

Luke: Scandalous Deliverance
Sermon 1-13-2019
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Luke 4:14-21

¹⁴Then Jesus, filled with the power of the Spirit, returned to Galilee, and a report about him spread through all the surrounding country. ¹⁵He began to teach in their synagogues and was praised by everyone. ¹⁶When 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, ¹⁹to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.” ²⁰And 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. ²¹Then he began to say to them, “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.”

Message:

As scary as this might be, I invite you to think back to those high school days with me. For some of you, that’s a very long time to think back. For others of you it wasn’t so long ago. What was high school like for you? Were you the nerd? Were you the band geek? Were you the jock? Were you the popular kid? Who were your friends? Did you have friends? What were they like? What was life like in high school? Take a small moment here to recall these things. (Pause) When I entered my freshmen year of high school, it was doubly nerve-racking. Not only had I moved from middle school to high school, but I changed from public school to private school. I didn’t have my usual friends from public school with me. I didn’t have my usual crowd. Everything was new. For the first semester of my freshmen year I was the cool kid. Looking back, I realize now why. It wasn’t because I had this electric personality. It was because I was new to everyone else. Most of the kids had grown up in the private Christian school system. They never stepped foot into a public school. They never had school dances. They had a pretty “restricted” life. I was cool because of my experiences within the public school system. They were curious and entertained by my experiences and stories. This high school didn’t have a football team, so the soccer players were the most popular jocks in the school and I happened to be one of them. So my first semester of my freshmen year I felt included, beloved and on

cloud 9 in terms of popularity. I liked going to school because of the attention I was receiving. But that all changed as I entered that second semester of my freshmen year in high school. The soccer season was over. The newness of my presence in a private school had worn off. The crowd that I initially associated with gradually shifted their interest from me. I was no longer entertaining and intriguing. I could tell I was getting less invites to gatherings. They were less buddy-buddy with me in school. I had become yesterdays news. People that I thought were my friends, ended up just using me for their entertainment. When you're in the "in-crowd" it feels great, wonderful and exciting. When you're pushed out, it feels lonely, isolating and depressing. Eventually I found another group of friends. Friends that I'm still close-to to this day. But it's interesting, this past summer I went to a high school friend's wedding. She happens to be friends with a lot of people and in-fact friends with people that I felt left me out in the cold that freshmen year. When I went to this wedding this past summer, I couldn't believe how all those rejected feelings came right back up from underneath all over again. I had those same high school feelings. I'm thinking, "I'm a grown man. That was 14 years ago or so. How is it that I still feel left out? How is it that I still feel the jilt?" It's an incredible thing. How feelings of rejection can stick with us for a long time. Sometimes people make it very apparent that you don't fit in. Other times they are more subtle like not inviting you to certain events. When you're on the inside it feels great. It feels like you're at the top of the mountain. But when you're on the outside it feels like you're in the valley, lonely and worthless. Popularity is a funny thing. It feels great one moment, but when it's not there, it feels terrible. Thank goodness Jesus doesn't operate by popularity or we'd be in deep trouble.

In fact, what happens in our passage today, Jesus radicalizes who's in and who's out. When I read this passage it reminds me of my high school story, ¹⁴"Then Jesus, filled with the power of the Spirit, returned to Galilee, and a report about him spread through all the surrounding country. ¹⁵He began to teach in their synagogues and was praised by everyone." Jesus quickly became popular. He went back to Galilee where he was raised. Galilee was the dumps of Israel. It was believed that no prophets ever came from Galilee. And here, amazingly, Jesus speaks with authority and wisdom. His teaching captures the heart of the people. He's filled with the Spirit of God and the people respond with favor. He, then, returns to Nazareth, the town he was raised in in Galilee. He goes to the synagogue in Nazareth. What happens next you may not fully understand. According to Biblical scholar Alan Culpepper, in Synagogue worship practice there would be multiple readers who read from the scroll. These readings were typically from the Torah, the first five books of the Old Testament as we know it today. Jesus would have read these words in Hebrew and then interpreted them in

