

## New Meaning

Luke 4:14-21  
Nehemiah 8:1-10

*Read Before Scripture*  
We heard ~~Darrell~~ <sup>Ken</sup> read about how the people responded to hearing the words of the book of the law of Moses. They wept but were admonished to rejoice because that day was indeed holy. Those that understood knew it was time to turn back to God. The people had found new meaning in the law. Centuries later Jesus referred to the sayings of the prophet Isaiah. Jesus knew what he was all about. He knew what his mission was. He traveled to his own hometown and proclaimed his mission and offered new meaning to the words of the prophet.. Here is what happened. (Luke 4:14-21) *Darrell read*

Undoubtedly, those who understood Jesus' words would receive them with rejoicing. Others would be curious about what he said. Verse 22 goes on to say, "All spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his mouth." It is the first time Jesus proclaims his mission and purpose in the gospel of Luke. The rest of the gospel fills in the details of that mission and draws us to the final proclamation to his disciples when he reappears as the resurrected Christ: "These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you—that everything written about me in the law of Moses, the prophets, and the psalms must be fulfilled. Then he opened their minds to understand the scriptures, and he said to them, "Thus it is written, that the Messiah is to suffer and to rise from the dead on the third day, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem." And we know the results of the disciples going out to proclaim the good news to others.

Today, no less than in those early years of Christianity, we are called to proclaim the good news. This is a time when the people of this world are just as much in need of a freeing and hope filled message as they were back in those times. No generation can escape the need for repentance and forgiveness because we are constantly engaging in activities, behaviors, and thoughts that are contrary to God's will and desire. We can think of the last time our conscious pricked us because we did something that seemed not quite right. Maybe we yelled at our spouse, or did a little spiteful thing to someone out of anger, or ignored someone in need because we were too busy to care. We see the evidence of the need for God's grace in the people who do really harmful things to

others, those who think that they can buy power and prestige through shady deals or atrocities that deny others their basic rights, even the right to life. God's word needs to be delivered to this hurting world. Christians are called upon to do just that. But most of us are timid about our faith. We enjoy being around one another in the community of faith and are bolder about talking about faith issues when we are surrounded by friends who understand what it means to be Christian. How do we witness to our faith in a world that seems indifferent to church, is becoming much more secular and sees the church as irrelevant?

I relearned an important lesson on our trip to Las Vegas. <sup>one year</sup> First of all, it is unusual for pastors to go to Las Vegas, since gambling is often viewed negatively, at least in the United Methodist Church, and I will admit that it was not my first choice of vacation destination. But Joe's mother was celebrating her 80<sup>th</sup> birthday by going to Las Vegas and we intended to surprise her by joining her there to help her celebrate. It was quite a surprise for her. The last thing she expected was to see her son show up at her hotel room. The city was what I had expected, noisy, crowded, glitzy, busy, and filled with slot machines. It was a place to take care of just about any fantasy one could imagine. But it was also filled with drunks and alcoholics, prostitutes and pimps, hustlers, and scantily clad boys and girls. It certainly was a city of contrasts, people looking for the big win, and people whose dreams had been shattered by the big lose. There were people looking for fun and enjoying what they found, and there were people looking for existence and commiserating their misfortune. There were not many church steeples, <sup>but</sup> and a whole lot of wedding chapels. I wondered where God was in that place in the desert surrounded by mountains. Where was the word of God proclaimed to those imprisoned by the lust for money, impoverished by their lack of it, and blind to the enticement of slot machines, girls, and big jackpots?

But God was even there. I found that God's word will be proclaimed in spite of all the ways we can invent that cover it up. Our hotel room was on the 21<sup>st</sup> floor of the Stratosphere and there to greet us each morning was the sight of mountains beyond the city. It was a reminder that this was God's creation, powerfully structured to bring beauty and inspiration to spirits overwhelmed by crowds and noise. The Grand Canyon and Hoover Dam were just minutes and hours away. The spectacular sight of water



carved canyons literally shouted out God's glory in their awesome silence. But the greatest lesson I learned in God's ability to proclaim the word of God came from Julio.

