

Follow Jesus?
Luke 4:21-30
First Presbyterian Church
January 31, 2016
Rev. Glen Bell

In order to move forward, we must first look back.

The opening of our Gospel lesson invites us to revisit the verses just before today's passage.

"Today this Scripture has been fulfilled," Jesus announces, and the Scripture to which he is referring is from the prophecy of Isaiah, quoted in the reading we shared last Sunday. These prior verses become the theme, the very core, of Christ's ministry:

"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me to bring
good news to the poor,
release to the captives,
recovery of sight to the blind,
freedom to the oppressed, and
to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."

Throughout Luke's Gospel, in preaching, teaching and healing, we discover good news, release, enlightenment and freedom for the poor, the imprisoned, the blind and the oppressed.

The tone of last week's reading was upbeat and positive. "Jesus began to teach in the synagogues and was praised by everyone," we read. Today's lesson opens in a similar way. "All spoke well of Jesus, and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his mouth."

But the tone quickly changes as Jesus offers a message of grace and promise not to those gathered in the synagogue for worship, not for those family and friends welcoming him home, but to outsiders. He rubs salt into this wound by reminding them that the prophet Elijah was sent not to deliver the Israelite widows in need, but instead to the widow of Zarephath in Sidon, far north beyond the boundaries of what is Israel, in present-day Syria. Similarly, the prophet Elisha was sent not to heal the local lepers, but instead to Naaman the Syrian, the commander of a foreign army.

All his listeners were filled with rage that Jesus would dare announce that God's favor rests upon the outsiders and not the insiders.

In order to move forward, we must first look back.

Today's scripture is painful for me. I like being one of the insiders.

I am indeed an insider. I graduated from a respected Presbyterian seminary founded in 1812. For more than two centuries, Union Seminary in Richmond, Virginia has been training pastors and leaders in our Presbyterian Church. The first congregation I served, Laurel Hill Presbyterian

Church in Scotland Country, North Carolina, was founded in 1797. The first pastor preached for an hour in Gaelic and then an hour in English, given that many of the Scot-Irish settlers did not speak English. The last congregation I served in Indianapolis was founded in 1838; Henry Ward Beecher was the first pastor. Son of Lyman Beecher and brother of Harriet Beecher Stowe, Henry Ward Beecher was one of the best-known preachers of his age. His 2006 biography, by Debby Applegate, is titled *The Most Famous Man in America*.

Our congregation was founded in 1906, when Sarasota was in its infancy. Only about 850 people lived in Sarasota when our church was established. Over the years, this congregation has been a leader in the community, giving birth to seven or eight others. We were cofounders of Family Promise and Resurrection House and more recently, the local chapter of the Fuller Center for Housing.

I like it. I like being an insider. I like coming to church and knowing by heart the routine of the liturgy, the rhythm of worship. I like being a part of the same established tradition since I was ordained twenty-five years ago. I like knowing the jargon, understanding the system, being aware of our history.

If I lived in Bible times, I would be with the “in crowd,” with the Israelites in the days of Elijah and Elisha, I would be sitting in the synagogue in Nazareth listening to Jesus read the Scripture. And I expect I would have become enraged like all the rest, when the upstart Jesus dared to speak about God’s ministry to Syrians, to foreigners, to those beyond the promise. I expect that I too would have driven Jesus out of town, leading him to the cliff, ready to kill him for daring to declare God’s favor on outsiders.

Are you and I prepared to follow Jesus? Following Jesus is a dangerous thing. If we would walk in his footsteps and share his message and embrace all the world with love and grace, we make ourselves vulnerable to people who misunderstand or oppose us.

I expect almost all of us today are insiders. Unless this is our first or second time at a Christian worship service, we are insiders. Think about it. Consider the categories used by Isaiah and Jesus in his reading in the synagogue. Through Christ, God will deliver good news to the poor, release to the captives, enlightenment to the blind and freedom to the oppressed.

What would you and I do if we were to divide our worship space into four sections, and invited all of u to sit in one of the sections? We would label one section for the poor, one for captives, one for the blind, and the other for the oppressed. Where in the world would you and I sit?

We want to follow Jesus, but we also want to be comfortable and successful.

Which is finally more important to us?

In order to look forward, we must first look back. We must look back to the widow at Zarephath in Sidon in present-day Syria and to Naaman the Syrian general. We must look back and we must listen to Jesus, in order to discover those he invites us to serve.

Elmarie and Scott Parker represent the Presbyterian Church (USA) in Syria, Lebanon and Iraq. Both are ordained pastors. Elmarie is the regional liaison for Presbyterian World Mission; Scott is a writer in residence. Last week, the *Presbyterian Outlook* published an article by Scott.

“Last May,” Scott writes, “I spent a week with Georges and Rima, a husband and wife who serve a church in southwest Syria. Hundreds of families forced out of their cities by ISIS have come looking for help.

“I quickly learned that every day, as soon as the sun rises, the front door begins sounding with the knocks of a steady stream of visitors who bring all manner of needs: food, rent money, help with doctor bills, medicine.

“Nobody is turned away. Rima and Georges make sure that anyone who comes through their door, at the bare minimum, gets a food bag.

“One morning, I helped put these bags together. A man named Dr. Bassam came to the church with a pickup truck that we loaded with food bags for him to take to people who lived too far away to come themselves. He said something that really struck me: ‘There are other churches doing this kind of thing, but I only see them taking care of their own people. But this church takes care of everyone – Catholics, Protestants, Muslims, everyone. If someone can’t get help anywhere else, they know they can come here.’

“In this little village, people are wondering: Will Georges and Rima leave? Will the people of their Presbyterian church continue to leave?

“A Muslim woman approached Rima with that very question. She cried out, ‘You people cannot leave. You are *hadara*. You are good culture – you are the positive, the life, the hopefulness that keeps our community going.’

“In Syria, over four years of war has taken its toll. The city of Aleppo, once boasting more than four million residents and growing industry, is a shell of its former self. Though some residents remain, the water and electrical infrastructures have been destroyed.

“It’s the Christian churches – the religious minority – who are addressing the water problems in Aleppo. Churches have taken it upon themselves to drill wells on their property and make the water available to the community. Yusef, the pastor of an Armenian church in Aleppo, tells that every day the water lines at his church begin about 4:00 am and keep going until after 10:00 pm.

“Two years ago, while making his way to the pump one morning, Yusef was praying. He had no idea how he was going to run the pump that day. Everything in Aleppo runs on fuel generators, but fuel is expensive – if you can get it.

“When Yusef checked the church’s generator, he was shocked to discover that the tank was full. A Muslim man who owns a fuel station across the street from the church had helped. This man keeps his distance from the church, but Yusef learned it was this man who filled the tank.

“Later in the day, Yusef found the station owner, thanked him, and offered to pay for the fuel. But this man refused, saying, ‘No, I have been watching you. Every day you provide free water for anyone who needs it – whether they are Christian or Muslim, regardless of what political party they belong to. You have loved our community. This is my way of saying thank you.’”

Sisters and brothers, even amid the deepest challenges, even in the midst of the poor, the captive and the oppressed, Christians in the Middle East are the positive, the life, the hopefulness that keeps the community going.

Who will we be? Will we break down the walls and welcome everyone who comes to our building? Will we serve the homeless, and give our best to build and rehab homes for low-income families? In our LOGOS Program, will we teach the Gospel not only to our children, but also to the children of the community? Through our Stephen Ministry, will we listen and care not only for our members and friends, but also to those beyond our walls?

Who will we be? Will we follow Jesus?