

The Jesus Way / **REAL FREEDOM**
Seize the Opportunity
Luke 4:14-30

When was the last time you felt that you had missed a unique, once-in-a-lifetime opportunity? The feelings can be described as nothing short of grief, regret, and a “Why did I let that happen?” kind of feeling. It happened to me a few months ago. I wouldn’t describe it as a “once-in-a-lifetime” opportunity, but it did pain me for several days. You see, I had received a reminder from United Airlines that my miles were about to expire. Now you have to understand. When it comes to amassing miles, I’m a little obsessive compulsive. I will go to great lengths to amass those delectable points. And when I’m able to purchase a ticket with those miles, there is an unusual sense of personal euphoria that transports me to a sort of emotional high. Sort of like my wife when she finds that special buy at Goodwill. So I laid that notice on my desk with every good intention of doing the necessary to preserve my some 24,000 miles...like buy a cup of coffee with my credit card. Well, you know how desks get...at least in our house, with three using the same desk (one of those being a teen-ager!). In fact, there’s a special word for that in French. It’s *la paperasse*. It means papers, papers, papers. Several weeks later as I was attempting to bring some order to the piles that had collected, I ran across that notice. *I was just several days too late.*

If amassing and using my points can give me an emotional high, losing them can send me into a prozac moment. Ever feel that way? “If I had just...” is a phrase that can play relentlessly in our minds. And we ask, “Why didn’t I seize the opportunity?”

That’s not unlike what the people in the passage we are looking at this morning are confronted with. A unique opportunity – obviously not for travel miles, but the opportunity to journey with Jesus into an experience of grace and healing that would change their lives forever. But they pass it by. I wonder why? Have you ever wondered why *you* pass by certain opportunities to step out in faith and experience God’s blessing in unusual ways?

The story I’m referring to is found in Luke 4, beginning in verse 14:

Jesus returned to Galilee in the power of the Spirit, and news about him spread through the whole countryside. He taught in their synagogues, and everyone praised him.

— Luke 4:14-15

Over recent weeks we have been looking at key events from the first year of Jesus’ ministry. Some have called this first year the “Year of Revelation.” From the best studies of chronology, this year most likely runs from the summer of AD 29 to early fall of AD 30. During this time period Jesus is revealing himself to the nation of Israel. He is baptized by John the Baptist. He is thrust into the desert where he is tested and proven victorious. He calls his first disciples. He performs his first miracle at Cana of Galilee. He cleanses the Temple in Jerusalem. And he crosses over cultural frontiers to offer the water of life to the Samaritan woman. Having passed through Samaria, he now returns to his hometown in Nazareth of Galilee.

By the way, Luke often notes how Jesus is responsive to the leading of the Spirit of God in his life. And if we want to seize the opportunity to experience God’s grace and blessing in and through our lives, we must be also. For when we’re not responsive to God’s Spirit, those unique

opportunities of witness and growth will pass us by. In fact, my prayer is that you will be sensitive to God's Spirit this morning. What does He want to say to you from this passage? We continue in verse 16:

He went to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, and on the Sabbath day he went into the synagogue, as was his custom. And he stood up to read.

— Luke 4:16

No doubt, as Jesus entered Nazareth – probably on a Friday evening – the familiar surroundings brought back a flood of boyhood memories. It's quite possible that the eventful news was already being passed from house to house: Jesus is back! He's here! I'm sure that Jesus noticed many familiar faces, neighbors among whom he had grown up and played with in the streets. "Hey, there's Joshua, he's the one that jokingly hid Dad's favorite carpenter's tool!" It would have been about dusk when the silver trumpet sounded from the synagogue roof announcing preparation for the Sabbath. By this time reports had reached Nazareth concerning the miracles Jesus had earlier worked in Capernaum. We can only imagine that those in the Synagogue were waiting in ecstatic expectancy to see if this "home-town-boy-turned-prophet" could "hold his own" as a teacher.

Jesus was familiar with the sequence of liturgical elements in the worship of the synagogue. First there was a "Thanksgiving" or "blessing" spoken in connection with the Jewish *Shema*, "Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God is one Lord." This would be followed by a prayer and a collective "amen" by the congregation. Then would come the reading of the *Torah*: first by a priest, then a Levite, and in succession by five Israelites. These texts were read in Hebrew and then translated into Aramaic, the common language of the people. The prophetic reading would be next and for this it was providentially requested of Jesus that he officiate. This would be followed by an exposition explaining the meaning of the passages and the service would be closed out with a benediction. This is the order we see beginning in verse 17:

¹⁷ The scroll of the prophet Isaiah was handed to him. Unrolling it, he found the place where it is written: ¹⁸ "The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, ¹⁹ to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." ²⁰ Then he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant and sat down. The eyes of everyone in the synagogue were fastened on him, ²¹ and he began by saying to them, "Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing."

— Luke 4:17-21

By this time, the atmosphere was electric. This home town young man, Jesus, had read a clearly Messianic passage, abruptly stopped at an inappropriate moment as if to say, "Don't you get the point?" and then claimed he was the very fulfillment of what he had just read!

