

Series: The Words of Jesus
Today: Words on his Mission
Text: Luke 4:16-30

A Sermon preached by the Rev. Randolph T. Riggs, D.Min.
Sunday, September 21, 2008
First Presbyterian Church of Lancaster, PA

How many remember your first bible? I received mine when I was in the fourth grade, and I pulled it off the shelf to show you it is well used in its 53 years. At the time, my parents were not consistent in their church. They would go to church when it was convenient or when they were feeling guilty about not giving my sister and me a moral and ethical foundation. After several months of attending, they would fall back into old habit patterns and we would stay away for a few years only to return again around the same feelings of concern for our well-being. We had lived in Newport Beach, California, for two years when they felt the need to find a church home as a part of becoming acquainted with the community. It was the mid 1950's and church was much more a part of the fabric of our country at the time. So they sought out a church where my sister and I could learn the "Christian way."

In fourth grade Sunday School, at this church, students were given a chance to earn a reward for bible memorization: your very own Bible. As you can see, it is a rather plain and unassuming looking book. It was meant to be that way. It was in the seventh grade, during the Confirmation Class, that you earned a leather bound, red letter edition of the Bible. My parents did not stick with church until the seventh grade, so I never received my leather bound, red letter edition of the Bible. For those of you who were not raised in the church, or who have never had your very own red letter edition of the Bible, the "red letter Bible" is simply a Bible where the words which Jesus spoke are highlighted in red.

Phyllis Tickle did have her very own red letter edition of the Bible. She is the founding editor of the religion department of *Publisher's Weekly*, and in February, I had a chance to hear her speak and attend two seminars. Mrs Tickle is a 75-year-old woman who is passionate about reaching young adults who have grown up in the postmodern world. Two years ago, in an attempt reach postmodern young adults with the actual words which Jesus spoke; she pulled out her red letter edition of the New Testament and began to read what Jesus had to say in his own words. The result was a book published in February of this year entitled The Words of Jesus. It is the inspiration for the yearlong series of sermons which some might say is about *Red Letter Jesus*, but all we are really doing is looking at what Jesus had to say, in his own words, about a variety of topics.

The series will take us through the Summer of 2009, and it will be divided into the categories which Phyllis Tickle developed for her book. This Fall we will be dealing with some of the public teachings of Jesus. In January, we will look at some of the private teachings. During Lent we will visit his words on healing which we examined a few years ago, but there is always more room for understanding in this area. During the period between Easter and Pentecost we will look at the words Jesus spoke to his disciples following his resurrection, and next Summer we will focus on the intimate conversations which Jesus had with individuals and small groups.

The Mission of Jesus

This morning our focus is on what Jesus said or how he understood his own mission. The context of his teaching is a visit to his hometown. Now if you have ever left home and had the experience of returning as an adult, you can probably identify with the feelings Jesus might have had. No matter how many awards you have received or degrees you have added to your name, when you go home again, people in your home

town don't always see you as an adult. They view you as Billy, or Sally, or Freddie and may even treat you like a child.

In his teenaged and young adult years Jesus had worked with his father as a carpenter. He attended synagogue every Friday night and all day on Saturday. The older people of his community knew him as a "good boy." He was Joseph and Mary's son who came along about eight months after their wedding; but no one seemed to make a big deal of a child born in awkward circumstances. Joseph and Mary had been married about 30 years now, and they had raised a fine family. Jesus was the eldest child. He had brothers and sisters, but there is nothing like the first son.

They remembered the unique circumstances of his birth. When he was just a boy, they remembered the visit that they made to the Temple in Jerusalem and how he impressed the teachers there with his knowledge of scripture and his probing questions. They may have even wished they had been born Levites instead of the tribe of Judah. Priests come from the tribe of Levi. The tribe of Judah is the tribe of royalty, but a carpenter from Nazareth was a long way from being a King.

Our text says that he went to synagogue as was his custom. Perhaps we need to pause right there before rushing. On the Sabbath day Jesus chose to be with the people of God. It was his custom. It was something he had nurtured as part of his routine. He went every Sabbath, wherever he was and whatever he was doing. He didn't complain if the services were too short or too long. He wasn't focused on whether they sang his favorite songs or if the organ was too loud or too soft. For Jesus, worship wasn't about entertainment. It was about honoring the place of God as central in his life in the context of a community of people who felt the same way.

If anyone ever asks you why you go to church, I hope you will tell them about the wonderful music and the great programs we have for children and youth. If you are so inclined, I would even hope you will tell them about the great messages you hear.

However, as a follower of Jesus the primary reason we come to church is verse 16: it was the custom of Jesus to be in church on the Sabbath, and it should be ours, as well.

The synagogues in towns like Nazareth probably didn't have a rabbi. Lay people were expected to lead. The responsibility for reading and interpreting the scripture was in the hands of the laity, and the day Jesus went to Nazareth it was his turn to read the scriptures and to preach the message. So they handed him the scroll of Isaiah 61, and he read the words of the prophet: *"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."* When he was finished, he sat down, as was the custom for rabbis, to teach, and gave one of the shortest sermons on record: *"Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."* When looking to interpret the prophet Isaiah, he did not make a case for the authority of scripture, nor did he try to proof text the scripture with what other prophets said. He pointed to himself and his own sense of mission and said, "Look at my life. Look at my ministry. Look at me—today.

What did Jesus say about his mission here on earth? 1) His Mission is to the Poor and the Forgotten of Society; 2) His Mission is about Today.

