourself!' And you will say, 'Do here also in your hometown the things that we have heard you did at Capernaum' " And he said, "Truly I tell you, no prophet is accepted in the prophet' hometown. But the truth is, there were many widows in Israel in the time of Elijah, when the heaven was shut up three years and six months, and there was a severe famine over all the land, yet Elijah was sent to none of them except to a widow at Zarephath in Sidon. There were also many with leprosy in Israel in the time of the prophet Elisha, and none of them was cleansed except Naaman the Syrian." When they heard this, all in the synagogue were filled with rage. They got up, drove Jesus out of the town, and led him to the brow of the hill on which their town was built, so that they might hurl him off the cliff. But Jesus passed through the midst of them and went on his way.*

Barbara Brown Taylor, a theologian and writer, tells of an intriguing experience she had while attending a retreat.<sup>1</sup> Their very first assignment was to tell a story about someone who had shown the love of Christ to them. Several people spoke about friends who were there for them while they were going through difficult times while other friends seemed absent. Another participant talked about how his neighbor had stepped in to help his family when his own father had died. There was a tremendous spirit of gratitude in the room. As a matter of fact, the

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<sup>1</sup> Barbara Brown Taylor, *Home By Another Way*, "In the Company of Strangers" - Luke 4:21-32 (Cambridge, MA: Cowley Publications, 1999), 42-46.

room started feeling like church in short order. All that care and love was shared and allowed to soak in. These stories and the people in them were beautiful and good in their own right.

But then a woman stood up and said: “Well, the first thing I thought about when I tried to think who had been Christ to me was, ‘Who in my life has told me the truth so clearly that I wanted to kill him for it?’” Whoops. That woke everybody up in a hurry. This woman reminded everyone that Jesus sometimes spoke the truth even to the point, as Barbara Brown Taylor puts it, “that we will do appalling things to make him shut up.” Think for a moment, have you had this experience of someone speaking truth to you in a way that first enraged or saddened you but made an important difference in your life?

In our story from Luke today, Jesus is in that unenviable position of speaking truth to the people he grew up with in Nazareth. This takes place right after his baptism and temptations in the desert. He is full of power and clarity around what really matters. At first, Jesus is welcomed in his hometown and invited to read in the synagogue. By the power of the Spirit, he reads a text from the prophet Isaiah which lays out Jesus’ own mission statement and can inform all his followers. He read: *“The Spirit of the God is upon me, who has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. Who 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 God’s favor.”* After reading the text, Jesus rolls up the scroll, sits down and says: *“Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.”* Curiously, Jesus left out Isaiah 61:2b from the quotation which promises vengeance against enemies.<sup>2</sup>

Our text says that people in our story were initially pleased. We can imagine them nodding affirmatively or saying: “Fine lad. So articulate. Well done! Isn’t this Joseph’s son?” “All spoke well of him,” and they appreciated “the gracious words that came from his mouth,” we are told. He was “doing them proud,” so to speak, but Jesus seemed to question their own readiness to receive what he had to say and who he was. He immediately challenges them by saying, *“Doubtless you will quote to me this proverb, ‘Doctor, cure yourself!’ And you will say,*

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<sup>2</sup> See also Ernest Hess in David Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, eds., *Feasting on the Word, Year C, Vol. 1*, (Westminster John Know: Louisville, 2009), 287.

*‘Do here also in your hometown the things that we have heard you did at Capernaum.’*” Jesus seemed to assume that if push really came to shove, they would want unerring assurances. He would have to perform for them, entertain in a way, and they would judge for themselves whether his acts of power were worth their salt. They would be passive recipients counting on a strong man and miracle worker to deliver what they thought they needed. Did they understand or embrace the breadth and depth of God’s offer of healing and liberation moving through him? Were they interested in really growing and joining him in living a different reality?

Jesus really put his proverbial foot further in his mouth when he proceeded to remind them of how the revered prophets Elijah and Elisha were sent by God to help foreigners instead of insiders during times of crisis because the foreigners were more faithful and generous. For example, Elijah was sustained by the faithfulness and generosity of a poor and starving foreign widow when he was running away from the Jewish King Ahab and his wife Jezebel who wanted his head. Because the widow was willing to share her last rations with him during a time of famine, her oil jars and flour pots were wondrously and continuously refilled (I Kings 17:7-16). All this was God’s doing, and they should not take God for granted, Jesus seems to imply.

Listening to this, it almost sounds like Jesus was offering his town folk a hopeful message only to pull the rug right back out from under them. It does seem that Jesus was being awfully tough on his home community. It’s not like the people in Nazareth were without struggle. They had been living under Roman occupation and oppression for a long time.<sup>3</sup> They were also generally looked down upon by their fellow countryfolk and rivals to the south in Judea which included Jerusalem and the seat of power. Hearing Jesus talk about freedom from oppression and “the year of God’s favor,” might have made them hopeful that their material and political fortunes would finally improve without their having to do anything about it.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Other superpowers had come and gone before the Romans since the land was part of a famous trade route.