It's interesting that, from the very outset of his ministry, Jesus outlines what his mission is all about. And that makes good sense, too. Usually, the first hundred words of any book, message, or presentation are the most important. If the writer or teacher hasn't caught your interest, or presented an idea of where he's going in what he has to say, then he probably won't hold your interest. That's what Jesus does here. From the very outset, he states his personal mission. This event is a snapshot of the values of the entire ministry of Jesus Christ.

What is that mission? What are those values? That's an important question, because Jesus' mission should determine our mission. His values should determine our values. And the more I've thought about this passage and the priorities and focus of Jesus' ministry, the more I have called into question how we go about doing ministry today.

Notice, he first he says that he's been appointed to "preach good news to the poor."ⁱ The good news, then, is all that Jesus describes in the following verses: freedom for the prisoners, recovery of sight for the blind, and release for the oppressed.

Who are the "poor?" Without a doubt, they are those who suffer from living without the social and economic privileges that others have. And both the Old and New Testaments have a lot to say about God's care for the poor. But they are also more than this. The "poor" are those who are open to God and humble before him. And it just so happens that those who are poorer economically or socially are also often those who are the most open to God's work in their lives. They are the "poor in spirit" that Jesus talks about. James, the brother of Jesus Christ, reminds us:

Listen, my dear brothers: Has not God chosen those who are *poor* in the eyes of the world to be rich in faith and to inherit the kingdom he promised those who love him?

— James 2:5-6

These verses say something else about Jesus' values in ministry. He came to "proclaim *freedom* for the prisoners...*release* the oppressed." The background to Jesus' words is found in the Old Testament year of Jubilee. Salvation is *release*. The year Jubilee pictured a total release from all debt and enemies. The books are wiped clean. Legal obligations are removed. Prisoners are set free.

Jesus didn't just talk about freeing prisoners and releasing the oppressed. He did it! Jesus combines word and action. The words of the gospel are spelled out in the music of the gospel as he brings deliverance to the oppressed and needy. And if we are Christ-followers, we are called to do the same. The words of the gospel and the works of the gospel go hand in hand. The message of the gospel is combined with a ministry of compassion.

Some may have asked, "Why are we doing Compassion Montavilla anyway? That's the job of social agencies!" No...for too long the church has failed to carry out its holistic mission of caring for both the spiritual *and* physical needs of the surrounding community. This is *the Jesus way!*

But you know, the "poor," the "prisoners," the "blind," and the "oppressed" are not just "out there." They are also "in here." Today, you may well identify with one of these categories. Are you the prisoner of some sin or addiction in your life? Are you blind, unable to see your way through the difficulties ahead? Are you oppressed emotionally, psychologically, spiritually and see no way out? Or maybe your saying, "None of the above!" In this case, you may fit the description of the believers in the church of Laodicea who say "I am rich and do not need a thing." But you do not know that you are poor, and blind and naked (Revelation 3:17).

You may be familiar with the fact that Jesus could have continued to read in Isaiah 61, citing the words "to proclaim... the day of vengeance of our God." But he doesn't. He ends his reading with those words, "to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." In abruptly stopping at that

inopportune place in the passage, Jesus underscores the truth that you and I live today in the age of God's favor. Heaven smiles! God is *for you!* A time of severe judgment is coming. It will not delay. But today is the day of God's favor.

The discourse by the teacher was usually followed by a time of silence in the synagogue, giving all time to reflect on what was just read. This was especially appropriate on this occasion. They needed time to process the words of Jesus. But the silence was soon broken by a mixed response.

All spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his lips. "Isn't this Joseph's son?" they asked. Jesus said to them, "Surely you will quote this proverb to me: 'Physician, heal yourself! Do here in your hometown what we have heard that you did in Capernaum.'" "I tell you the truth," he continued, "no prophet is accepted in his hometown."
— Luke 4:22-23

It has often been said that "Familiarity breeds contempt." There's probably no more an accurate description of these verses than that. Verse 22 expresses the people's familiarity with the "son of Joseph" who is making such radical Messianic claims. "Isn't this Joseph's son?" they ask. "How can the one who played in our streets for so many years now stand up and make such presumptuous claims?"

The contemporary maxim – "familiarity breeds contempt" – is grounded in the moorings of 1st Century terminology. Jesus says, "No prophet is welcome in his hometown." Did you know that it's possible to be so *familiar* with Jesus that you no longer really have *faith* in Jesus? Though there are certainly many advantages and privileges of growing up in a Christian family or being a Christian for many years, one of the subtle dangers is familiarity that can breed contempt. You become to "accustomed" to Christ, so "accustomed" to the Bible, so "accustomed" to church ... that you lose the vibrancy, the freshness, the initial faith. Familiarity, apart from faith, can result in contempt.

The contempt, conceived in the hearts of these people, is now perceived by Jesus. Under the surface of their awe and amazement he sees their cold hearts of rejection and unbelief, and says, "No doubt you will quote this proverb to me, 'Physician, heal yourself.'" In other words: "You aspire to messiahship by claiming a divine anointing! Prove it! Whatever we heard was done at Capernaum, do here in your hometown as well."

