

Luke 4:14-30

<sup>14-15</sup> Jesus returned to Galilee powerful in the Spirit. News that he was back spread through the countryside. He taught in their meeting places to everyone's acclaim and pleasure.

<sup>16-21</sup> He came to Nazareth where he had been reared. As he always did on the Sabbath, he went to the meeting place. When he stood up to read, he was handed the scroll of the prophet Isaiah. Unrolling the scroll, he found the place where it was written, God's Spirit is on me;

he's chosen me to preach the Message of good news to the poor,  
Sent me to announce pardon to prisoners and  
recovery of sight to the blind,  
To set the burdened and battered free,  
to announce, "This is God's year to act!"

He rolled up the scroll, handed it back to the assistant, and sat down. Every eye in the place was on him, intent. Then he started in, "You've just heard Scripture make history. It came true just now in this place."

<sup>22</sup> All who were there, watching and listening, were surprised at how well he spoke. But they also said, "Isn't this Joseph's son, the one we've known since he was a youngster?"

<sup>23-27</sup> He answered, "I suppose you're going to quote the proverb, 'Doctor, go heal yourself. Do here in your hometown what we heard you did in Capernaum.' Well, let me tell you something: No prophet is ever welcomed in his hometown. Isn't it a fact that there were many widows in Israel at the time of Elijah during that three and a half years of drought when famine devastated the land, but the only widow to whom Elijah was sent was in Sarepta in Sidon? And there were many lepers in Israel at the time of the prophet Elisha but the only one cleansed was Naaman the Syrian."

<sup>28-30</sup> That set everyone in the meeting place seething with anger. They threw him out, banishing him from the village, then took him to a mountain cliff at the edge of the village to throw him to his doom, but he gave them the slip and was on his way.

### **What Would Jesus Say?**

Last month, when I met with the Worship Planning team and told them of my desire to do this worship series, *Seeing Gray in a World of Black and White*, one of the concerns that came up was that it was too political, that I was going to be talking about big controversial issues that cause a lot of discomfort when they come up in discussion. These are topics that people avoid at parties and probably should be avoided at church in order to keep the peace. I appreciated the concerns expressed by those at the meeting, though I still plan to continue the series. And their comments made me reflect upon Bethel and our mission.

Bethel is like many other small congregations. We have a lot of immediate concerns; Jean Bauerlein's husband is in the hospital, Wally Eagle has a broken toe and suffers from chronic back pain, Pat Spagnoli who his getting over a rather painful illness, there are those who are preparing to marry and those whose marriages are really struggling, there's a concern that our younger children will find enough meaning in the church to continue it during their teenage

years when their interests are so easily drawn in other directions. There's the concern that our worship services remain inspiring and joyful in ways that satisfy the needs of those who hunger for truth and long to worship God. We have two candidates for ordained ministry who we need to spiritually nurture and pray for as they engage in ministry. There are budgetary concerns. There are disputes among members over a variety of issues. These are the issues we focus on, and they're enough for us. So why should we bother to get distracted with the politics of our nation? Why should the church weigh in on all these issues that are confronting our nation right now? Isn't the church supposed to stay out of politics and just go about doing good things for one another?

Well, yes and no. Yes the church needs to focus in on the needs of our people and our immediate community – and there are plenty of needs to address. But no, we can't divorce our faith from our politics. Our faith and our national identity are both very important to us, and they should be. Let me ask you; are you proud to be an American? Most of you would answer yes. And if I asked you, "What is it about America that makes you proud?" your answer would include the same list of things that make you 'proud' to be a Christian.

"We care for the poor."

"We live by the rule of law."

"We give people the chance to be heard."

"We set a good example for others to follow."

The same behaviors that we like to project as Americans are the behaviors we like to project as Christians. Do you see that how we aspire to treat one another in the church and in our community reflects the way that we want Americans to treat other Americans and people in the world at large? The same things that cause people to love the church should be the same things that make people love the United States. We have values that we hold sacred. Other nations don't admire us because we're rich and have a big army. They admire us because we value human rights like freedom of speech and equal opportunity and the provision of basic services to ensure a quality of life. Our military is meant to defend those principles that we hold so dear and to protect those whose rights are violated, not to bully those who don't give us what we want.

And so our nation succeeds or fails depending upon how well we uphold those principles that we hold dear, Christian principles, *Biblical* principles. That was indeed the message that God gave to the nation of Israel through the prophets; if you do the things that God wants you to do as a nation you will prosper. Otherwise you will fall. And there were three things that God told Israel they had to do in order to thrive as a nation; all three can be found in one single Old Testament verse:

but let those who boast boast in this, that they understand and know me, that I am the Lord; I act with steadfast love (hesed), justice (mishpat), and righteousness (tsedeka) in the earth, for in these things I delight, says the Lord.

Jeremiah 9:24

“For in these things I delight” says the Lord: Love, justice, and righteousness. This is the way God acts on earth. This is the way we need to act as well.

Last week we talked about love (Hebrew word: *hesed*), and I gave you a card to help you monitor your capacity to love the way the Bible describes love. One of those qualities of love was that it never ends, which means it’s steadfast; it doesn’t stop just because someone did something to upset you. True love tends to the needs of all people – it doesn’t discriminate based upon income or past offenses or nationality. How well are we doing as a nation in our ability to love others?

Justice (Hebrew word *mishpat*): this has to do with treating people fairly. How fair is our justice system? Does it favor the rich and powerful? So much of what the prophets wrote about was Israel’s failure to act justly – the rich and powerful were making laws that enabled them to take land from the poor and force them to be indentured servants to the rich. And guess what? Israel fell, first to the Babylonians, then to the Syrians, then to the Macedonians, and then to the Romans. Do we treat all people fairly, or are there people we tend to take advantage of?