<sup>4</sup> Quoting Kate Huey from i.ucc.org: “Kim L. Beckmann draws on the work of Caleb Rosado (from his book, *Significance of Galilee to the Mission of the Church*), to help us understand that the Judeans would have seen the Galileans as “peasants,” “common people,” “unwashed people of the land” with an accent that betrayed their region’s long history of a rich mix of cultures and races.”

The year of God's favor refers to the Hebrew concept of the *Jubilee* (Leviticus 25:8-17), which proposes that after forty-nine years all debts would be forgiven, slaves freed, property returned, the land left to rest, and wealth would essentially be redistributed to give everyone a fresh start. It was a leveling of the playing field of sustainability, of worth and power in order to avoid the incredible and ever-growing wealth gaps we have in our own culture and world. There is no evidence that this Jubilee was ever enacted but it contains a biblical vision Jesus embraced.<sup>5</sup> UCC theologian Walter Brueggemann calls the biblical jubilee: "... the most difficult, most demanding, most outrageous requirement of biblical faith... [given] our deep practices of accumulation and our intense yearning to have ours and keep ours and make it grow."<sup>6</sup>

The concept of Jubilee also counters a fundamental lie, which Julie Porter describes with these words: *"This is the big lie the world tells us: that the universe is connected by trade agreements, electronic banking, computer networks, shipping lanes, and the seeking of profit — nothing else. Whereas this is the truth of God: all creation is one holy web of relationships, and gifts meant for all; that creation vibrates with the pain of all its parts, because its true destiny is joy."*<sup>7</sup>

We may shake our collective heads at this assertion that what we hear from Washington and Wall Street to Beijing, Hong Kong, Tokyo, Frankfurt, London, Paris and beyond is a big lie. Ask our Canadian and Mexican neighbors how they feel about the new round of huge tariffs. Significant parts of our own church budget and for many of us our retirement portfolios are rooted and growing in that very soil of trade agreements and shipping lanes. We can add fossil fuels, precious metals and rare minerals needed for electronics, energy for Artificial Intelligence and more to that list of bottom-line values. We want our profits to rise, our net worth to accumulate, convenience and our needs for security met.

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<sup>5</sup> We find echoes of it in attempts to forgive the debts of developing countries from loans with exorbitant interest rates, often given to unscrupulous corrupt politicians more intent on amassing their own wealth than improving the lives of their citizens.

<sup>6</sup> Quoted by Kate Huey from a Brueggemann sermon listed in *Inscribing the Text*.

<sup>7</sup> Quoted as an additional resource on the [i.ucc.org](http://i.ucc.org) lectionary commentary but without a detailed source.

How dare anyone suggest that true joy is found in letting go of our grasping and instead rejoicing in the restoration and empowerment not only of themselves but also of others, even if it comes at a cost to us?

As far as God seems to be concerned, there are indeed much more foundational gifts and precious resources and characteristics which have authority over who we are and how we are to live than stock market indexes and goods exchanged. Liberating love, generosity and mercy have primacy. And, as Jesus reminded his contemporaries, those who can show us how to live this way may well be the very strangers and outcasts we don't deem to be part of the community and God's care. No tribal preference, no hometown advantage – just an invitation to keep having our hearts and minds changed and opened toward a greater sense of belonging and joy.

The problem with Jesus' hometown crowd is not that they might have desired the Year of Jubilee but that they did not comprehend or desire that this jubilee would be participatory and for the healing of the whole world, including those they might consider to be their enemies. Their horizon for love was too narrow! We see plenty of evidence of this attitude in our day.

Jesus' truth was more than the people listening to him were willing to tolerate. The crowd got so riled up that they even to throw Jesus off a cliff. They were willing to do "appalling things to shut him up," as Brown Taylor put it. Amazingly, Jesus walked "through the midst of them" and proceeded with his ministry of healing and liberation, wherever people received him. What allowed Jesus to have the courage to do that? Was he afraid when he took that step through the crowds and forward into the future amidst the display of rage and rejection? Andrea Gibson wrote: "Bravery can never be measured by a lack of fear. It takes guts to tremble. It takes so much tremble to love." The good news is that we do not have to tremble our way forward into love alone. The Holy Spirit is walking with us and in us.

This week, let's pay attention to where and how we are buying too much into "*practices of accumulation and our intense yearning to have ours and keep ours and make it grow.*" Where and how can we participate in seeking freedom from oppression, good news for the poor,

recovery of a greater vision and accountability to the primacy of God's love this week? Let us pay attention to everyone and everything that reminds us that, "All creation is one holy web of relationships, and gifts meant for all; that creation vibrates with the pain of all its parts, because its true destiny is joy." We can reject this truth and be left standing at the edge of a cliff of our own making or enter into a deeper joy in company with the one who was willing to tremble his way toward God's realm of love. May the Holy Spirit give us courage to walk with him. Amen.