Bottom line, the people want Jesus to "show his stuff." But there may be another more subtle thought here. It seems the people ironically believe that Jesus himself is "sick." Why else would he make such stupendous claims? He needs to first heal himself, and then he'll be fit to heal others.

The problem, however, is not with Jesus, but with the people's lack of faith. It's this point that Jesus drives home in no uncertain terms in the following verses:

²⁵ I assure you that there were many widows in Israel in Elijah's time, when the sky was shut for three and a half years and there was a severe famine throughout the land. ²⁶ Yet Elijah was not sent to any of them, but to a widow in Zarephath in the region of Sidon.
— Luke 4:25-26

In referring to the time of Elijah and Elisha, Jesus is comparing the present situation to one of the most apostate moments in the history of Israel. The situation in Israel at this time was awful. It's the ninth century B.C. and Ahab is ruling along with his wretched wife, Jezebel. 1 Kings 16:30 says that "Ahab ... did more evil in the eyes of the Lord than any of those before him."

Israel at this time had all they needed to experience God's full blessing in their lives. They had his promises and they had his prophets. But partly due to Jezebel's insipient, evil influence, they swapped Yahweh for Baal. The people wouldn't even listen to Elijah, God's prophet. And as a result, God sends a famine on the land of Israel.

Not welcome in his own country, God sends Elijah to a lowly Gentile widow in Zarephath. By the way, have you ever noticed how God often works in unexpected ways and places. Elijah would have been surprised to hear that his most effective ministry would be among a widowed Gentile. This wasn't part of his "target audience" to start with. I sometimes wonder, too, what God is saying to Central Bible Church. He sometimes leads along what the prophet Isaiah calls "unfamiliar paths" (Isaiah 42:16). These are "paths" that we might not have chosen for ourselves. They may appear risky, dangerous and full of obstacles and challenges. But they are nevertheless the paths that will lead to God's fullest blessing in our lives and in the lives of others. We sometimes hold back from new, unexpected opportunities that God places before us.

Back to Elijah and this widow and her son. There she is, gathering sticks to prepare one last meal before she and her son would die due to the famine. And here comes Elijah, this seemingly cocky prophet seeking room and board from one so poverty-stricken. First, he asks for water, and then for bread. But the believing widow, recognizing Elijah as a prophet of the God of Israel...acted in obedient faith. 1 Kings 17 says, "She went and did according to the Word of the Lord, and she and he and her household ate for many days."

What enables us to lay hold of God's favor and desire to profoundly touch our lives and use us in the lives of others? Humble, obedient faith. And many opportunities that God gives us are passed by due to lack of faith on our part. I hope this point is coming across. For those in Nazareth it was, loud and clear.

Jesus continues in verse 27:

And there were many in Israel with leprosy in the time of Elisha the prophet, yet not one of them was cleansed—only Naaman the Syrian." — Luke 4:27

Again, Jesus uses an historical illustration and one all too well known to his hearers. Naaman was a high officer in feudal service to Ben-Hadad, King of Syria. 2 Kings 5:1 describes Naaman as "highly respected" and "a valiant warrior." There was only one problem. He was a leper.

Hearing of the opportunity to be healed by a prophet of Israel, he came to Elisha. With royal pomp and ceremony, he came and stood at Elisha's door. He probably thought to himself: "Surely this Elisha, recognizing me as a superior, will come out, call on the name of the Lord his God, wave his hand over the place and cure me!" However, Elisha simply sends a messenger to him, saying "Go, wash in the Jordan seven times."

If you could diagnose with an emotional thermometer both Naaman and those listening to Jesus on this occasion, it would read for both, “Danger, hot-headed!” Why? Because both Elisha and Jesus are surfacing a problem in their hearers – the problem of unbelief fueled by pride.

But then Naaman parts paths with the Jews of Jesus’ home town. Naaman, as we know, humbles himself and goes, dips in the dirty Jordan River seven times and is healed. And it’s this very fact that gives “bite” to Jesus’ illustration.

²⁸ All the people in the synagogue were furious when they heard this. ²⁹ They got up, drove him out of the town, and took him to the brow of the hill on which the town was built, in order to throw him down the cliff. ³⁰ But he walked right through the crowd and went on his way.
— Luke 4:28-30

In contrast to Naaman, those in Nazareth rise up in anger and attempt to murder Jesus by throwing him off a cliff. For them, mere intellectual familiarity bred contempt, and this contempt ultimately resulted in rejection of the very one who could heal their hearts and forgive their sin.

What about you? Jesus stands among us today very much like he stood among those in his own home town of Nazareth. He offers us, as them, freedom, release, sight, and grace. Think with me.

In what specific area of your life do you need God’s touch like that? Where does freedom need to replace bondage? Where does sight need to replace blindness? Where does God’s grace need to replace obligation and lift a burden? Mere familiarity with Jesus can often block authentic faith in Jesus. And faith is the first step in experiencing God’s favor in our life.

ⁱ Citing Isaiah 61 which foretells a coming Messiah who will bring about the many blessings of the Kingdom age spoken of in Isaiah chapter 60.