Julio was a tour bus driver and probably has driven bus tours for years and I'm sure he has encountered many tourists on his trips. We were fortunate to get the front seats of the bus where we could converse with Julio during the long hours of riding. It was an enjoyable day, and the sights were terrific. He was a stickler on time and voiced his disapproval when any of the tourists were late getting back to the bus at any one of the stops. Julio kept us entertained but I also think we kept Julio entertained as well. Toward the end of the day as Julio was letting people off at their hotels he stopped at one hotel and we heard the familiar chants of the pimps on the streets, "Girls direct to your room." I was startled when Julio yelled out to them, "Now stop that! There are church going people on this bus." How did he know that? I hadn't remembered any conversation of ours that dealt with church or church related matters. But he assumed that we were church going people. Maybe it was because our language did not include typical four letter words. Or maybe we did not engage in off color jokes. Or maybe it was our attitude about people in general. Or maybe we did drop a piece of conversation about a church related activity. I suspect it was all of the above and something else. I think it was the voice of God in each one of us in the ways we reacted to the many events of the day. Something about us spoke to Julio of Christian presence. It's a part of being Christian, a presence of a spirit within us that speaks to others. This is what I learned from Julio and from others we encountered in elevators, on buses, walking down the street or standing in line. Christ will not be silent in those he has called. When we are striving for Christ likeness and living as if Christ really mattered, our whole being will communicate the presence of Christ to others, not necessarily in a cheerful, syrupy kind of way, but in a way that embraces people and life, in a way that reaches out in confidence and hope and love. Julio did not seem too surprised when we told him later that there were two ministers in our group. He also told us that we had made his trip and as he let us off the bus he wished us well.

One of the most powerful tools a Christian has to spread the gospel is the presence of Christ within them. Every time we do an act of compassion Christ announces that the scripture has been fulfilled. Every time we reach out to help another, Christ

announces that the scripture has been fulfilled. Every time a tear is shed for the hungry, the sick, the dying, or the distressed, Christ announces that the scriptures have been fulfilled. We are the living presence of Christ for this hurting and shaken world. When we are guided in action by what we read in scripture and hear in prayer, Christ has a chance to announce the fulfillment of scripture. If we are in tune with Christ by worshipping, praying, reading, studying and singing, we offer the message of salvation to the world. That's why it is important to live our lives with Christ as the center. We become the living word of God, recreated in an image that speaks clearly and loudly of a way of life, not just in word, but in every action we do.

Sure we mess up occasionally, but for the most part we are what we believe. And if our guiding principle is Christ our behaviors will become more and more Christ like as we mature in our faith. Ours is not a dead religious faith, it is a living, breathing, growing faith that will continue to draw others into it. That is why it has lasted more than 2000 years and will not die out. Unlike other faith expressions that hang on to great principles and moral laws, Christianity has the living presence of Christ in all who are called to believe. And it is that presence that brings peace, understanding, right relationship with God and speaks to others about God. No other faith expression allows for the living presence of one who walked with us and understands what it is to be human.

What we do and the behaviors we engage in are important expressions of our faith. When we are too timid to proclaim the good news of Jesus Christ, our behaviors in Christ can proclaim it for us. The closer our relationship is with Jesus the more loudly we proclaim the truth in our actions. And I think that is what Julio was picking up on the day he silenced the pimps.

But Julio did his part too. He boldly spoke out when he needed to. His own testimony was heard as he proclaimed what he felt was right. At that moment Christ proclaimed that the scripture had been fulfilled. It does matter what we say and do. I wonder how each of us is proclaiming our faith through the things we say and do. We are most likely to engage in more Christ-like behaviors when we are in church, surrounded by people of faith, but the place it really matters is when we are engaged in our normal daily routines. That is when we encounter those most in need of a word of

hope. Perhaps there should be more ministers of all kinds, after all we are all ministers in faith, in Las Vegas spreading the word through our actions. Perhaps there should be more Christians standing on street corners, not necessarily holding signs condemning the world or challenging people who lack faith, but offering smiles and warm greetings and a hand when needed. Perhaps there should be more Christians extending an invitation to church or willing to listen to another's troubles. Perhaps there should be more parents who read the Bible stories to their children. Those are the things that speak louder than yelling or screaming about the coming judgment. Actions based on the love of God are what softly wind into someone's heart and awaken the voice of God within them and allow God to do the work of redemption. We are the living, breathing presence of Christ and what we do and say will reflect that. Let's stay in touch with Christ by regularly engaging in faith disciplines that move us closer to God and give us deeper understanding. In Christ we are being perfected in love and it will show.