Aramaic. By this time in Israelite history, reading from the prophets, such as Isaiah, would have been a relatively new practice in Synagogue worship. Jesus reads these words from Isaiah, “¹⁸The 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, ¹⁹to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.” Now, remember, Luke declared through Jesus baptism that the Spirit was with him. In our passage last week before he entered the wilderness, Luke emphasizes that the Spirit is with Jesus. And here again, in our passage today, Luke emphasizes that the Spirit is with Jesus. The Spirit being upon someone signifies their authority and prophetic status to speak to the people. Luke is emphasizing Jesus’ authority to speak to the people.

To understand this passage from Isaiah even more, you have to understand “...the year of the Lord’s favor.” What this phrase refers to is what’s called the “Year of Jubilee.” In Leviticus, God legislates that after 6 years of tilling the soil and working the land, that the people should take a sabbath year where they don’t store the fruits of the land or work the land, but they simply rest for one year and let the land rest for one year. And then they go for another 6 years and rest for 1 year. After 7 times of this cycle, 7 times 7 equals 49, in the 50th year they are to have the Year of Jubilee. Over 49 years some may have gone in to slavery to pay off debts. Slavery in the ancient world wasn’t like American Slavery in the early days of our country. Slavery in the ancient world was usually something that people opted into to pay off debts or to pay off the debts of their relatives. But in the Jubilee Year, everything was to be freed. So if you have inherited certain land through another’s indebtedness, it was to go back to the original owner. If you were part of generational slavery, you were to be freed and you no longer owed any debt. In a sense, the Jubilee Year was radical social reform where all of Israel would go back to equal socio-economic status. There is this restoration sense to the Year of Jubilee that everything and everyone will go back to normal. Isaiah proclaims that it’s not just economic reform, but also return of sight to the blind. Another marker of a prophet. A prophet is able to help people see where they are blind. Both figuratively and literally. The anointing, or Spirit, of God comes upon the prophet to help people see.

So with that information in mind, let’s read that Isaiah 61 passage as it’s quoted by Jesus again, “¹⁸The 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, ¹⁹to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.” And then what happens next is a little goofy. “²⁰And 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. [It’s as if the people are saying ‘And...’ They were waiting for an interpretation as was customary. So then he

finally says something...]²¹ Then he began to say to them, “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.” If we read beyond our passage, the people at first are amazed. Almost as if, “Wow Jesus! That was profound. We’ll have to ponder that one.” It almost seems superficial. And then the real response comes out, and in so many words the people say, “Wait a minute! Isn’t this Joseph’s son? The carpenter? And we’re listening to him!?!? False prophet!! He can’t be the Messiah!!” See, the people were taught to be very vigilant for false prophets among them as they waited for the Messiah. They were taught that many would try to claim this role and would be wrong. They associated the Messiah with nationalism, national liberation. The Messiah would conquer the invaders occupying their land and Israel, the nation, would be restored. And, again, this is where Jesus’ reading and response are so radical. What He’s telling them through the Isaiah passage is that everything is being restored through HIM. Not just Israel. Not just the people of Israel. Not just the nation of Israel. The entire world will be freed and redeemed.

The scandal of Jesus is His deliverance of ALL people. It’s his radical inclusiveness of people that sends many to deny Him and run away from Him. See the people in this scene liked it when the deliverance was all about them. That only included them. They had this idea that God was only going to redeem them. If the deliverance of God meant that Samaritans, the Romans, the lepers, the crippled, the poor, the enslaved were also going to be freed, then it can’t be true. So the reverse logic has to conclude that Jesus is a false prophet. You would think they would have a little more compassion upon Jesus since he was raised in that town. Yet, they decide that his words are so blasphemous that he needed to die and they tried to throw him off a cliff. Of course, Jesus knew this wasn’t the time for Him to die. So, mysteriously, he sneaks away from this volatile crowd and continues on His way. In verse 24 he notes that no prophet is welcome in his hometown. I remember a number of years back my mother asked me if I had any interest in pastoring at my home church, Florin, and I didn’t even have to think about it. NO. I certainly had plenty of reasons to say “No,” but the biggest reason was because that’s where I grew up. I knew that the people there would have a hard time seeing me as their pastor and instead would see me as the child-version of Curtis. So when it would come time to lead them in challenging directions, they wouldn’t follow because they wouldn’t be able to get past seeing me as a child.

