

Pastor's Message – 2/2/25  
Luke 4:14-30

I mentioned a few weeks ago that the gospel writers tell us very little about the years from Jesus' birth to adulthood. We know that Mary and Joseph presented him in the temple at the appropriate time where Anna and Simeon met him. We know that he presented himself before John and was baptized in the Jordan River. Jesus was invited to a wedding and there he performed his first miracle: turning water into wine.

Since then, Jesus has made a splash and Luke reports today that "Reports about him [had] spread quickly through the whole region" (vs. 14a). In our two Bible passages for today, we hear more about the adult Jesus: the first Bible passage is one of the suggested readings for today and the second for next week, but I'm sure you heard the common verse, vs. 21, which is a linchpin between the two readings, "The Scripture you've just heard has been fulfilled this very day!" Jesus is just beginning his ministry. The setting is the region of Galilee. So what did Jesus do? That's the question.

The bulletin says that both readings are from the gospel of Luke, but within the readings is another reading: a passage out of the Book of the prophet Isaiah. Jesus entered the synagogue of his hometown, took up the Isaiah scroll, and read aloud the prophecy from Isaiah that says "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He 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 the Lord's favor" (4:18-19).

Have you ever wondered as I have about these words that Jesus spoke as he began his ministry? Why did He quote these particular words from Isaiah? What made him choose this passage? Was it the prescribed reading for the day? Had He thought it all through in advance? Or did He just pick up the scroll, unroll it, close his eyes, put his finger down and land on this passage by chance? After Jesus finished reading, He said "These things have been fulfilled (perfect tense) in your hearing." They're here, now, it has already happened.

Here we have the heart of Jesus' message. Walter Russell Bowie, an Episcopalian priest, author, and theologian from the last century, called this gospel, "the compassionate Christ." The heart of that compassion began when Jesus stood up in his hometown and unrolled the Isaiah scroll. He told people who had known him all his life what He had come to do: "Bring good news to the poor ... proclaim release to the captives ...

recover sight to the blind ... let the oppressed go free and proclaim that moment was the year of the Lord's favor." One translation adds: "to heal the brokenhearted." And so, the whole gospel was really an unfolding of what He said He had come to do. He left us a standard by which we judge the work of the church and all followers of Jesus: our response to human need.

Every successful business and organization know the importance of a mission statement. A mission statement lets people know who you are, what you are about, and what you stand for. A mission statement ensures that its members are in sync: each member of the organization knows the statement and operates according to it.

There are four main points to a mission statement:

- 1) It provides the reason for the existence;
- 2) it provides clarity and focus to the organization;
- 3) it is clear and concise;
- 4) it is agreed on by the wider organization.

Luke 4:16-19 has been referred to as Jesus' mission statement. It easily fulfills points 1-3 above. Whether it is agreed upon by the wider organization, the church, all people who claim to be Christians, is debatable. In principle, nobody would argue about Jesus' mission statement, but in practice, especially the social aspect of Jesus' ministry, it is often another matter.

The United Methodist Church has a mission statement: "to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world."

This Waupun United Methodist Church has a mission statement, revisited and updated last year:

- GATHER [with us] in fellowship
- GROW in faith
- GO into the world to share God's love

Do the people of this Church remember that we have a Mission Statement and is everyone actively working to carry out that Mission Statement?

There has been much discussion and a little angst regarding the present and future health of the Waupun United Methodist Church. What do you think is the greatest indicator of a healthy church?

Some have pointed to the level of participation by its members.

You may have heard of the 80/20 rule? It basically says that in a Church, or really in any volunteer organization, 80% of the work is done by 20% of the people. It seems to me over the past 20 years or so that I have been in leadership roles in the church that the rule may be changing

to a 90/10 rule where 90% of the work is now done by 10% of the people. The greater the number of "ministers" who are active and involved, the greater the health and growth. The fewer the "ministers," the greater the risk for decline and danger.

A while back, the United Methodist Church embraced a motto or tagline that came from United Methodist Communications. We see it posted in lots of our churches, and we have it on banners in our coffee fellowship area. Some think it is an official position of the denomination: "Open Hearts, Open Doors, Open Minds."

While that particular tagline might be relatively new, the idea is not. Methodists have always strived to be an open church. We have striven toward that goal, although we have not always succeeded. It's not a reality. Not yet anyway. But maybe it is something to strive for. Maybe posting a sign or hanging a banner points us in a direction. Maybe it points to a way of getting us there. Maybe if we can just act as if it is true, it will become true one day.

Being open and welcoming can be a struggle for Methodists and for many churches, just as it was a struggle for the people of Nazareth. Our Bible passage today shows us Jesus' hometown crowd in the synagogue in Nazareth in rapt attention at the gracious words that Jesus spoke: "Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." And then Jesus said what that meant. And then the crowd was ready to kill him. More than this, they actually stormed him and nearly drove him off a cliff. Why? Because the "gracious words" Jesus had to say were the clear opposite of what they wanted to hear. However, that good news wasn't just for them.

You may have heard at one time or another that President Franklin Roosevelt worshiped often at a Washington church. The rector at that church got a strange phone call one day. "Tell me," the voice said eagerly, "if you expect the President to be in church this Sunday?" Patiently the rector said, "I can't promise that the President will be here this Sunday. But we expect God to be here. We think that's reason enough to attend." Being the people of God, committing ourselves to be disciples of Jesus Christ, being a Church, isn't about us. It's about others and it's about God.

The amazing good news of Jesus Christ is for everyone, from those fortunate to live privileged lives to those caught on the other end of a system of oppression and injustice that governments and societies have created and we all participate in. Those who live with privilege need to hear it as much as those who live with less.

What would it mean to hear, "The Spirit of the LORD is upon me, for he has anointed me to bring Good News to the poor. He has sent me to

proclaim that captives will be released, that the blind will see, that the oppressed will be set free, and that the time of the LORD's favor has come" (vs. 18-19) and have it come true on the day it is read in our church and in our country? Has this Scripture actually been fulfilled? Has the time of the LORD's favor actually come? What is the good news? And if we are followers of Jesus, do we actually proclaim it? Do we act and speak as if we have heard good news? Does our demeanor reflect the love and light and salvation that Jesus came to bring?

There are innumerable voices in our society calling us to one thing or another. The voices of politicians and news outlets and social media and consumerism fill our ears with one promise or another. Many of those voices do not call us to Christian living and discipleship and the mission statement of Jesus.

You probably remember when RCA used the image of a dog sitting attentively next to a record player and the caption was, "His master's voice." The idea was that the dog was tuning out everything else and giving all of his attention to just that one thing, listening to the voice of his master. As Jesus began his ministry, he demonstrated his willingness to ignore the voice of public opinion and instead to focus solely on God's voice.

It's that same voice that we are called to listen to: not politicians or news media or even, sometimes, the voices within our own heads, but the voice of Jesus announcing that the year of the LORD's favor is already begun. Whatever way we hear Him, the good news is this: By the power of the Holy Spirit he has passed through the midst of us and will go on his way to love and to heal and to announce God's love for all people, all the way to the cross.

We can either follow Him or not; there is no other choice. And not to decide is to decide. We are called to recognize Jesus in our midst, to acknowledge the blessings He brings and then, as followers of Jesus, be a blessing as we have been blest. Our focus as Christians must be on worshipping and serving God and loving as He loves us, loving others as Jesus loved us. The good news is revealed as we commit to worship, prayer, and service:

bring[ing] Good News to the poor.  
 proclaim[ing] that captives will be released,  
 that the blind will see,  
 that the oppressed will be set free,  
 and that the time of the Lord's favor has come."