

Luke 4:14-30

Preached at Stone Church of Willow Glen by Rev. Fred Harrell

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Experiencing Jesus as Teacher

“Thank you, Freddie, that sermon was ... interesting.”

Those are the words of the pastor right after I preached my very first sermon at my hometown church, Lakeside Baptist Church of Lakeland, Florida. I deserved far worse! I had harassed them for 30 minutes with my 21-year-old version of knowing it all, especially about how they should spend their money. Poor little boy up there trying to be all grown up!

I'd imagine folks were so hopeful when Jesus stood up to preach. He's one of the hometown boys, “We wish him well!” His sermon was so popular they wanted to throw him off a cliff. Way worse than “interesting.. I have to say, I have preached some bad ones in my life, but never so bad people wanted to throw me off a cliff. Well, there was that time back in 2015, but I digress.

We are in the middle of an Epiphany sermon series called “Experiencing Jesus, as Teacher.” It's one of the ways Jesus self-described. In John 13 he says, “You call me teacher and that is what I am”.

What your teacher says to you at formative times can have a long-lasting impact on your self-image.

I was not good at math. For this, I was made to feel stupid by my family and school systems. For reasons known only to God, in college I decided to major in Economics. I had to pass calculus 1 to do it. So I took calculus 3. calculus 1 once, twice, and calculus 1 three times.

My sister Susie, taught calculus in high school. I decided for my third attempt, I'd go to a local community college, and have her tutor me each night. I'll never forget, after receiving another perfect score on a quiz, when she said to me “You are smart, you just don't learn the way they are teaching you. You ask different questions, better questions.”

I never felt “less than” again, even though I still can't stand math.

Teachers are HEROIC. Shout out to all the teachers, underpaid and underappreciated.

When Jesus stood up in the temple to teach and preach for the first time, he read from Isaiah that proclaims God's jubilee of liberation, amnesty and pardon. So far so good. They had heard that before.

Perhaps the first sign of trouble for those listening to Jesus was when he said, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing," some listeners likely thought, "Say what?" Their question, "Isn't this Joseph's son?" probably wasn't entirely positive. If I ever read a prophetic scripture and proclaim, "Today this is fulfilled in your hearing," run for your life.

The real trouble began when Jesus applied these promises to those outside His own tribe. He reminded them that their own scriptures contained stories of God's love extending to outsiders, such as the widow in Sidon and Naaman the Syrian leper.

This idea, Luke tells us, "fills them with rage." Because our species, with all of our anxiety and ego needs, really wants a God (and a country) that is just for "us and ours." But of course, that is ridiculous when you are really listening to what Jesus is saying. And this crowd was really listening.

I'll tell you one more thing, not mentioned explicitly in the story, but was surely heard by that first audience. Jesus edits Isaiah. Jesus stops short of completing the reading. He omits the last sentence. It's supposed to be this:

The spirit of the Lord God is upon me
because the Lord has anointed me; etc. etc.

to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor
and the day of vengeance of our God,

In other words, Isaiah is saying "There will be a day when the favor of God will be with us ... and God's wrath will be on THEM, because they are the enemies of God."

Jesus took that part out. He stops mid-sentence and rolls up the scroll. He closed the book on the idea of a vengeful God. It would be like singing the National Anthem at a sporting event, and you end with "And the land of the free ..." and then walking off the stage.

Franciscan priest Richard Rohr points out that , *"Jesus consistently ignored or even denied exclusionary, punitive, and triumphalistic texts in his own inspired Hebrew Bible in favor of passages that emphasized inclusion, mercy, and honesty."*

Jesus was saying “there is no room for violent vengeful Messiahs like King David or Judas Maccabaeus!” because the God revealed in Jesus is a God of radical mercy to all.

But the crowd hated the message.

It’s astonishing how angry some people will get if you try to take away their religion of revenge. The idea that God might give divine favor to those they deem unworthy of it — to those who do not belong to their kind of people — is a bridge too far. This is exactly what Jesus encountered when he preached in his hometown of Nazareth.

As they tried to throw him off the cliff, it says Jesus “passed through the midst of them and went on his way.” If you demand a God of vengeance and revenge, Jesus will pass through your midst as well.

Because Jesus leads with mercy, and as we do the same, we can develop gentle souls in a violent world. Maybe that is exactly the role of the church in these times: Developing gentle souls in a violent world.

One more thing about Jesus as a teacher. What he taught, he asked people to follow. It was not about receiving information as information. It was always about *transformation through practice*. But I’m afraid our inclination is that we would rather worship Jesus than follow him.

Good news to the poor.
Releasing the captives.
Recovery of sight to the blind.

What would Jesus say today?

Lutheran pastor Nadia Bolz-Weber surmises that if Jesus walked into a church today and preached this sermon it might be something like this, and some of this is paraphrased and some of this I’ve added myself:

*The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring **good news to the poor.***

- to bring gifts of fine wine and rich food to those who exist only on McDonalds and Funions, because it’s the only food in walking distance from their decrepit neighborhoods
- to forgive all predatory student loans
- to tell the bank janitors that the CEO has distributed all their own pay raises and bonuses and stock options to them

- to allow no one to go bankrupt over getting sick when there is plenty to go around

*Because the Spirit of the Lord has anointed me to bring **good news to the poor.***

*The Spirit of the Lord has sent me to **proclaim release to the captives***

- to free the addicts from the needle and the bottle and the laptop
- to remove the feeling of worthlessness from the depressed
- To welcome the stranger instead of criminalizing them
- to free those wrongly imprisoned by a justice system so often lacking in actual justice
- to save us from having to prove ourselves
- to remove all resentments from those who can't let go of the past

*Because the Spirit of the Lord has sent Jesus to bring **release to the captives**, to let the oppressed go free.*

*The Spirit of the Lord has sent me to bring **recovery of sight to the blind.***

- to forever change the way we see those whose abilities differ from our own.
- To allow us to see who we really are, to again glimpse the image of God in ourselves and others – to again see that thing that has always been there but is so obscured and made opaque by years of competing messages.
- To give us a glimpse of heaven in the here and now. To show us that the Kingdom of God is at hand.
- To show us what it looks like to love what God loves
- To allow us to see how there really is no longer a “them” there is only an “us”.

*Because the Spirit of the Lord has sent Jesus to bring **recovery of sight to the blind.***

That's the agenda of Jesus in first-century Palestine, and it's the message in 21st-Century America. Jesus says, “Today”. I'm doing something new, NOW. Which means the call is to always join him in repairing the world. Today.

What could you do today that your future self would thank you for?

Amen