

"A Gospel without Boundaries"

Jeremiah 1:4-10; Luke 4:14-30

Sermon Notes from the pulpit of First Presbyterian Church, Champaign, Illinois
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Here in Luke's gospel, Jesus begins his ministry in—of course—a synagogue. He's surrounded by his community. Standing in the midst of his peeps. He reads from the tradition of his elders and of their elders, from the prophet Isaiah:

18 *"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because he has anointed me
to . . .*

. . . and what follows is his mission statement. I've been anointed by God's Spirit 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,
19 to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."*

This is not only what Jesus stands for, it is what he proclaims that he is going to spend his ministry doing.

So, early in this new year, we could pause and ask, "What is my mission? What am I going to focus on? What has God anointed *me* to do?"

That would be a good table conversation for lunch today. What is God guiding you to do in this new year? What gifts has God given you to share? Notice that Jesus is all about helping, healing, befriending, reaching out to, and identifying with others. These personal goals are not about what Jesus is going to do for *himself* (I'm gonna lose 20 pounds), but they are about what he can do with and for others.

As we think of our mission, we are guided by Jesus' mission.

His community who hears Jesus' mission is impressed. What a good boy. Isn't his dad Joseph from Nazareth? What a good, good young man. The elders, no doubt, are smiling. They're stroking their beards. *He's grown up well. What a good kid.*

Jesus should have sat down at that moment. The elders in the synagogue are impressed with him, happy for him. They are pleased.

But Jesus doesn't sit down. He doesn't stop there. Here keeps talking. (See verse 23.)

Hold that thought.

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Do you remember the story in the 17th chapter of First Kings? Elijah is a refugee in the famine and drought that he had predicted to King Ahab would come. God told him to leave the land of the Jews for Zarephath,

14 miles north of Tyre, in modern-day Lebanon. Elijah the starving refugee was not far from the starving Syrian refugees today.

It is far from his hometown, far from his people, far from his religion that he finds aid from a poor but generous unnamed widow. She shared some bread, some water, some life. It was hospitality and healing from the hands of a foreigner.

God used a foreigner to heal a Jew.

* * *

Do you remember the story from Second Kings Chapter five? Naaman, the commander of a gentile army, has leprosy. A Jewish slave told his wife that if only Naaman could go to Israel to meet a prophet there, his leprosy could be cured. Naaman goes, meets Elisha, and is cured.

God used a Jew to heal a foreigner.

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Jesus told both of these stories to the crowd in the synagogue. After he gave his mission statement, he should have sat down. The elders liked what he said. They were pleased. But Jesus didn't sit down. He wasn't finished. At that fateful verse 23, he told these stories about foreigners.

These stories about foreigners make clear that people in Jesus' home town probably won't be able to handle Jesus' ministry in their town. Their reaction to Jesus makes clear that they do not want to think bigger than their own sectarian cliques.

But Jesus' world is bigger than that. His mission to serve others isn't limited to his own home town. His mission will reach beyond his community to other communities. To the Stranger. To the Foreigner. To the Insider *and* to the outsider.

And his elders, who moments before were so proud of him, became enraged and chased him to the edge of town where they had hoped to throw him off a cliff. Jesus escaped.

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In a time when we are told that we should be afraid of strangers, this passage reminds us—fearful or not—we're called to embrace strangers. Our "mission" if we are modeling it after Jesus' "mission" not only includes the outsider, it seeks out the outsider.

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Modern examples of welcoming the outsider include this one:

- A church in the Netherlands has welcomed a refugee family from Armenia facing deportation. Since Dutch law prevents the authorities from entering church sanctuaries while services of worship are underway, pastors from all over the Netherlands have come to help lead services of continuous worship. Since October, that church has been in constant worship in order to keep that foreign family safe. Alleluia.

Modern examples of keeping the outsider out abound, also. Consider this:

- Andrew Whitehead and his wife were asked to keep their children out of worship because they are too disruptive. Both sons are non-verbal and on the autism spectrum. They've been invited to sit in the parent's room where the service is piped in. Just when that family needs the church the most,

the church has pushed them out because the kids are too antsy. I say, "Please God, send that family to *us* where they will be welcomed." (They *would* be welcomed, wouldn't they be?)

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The people in Jesus' day were incensed that Jesus would take his mission across ethnic and cultural boundaries. Many people of our day—including some of our most prominent leaders—are still incensed that we would dare reach out across such clearly drawn boundaries.

Here in Luke chapter four, such a view nearly got Jesus killed. Twenty chapters later, the angry crowds will succeed in getting Jesus nailed to a cross—but not before he met a lot of people, did a lot of healing, and shared a lot of good news with anybody who would listen, with everybody of all stripes.

* * *

If following your God-given mission gets *you* in trouble, maybe that means you're doing it right. If people get angry with you and try to run you out of town, you'll be in good company—with Jesus running by your side, perhaps smiling, perhaps happily muttering, "That's what you get for following me."

How cool is that? Thanks be to God!

AMEN.

Jeremiah 1:4-10

4Now the word of the LORD came to me saying,
5"Before I formed you in the womb I knew you,
and before you were born I consecrated you;
I appointed you a prophet to the nations."
6Then I said, "Ah, Lord GOD! Truly I do not know how to speak, for I am only a boy." 7But the LORD said to me,
"Do not say, 'I am only a boy';
for you shall go to all to whom I send you,
and you shall speak whatever I command you,
8Do not be afraid of them,
for I am with you to deliver you,
says the LORD."
9Then the LORD put out his hand and touched my mouth; and the LORD said to me,
"Now I have put my words in your mouth."
10See, today I appoint you over nations and over kingdoms,
to pluck up and to pull down,
to destroy and to overthrow,
to build and to plant."

Luke 4:14-30 **14** Then Jesus, filled with the power of the Spirit, returned to Galilee, and a report about him spread through all the surrounding country. **15** He began to teach in their synagogues and was praised by everyone.

16 When he 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, **17** and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written:

18 "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,
19 to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."

20 And he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down. The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. **21** Then he began to say to them, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." **22** All spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his mouth. They said, "Is not this Joseph's son?" **23** He said to them, "Doubtless you will quote to me this proverb, 'Doctor, cure yourself!' And you will say, 'Do here also in your hometown the things that we have heard you did at Capernaum.'" **24** And he said, "Truly I tell you, no prophet is accepted in the prophet's hometown. **25** 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; **26** yet Elijah was sent to none of them except to a widow at Zarephath in Sidon. **27** There were also many lepers[a] in Israel in the time of the prophet Elisha, and none of them was cleansed except Naaman the Syrian." **28** When they heard this, all in the synagogue were filled with rage. **29** They got up, drove him 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. **30** But he passed through the midst of them and went on his way.