1) His Mission is to the Poor and the Forgotten of Society

If you believe in the providence of God, it was no accident that the lectionary reading for the day was from Isaiah 61. Lectionary readings are the assigned reading for

scripture in the Jewish calendar year. Isaiah was speaking to the nation of Israel in the 8th century B.C. They were a nation who saw themselves as special in the sight of God, but they had not been faithful to the intent of God. They had grown fat and held the false belief that the measure of God's love and care for the individual was directly related to the amount of wealth they had. The rich were seen as blessed by God, and the poor were seen as cursed by God. Those who were in prison were viewed as less than human. Disease was viewed as a punishment for sin.

Isaiah's prophecy says that when the Messiah comes, the world as we know it will be turned upside down. God's favor will be extended first to the poor, then to the captive, and then to those who have been rejected because of their disease. God will not blame the poor for being poor. God has a special place in His heart for those who have been captive. God will not reject the sick and the suffering. Indeed, it is God's intention to reach out to those whom polite society would just as soon forget.

This is the mission of the Messiah, and it is the mission which Jesus claims as his own. So if we want to be followers of Jesus and identify with the mission of Jesus, we will demonstrate it in our commitment to the well-being of those whom our society might just as soon forget.

I do not pretend for a moment that this will be easy. In the post takeover world of our financial institutions, it would seem as though the amount of wealth we have in our retirement accounts is the most important issue of the times in which we live. However, our text indicates that the health of our retirement accounts is not the primary mission of Jesus. His primary mission is to bring hope to people who are poor, people who are diseased. If we are seeking to be on the side of Jesus, we will involve ourselves in

addressing the problems of the sick, the poor, those in prison, and others whom our society might consider as unworthy of our care.

Don and I count ourselves as blessed to be pastors of this church which has nurtured a deepening of faith. Both of us have been sent to third world countries where we have eaten with the poorest of the poor. We don't have to go looking for the poor of our community. They come streaming through our front door every day. We get to call on people when they are sick in the hospital and be deepened by the faith of those who are sick and yet affirm the presence of Christ in their lives. We have learned from you the difference faith can make in our lives as people wrestle with the things which are really important.

Those of us who have been privileged to travel to third world countries quickly learn how hard it is to see the grinding poverty that wears people down. What one quickly learns is that we, in this country, are the blessed of the world. Yet, when we involve ourselves in the lives of those whom the world would judge as worthless, we discover that they may be poor in material things, but they are rich in things of the Spirit.

Each day we were in Kenya this Summer, we visited in the homes of the parishioners of the Kiambaa Church. One day I was privileged to visit a man whom I had first met in 1999. He had just turned 100 years old. I asked him what he thought the secret of his longevity was. He said, "I eat well, I love God and I allow others to love me." This is a man, whom the world considers poor, but he was a blessing to me about what is really important in life, and I hope his story has been a blessing to you. Perhaps that is why Jesus encourages his followers to serve the poor if they want to experience a deeper sense of the presence of God.

2) His Mission is about Today

The other important thing to notice about what Jesus said about the nature of his mission is its immediacy. He says that *Today* is the acceptable time to reach out to the forgotten of society. Today is the time to embrace the ones who are difficult for us to love. God's unconditional love isn't about some pie in the sky in the sweet by and by. *Today* is the day we are to proclaim God's favor to all people.

In his book *Hidden in Plain Sight*, author and pastor Mark Buchanan tells the story of Rwandan genocide and a woman whose only son was killed. She was consumed with grief and hate and bitterness. "God," she prayed, "reveal my son's killer."

One night she dreamed she was going to heaven. But there was a complication: in order to get to heaven she had to pass through a certain house. She had to walk down the street, enter the house through the front door, go through its rooms, up the stairs, and exit through the back door.

She asked God whose house this was. "It's the house," he told her, "of your son's killer." The road to heaven passed through the house of her enemy.

Two nights later, there was a knock at her door. She opened it, and there stood a young man. He was about her son's age. "Yes?"

The young man hesitated. Then he said, "I am the one who killed your son. Since that day, I have had no life. No peace. So here I am. I am placing my life in your hands. Kill me. I am dead already. Throw me in jail. I am in prison already. Torture me. I am in torment already. Do with me as you wish."

The woman had prayed for this day. Now it had arrived, and she didn't know what to do. She found, to her own surprise, that she did not want to kill him. Or throw him in

jail. Or torture him. In that moment of reckoning, she found she only wanted one thing: a son.

"I ask this of you. Come into my home and live with me. Eat the food I would have prepared for my son. Wear the clothes I would have made for my son. Become the son I lost." (source: Mark Buchanan, *Hidden in Plain Sight* (Thomas Nelson, 2007), pp. 187-189)

This was a woman who took the call to follow Jesus very seriously in her life. It did her no good to nurse a grudge. Today was the day that she was called to forgive, and she demonstrated her actions.

Jesus says of his mission that today is the day we are to proclaim God's favor to all people; even those whom we might find it difficult to love. It was a message that nearly got him killed by the people who had watched him grow up. It is one thing to talk the talk, but it is entirely different to walk the walk. The mission of Jesus was to walk the walk—to reach out to the very people whom polite society would just as soon forget and to do it TODAY.

Now is the year of the Lord's favor. Today is the day we are to put the grace of God to work in our lives. These are powerful words from a powerful man. They are the Word of the Lord for us TODAY. Thanks be to God.