Similarly, the people had put these boundaries around Jesus of who He should be and who He shouldn’t be. “He’s the carpenter’s son. How could the Messiah grow up in our town and we not know it? Therefore, it can’t be so.” God’s movement is bigger than our imagination. In fact, we were just talking about this at the Acts Bible Study on Wednesday. Sometimes we are so fixated on this idea of how things are supposed to go, how things are supposed to be and what

God is supposed to do that we end up trying to give God the orders. I can imagine God just shaking His head like a Father to his child, "No. No. No. You don't see it now, but what you want me to do is not good for you. I have something better for you that you can't even imagine yet." These people in Jesus' hometown had already made up their mind of who the Messiah is supposed to be and who Jesus was, the carpenter's boy. They couldn't conceive that they are one in the same. They couldn't conceive that God's grace is so radical, so bold and so broad that it would include the least of these. Jesus wants to include them in His kingdom, but it's they who reject Him. It makes me wonder, how have we created barriers and boundaries to Jesus? How have we limited the radical inclusiveness of God's grace? How have we put up certain markers and walls that says "You're in! You're out!"? And it may not even be things that are very conscious. It may be traditions that were originally designed to bring people together of all backgrounds, but the tradition now serves to be a marker of who's in and who's out. Maybe it's the way we worship. Maybe we thought that there is only one way to worship the Lord and if others don't worship that way, then they're not included. Either they should worship as I do or they're out. Maybe we've defined ourselves too much as Providence Church to the point where our name, our practices, our heritage in the Church of the Brethren serves to push people away rather than to invite them in to the abundance of God's grace. What boundaries have we created here at Providence, consciously and unconsciously, that now exclude people from God's Kingdom? I know we don't like to think of ourselves that way, but sometimes we create more hurdles to Jesus than creating more clear avenues and pathways to Jesus.

Like John the Baptist's call to repent to the insiders of the faith, insiders like us, Jesus' call to the insiders in Nazareth is to embrace this radical deliverance and acceptance of all people. That no matter how poor, no matter how much wrong one has done, no matter their economic status, no matter their association with a certain denomination or social group, He has come to set them, set us, all free. See, it's not Jesus who sets these superficial boundaries and expectations, it's we who create these barriers to the cross. It's we who reject Jesus with these barriers and boundaries. For in the Kingdom of God, there is not male or female, there is not old and young, there is not Episcopalian, Methodist, Lutheran, Catholic, Mennonite, Brethren and non-denominational. There is not rich and poor. In the Kingdom of God, all are one in Christ. How do we get out of our own way? We open our hearts and minds to our brokenness. We repent. We open ourselves to the way of Jesus. We surrender our expectations. We surrender our plans. We begin to act in radical inclusiveness of all people no matter who they are or their background and we extend the love of Jesus as it is in us. We continue to bless others. We continue to bless Abundant Life Bible Church. We continue to bless

the stranger. We open ourselves to God's imagination for us and surrender to His ways. His ways are higher than our ways. We follow the path that Jesus lays before us. Jesus has come to set you free. Free from the slaveries of this world. Free from economic oppression. Free from the weight of your past. Free from your worries. Free from having to know every next step. Jesus has come to bring you life and to bring it abundantly. All we need to do is to not fight it. To not let our expectations get in the way. To fully surrender to Jesus. So I ask you today, will you surrender to this scandalous deliverance? Will you surrender to Him, to His ways and to His path for you? Amen.