

**SERMON FOR YEAR C, THIRD SUNDAY AFTER THE EPIPHANY**

LUKE 4:14-21

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“UNPOPULAR”

Jesus has just given the shortest sermon in the history of preaching.  
This had ought to make the rest of us sweat.

If I have it straight, this is what he's done.  
He's come into the synagogue of his sleepy little town,  
Grabbed the scroll containing the Isaiah text,  
And quoted from what he feels to be the heart of it.

This is his great to-do list:

*To bring good news to the poor, proclaim release to the captives,  
To give the blind their sight back, to unlock the chains of the prisoner,  
To declare Jubilee.*

He's saying that this is how he will be spending the rest of his life.  
He's clear about what he needs to do, and you can join him if you like,  
Only don't get in his way.

There's a tension here that's heightened in the reading we have for next week,  
Which immediately follows this passage.  
Initially the people seem to like what he has to say;  
Then they don't.  
They really don't.  
So they drive him out of town and try to send him over a cliff,  
But the text will tell us that he passes through the midst of them and goes on his way.  
Again, not so much a miracle as a point of view.  
These people stand between him and his mission,  
And he's not going to let anyone get in the way – period, end of sentence.

So, for Luke, this is the defining moment of the beginning for Jesus,  
How his whole life will come to be characterized:  
He has come to set the captives free, and he will be opposed at every turn.

Find anyone who professes to be Christian  
And ask them to explain the *bottom line* of their faith.  
What will they say?  
Will any of this come up?

You notice how Jesus doesn't quote from any of today's most popular Christian ideals?  
He doesn't say,  
“Someday you'll go to church and sing endless songs about why I'm so great.”  
And he doesn't say,  
“I know life is hard, but what you need is a positive mental attitude.”

And he certainly doesn't say,  
"If you're grateful enough in advance and can picture it in your head clearly enough,  
I'm going to give you that *motorcycle* you've had your eye on."

How did all *that* come to be thought of as the bottom line of Christianity?

Well, a few theories:

- One – it's being taught to people packed into auditoriums by the thousands,  
And comes wrapped in a very attractive package;
- Two – when you spend 45 minutes talking about one verse of Scripture,  
You can make anything seem relevant;
- Three – it's easier than doing the heavy-lifting stuff that Jesus advocates.

These are the things I'm hearing when I have the gall to tune into Christian media.

It's all about the interior process of transformation;

- About getting whatever you want,
- About being happy and fully healed.

I see nothing of service, justice, compassion.

And that is precisely why we should never be surprised when we throw open our doors  
And people do not come flocking into this chamber of worship.

We have a message that is inherently unpopular:

- That to follow Jesus means to find your soul,
- But that to find your soul,  
You must first be willing to let go of everything you think makes you happy –  
Power, privilege, esteem, pleasure –  
And no longer see yourself as part of a *tribe*,
- But as one of the human family, no more or less important than the person next to you,  
And *yourself* an inextricable part of the web of creation.

All that comes with a price –

- Your service, your pursuit of justice, your compassion for the pain of the world.
- You lay down your ego and pick up the seed bag and plow.

No, that kind of thing just doesn't play anymore.

Living in the culture of me, of now, of instant gratification,  
There's no room for selfless service.

But that's not what matters.

For the baptized, What Matters is whether we stand with Jesus  
And continue to fulfill his real work  
Even if the crowds are against him, or want to twist his words  
And make him the Messiah of all the wrong things.

He knows that what he's got to do and say isn't going to win him any popularity contests.  
But he also knows the truth of God, and he practices it.

He's faithful to the project he calls the Kingdom of God,  
And he asks us to do the same.  
May it be so.