

Wading River Congregational Church

SERMONS IN PRINT

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Luke 4:14-30

"The Lord's Favor"

Jesus has experienced the outpouring of the Holy Spirit upon him at his baptism, he has been led by the Spirit into the desert to struggle with the nature of his ministry, and now he returns to Galilee "in the power of the Spirit." His public ministry is starting, and he uses a Sabbath in the synagogue in Nazareth to announce how his calling will be worked out.

1) *The Anointed One*

Jesus takes the text from Isaiah 61 appointed to be read in the synagogue service that Sabbath, and comments on it, as anyone could arrange to do. He alone knows the import of the first sentence - "*The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me...*" To the astonishment of his family, friends and neighbors, he proclaims that the text refers to him! *He* is the "anointed one" - the Greek word for anointing is *chrío*, which gives us the title *Christ* (Ac 10:38).

The Old Testament background is of course the anointing of prophets, priests and kings with oil, which symbolized God's blessing on them, and the coming of the Spirit upon them to equip them for their tasks. So grew up the expectation of the coming of "the Anointed One" - in Hebrew *moshiac*, the Messiah. Jesus makes the claim, at the start of his ministry, in his home village synagogue, "I am he." The reactions of the

people are, as you might expect, highly varied!

2) *The Year of the Lord's Favor*

Isaiah had prophesied that defeated, sinful, captive Israel would be restored and would become greater than ever in the eyes of the LORD. Their restoration would signal "*the year of the LORD's favor.*"

Favor is a word that needs to be understood and digested. What does it mean? To favor is to act kindly to someone; in Latin it is called *gratia* - from which we form the English word *grace*. Biblical use always carries the sense that the kindness is undeserved, and arises solely from the character of God. He cherishes his people, he plans only good for them, he treats them with grace and favor.

So the year of the Lord's favor - which the angels announced at Jesus' birth ("*peace on earth to men on whom God's favor rests*") - has now begun in Jesus' ministry. To Isaiah it was the restoration of Israel, but behind that lay an even older idea, the "*Year of Jubilee.*" The Law of Moses had decreed that every 50 years in Israel there would be a year of celebration in which debts were forgiven, slaves freed, mortgaged property returned to its owners, and the land allowed to rest and lie fallow. So in Isaiah's vision, which Jesus takes up, "the year of the Lord's favor" brings "*freedom for the prisoners, sight for the blind, release for the oppressed.*"

Overarching all this healing, forgiveness, restoration, release, is the commission Jesus has to “preach the good news” (of God’s grace and favor) “to the poor.” Now who are they? This is where we also have to think carefully. It’s all too easy, as Christian groups through the ages have done, to conclude that this means God has a preference for economically deprived people. It’s also easy to “spiritualize” this and make these people “spiritually poor” – that is, those who are humble before God because of their sins. But it’s very doubtful that either of these is the primary meaning of “the poor.”

To get at “the poor” we have to get back to the culture of Israel. Their society was always much more hierarchical than we are used to, and the social gap between the *financially* rich and poor was huge. But that in itself was not the main division in a society most deeply concerned with status and honor, pride and shame. To be “poor” was to be uneducated, unclean, diseased, deformed, foreign; altogether unwelcome in the synagogue, an “outsider.” Of course that often meant the person had little money, but people who had acquired much money disreputably would still be in the same class – oppressive employers, thieves, prostitutes, tax-collectors.

To be “poor” was to be a *person of whom society thought little* – someone of no account, someone of no value, an “outsider.” Jesus says these are the people to whom the “good news” of the Lord’s favor is directed. *Outsiders will receive God’s grace!*

3) Affirmation and Rejection

It’s no surprise that there are varied reactions to Jesus’ claims about himself and his mission. His reputation in the area is already growing, many speak well of him, praise him, think his words gracious; and he has probably already done miracles in

Capernaum. The comment “*Isn’t this Joseph’s son?*” seems deliberately ambiguous: a note of pride that “our local boy is doing so well,” but equally the question “who does he think he is?” Jesus already knows that “a prophet is without honor only in his home town.”

The negative response swells to anger when Jesus suggests that there are other people who may be more receptive to the Lord’s favor – not just in Capernaum, but perhaps among the Gentiles? Like Elijah and Elisha, Jesus implies he might be sent to Phoenicia or Syria with the good news! Enraged, his own villagers run him out of town and try to throw him down a cliff! We are meant to understand already that Jesus will meet opposition, as well as deep affirmation and gratitude. The thanks will come from the poor, who we are told elsewhere “hear him gladly.”

4) The Poor Hear the Good News?

So when *we* hear Jesus saying “*today this Scripture is fulfilled in your hearing,*” what does that mean to you and me and our society?

Do we believe that “the year of the Lord’s favor” has begun? We may have changed the calendar to mark Jesus’ birth, but in the 21st century do we still believe that we live in the time of the Lord’s favor; that this is the era of grace? Too often the Church has lost the message of grace, buried it beneath programs, structures and hierarchies; and in trying to keep people in line and maintain its status in society, has resorted to teaching moralism instead of grace.

It still happens. Presbyterian pastor Tim Keller, who has ministered to thousands of 20- and 30-something professionals in Manhattan, says he is constantly amazed at how many non-believers misunderstand Christianity to be about “obey God and he

will reward you," when in fact it's about "God's grace in Jesus redeems you, and then you live to please him." Moralism and grace are not the same thing; in fact they are opposite. Moralism is what almost every religion teaches; Christianity says the good news is that through Jesus, people can be saved who can *never* be moral enough, and all this is by the grace and favor of God. Do you believe that? That we live in the era of the Lord's grace and favor?

Put another way, are we of low enough status to gladly receive the word of grace that Jesus brings? Do we see ourselves as needy? Do we see ourselves as "poor"? Are we among those of whom our society thinks little? Or are we desperately struggling never to be in that position? Are we willing to agree that we need our debts paid, our diseases healed, our eyes opened, our slavery ended? Have we mortgaged everything, and long for the year of Jubilee when our debts will be canceled? Is that true spiritually, socially, relationally, as well as economically? Are we in fact "outsiders"? Is the gospel of Jesus Christ "good news" to us, because it reassures us that although we cannot learn or earn or work our way out of the low position we are in, God in Jesus reaches down to us in grace?

And if we *are* "friends of Jesus," if we count ourselves already as part of his family, are we willing to accept that he is inviting "the poor" into "our family"? How do we feel about the word of grace and forgiveness going out to aliens, low-lives, the homeless, the needy, the handicapped, the poor, the "Gentiles" of our day? How do we deal with Jesus' intention to broaden the "people of God" to include people of "every tribe and nation and people and language"? Put more bluntly for America today, how do we *feel* when we hear that the US is becoming "more Christian" (in terms of % of the population that are believers) because of immigration?

That it's the aliens who are the believers of the future, either because they arrive that way or become Christians when they settle here?

Is the gospel good news today? Is the year of the Lord's favor over? Do we prefer to promote good moral behavior because that would benefit our society? Or do we gladly accept the mercies and grace of Jesus that can release us from prison, pay our debts, open our eyes, and welcome us into his family? He has opened the way for us at great cost to himself; he paid our debts, he bore our sin, he submitted to our punishment. Do we want to be redeemed by grace? Or would we prefer to work our way up to a place where God (as well as society) will praise us and reward us for our achievements? Which path will we choose?

Charles Wesley captured the right answer in one of his less-known hymns (except to "shape note" singers in the Sacred Harp tradition): "Blow, ye trumpets, blow...the year of Jubilee has come, the year of Jubilee has come; return, ye ransomed sinners, home!"

Let us pray...