Righteousness (Hebrew word: *tsedeka*): Righteousness is about doing the right thing at the right time in the right place for the right people. And righteousness has to be defined in terms of love and justice; acting out of hatred or unjustly is the opposite of righteousness. Taking advantage of others in order to build our own wealth is not righteousness. Closing our eyes to the plight of the needy is not righteousness. As a nation do we strive to do the right thing at the right time in the right place for the right people?

God called Israel to act with love, justice, and righteousness, and Israel failed. So God left the people, although it may be more accurate to say that the people left God. In their despair as a conquered nation under foreign rule, the people dreamed of the day when God would return, when Israel would once again be a nation ruled by God. That was the messianic expectation at the time of Jesus; so many people expected God to come back to his people to restore the kingdom of Israel. And many believed that the messiah was Jesus.

In today’s reading, Jesus seems to be affirming that expectation; he reads about releasing the prisoners, restoring sight to the blind, announcing the year of the Lord’s favor – and all of this was very good news to the poor. Jesus tells his audience that all this is being fulfilled in their presence, which thrills some but perplexes others (isn’t this Joseph’s boy? What makes him so special? Can we really expect *him* to restore Israel?).

And Jesus could have won the day here. He could have promised to restore Israel, he could have told the people exactly what they wanted to hear and been given the key to the city. But that’s not what prophets do. Prophets don’t say what people want them to say; they tell it like it is, and that’s what Jesus does. The crowd wants Jesus to dazzle them, to do something to show them that he is this messiah that they’re expecting. Jesus will have none of it; he reminds

the crowd that God has done miracles in their midst but not to benefit the children of Israel. He's shown his glory to the foreigner, to the stranger, and passed over the children of Israel. There's nothing about their religion or their nationality that would give them preferential treatment from God. Jesus is saying, "Just because you're children of Israel doesn't mean God's going to give you what you want."

If the crowd had allowed Jesus to speak awhile longer before chasing him away, he might have told them that in order for God's kingdom to be restored to Israel, the people have to re-dedicate their hearts to God. It's interesting when I read in the Old Testament about God ruling over Israel from the Temple, I ask myself, "Really? Was God's presence actually in that inner sanctuary of the Temple, and did God just get up and leave town when the Babylonians arrived?" Well, I don't know, but what I do know is this; where people embrace love, justice, and righteousness God is present, and where people care only about themselves, where they try to buy justice or distort justice, where they turn a deaf ear to the cries of the needy, God is absent. Israel was ruled by God as long as the people submitted to God's rule – which meant that they treated others with love, justice and righteousness. When they stopped caring about love, justice, and righteousness God left town whether we imagine this happened physically as Jeremiah describes it, or spiritually in the sense that the Holy Spirit no longer resided in the hearts of the people. And Jesus is telling this crowd in the synagogue that God cannot rule where the people do not allow him to rule. We so often curse God for not setting everything straight in this world, but the truth of the matter is that we don't allow him to. And when Jesus states the obvious, that God is not going to do anything anywhere that he is not welcomed, the people seethe with anger and drive Jesus away, just as they drive God away.

And so the humbling question is, "What would Jesus say to us today, as a church or as a country?" I think he would say the same thing that he said in the synagogue in Nazareth: "I will go where I am welcomed, and I will depart from places where I am not welcomed. Wherever people live in love for God and for one another, I'll be there. Wherever people hunger for justice and strive to do what is right, I'll be there. But don't expect to see me among the hate-mongers. And don't expect your nation to thrive if it stops caring for the poor and the stranger and outcast."

You see those were the values and principles that our founding fathers cherished. Pull out a dollar bill if you can and take a close look at the back of it. On the left you see the great seal, the pyramid with the eye on it. It's an unfinished pyramid because our founding fathers recognized that the West had hardly even been explored let alone settled, so we still had a ways to go before we were finished. At the top you see the eye of God, an ancient symbol signifying that we need God's help to guide us as a nation. ANNUIT COEPTIS, means, "God has favored our undertaking." The Latin below the pyramid, NOVUS ORDO SECLORUM, means, "a new order has begun." Our founding fathers envisioned a nation where God would be guiding us, which means we would be a nation that embraces love, justice, and righteousness. If you look at the circle on the right you'll notice the eagle. In the Eagle's beak you will read, "E PLURIBUS UNUM," meaning, "one nation from many people;" we were and we are a nation of immigrants from throughout the world, many people, yet one nation. While this doesn't

answer our questions in relation to immigration reform it reminds us that we too were immigrants once upon a time but we also were able to find unity. And whatever the status of the stranger in our midst we are still responsible to love them and treat them justly. Notice what the Eagle holds in his talons. He holds an olive branch and arrows, and faces the side with the olive branch. This country wants peace, but we will never be afraid to fight to preserve peace. How well are we at promoting peace? We spend about eight times more on the military than we do on international aid according to Politifacts. What would happen if we took some of money from defense and put it toward international aid? Doesn't it make sense that boosting our image as a loving, helping nation decreases the military threat against our nation?

The bottom line: love, justice, righteousness. That's what makes America great, and that's what will keep her great. Not military strength. Not GDP. As Americans we need to live it; as Christians, empowered with the prophetic voice of God's own Spirit we need to declare it to our leaders. If we live and act in ways that defy the will of God for this world, we cannot claim to be nation under God, and there are grave consequences for any nation that does not accept God's rule. May God humble us and remind us of our responsibility to love, to seek justice, and to be righteous in his eyes. Amen.