

First Presbyterian Church of Birmingham

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“Expanding the Vision”

Luke 4:21-30

He was the boy wonder of the seminary. Bob had been one of the seminaries most brilliant students. He was a wiz at Greek. He understood theology as if he had been studying it all of his life. Upon graduation he had enlisted as a military chaplain and served with great distinction. Upon his retirement he went back to seminary this time to earn his PhD in New Testament Greek. Once that was completed he moved to Houston and founded a new congregation. From a handful of members his congregation grew to several thousand. People packed the pews to listen to his in-depth and erudite translations and explanations of the text...which he did directly from the Greek. Needless to say the seminary took notice of his accomplishments and invited him to be the key note speaker at graduation. What they should have done however was a bit more research on his teachings and insisted he send the Biblical text for his talk ahead of time. Never the less when he stood to speak he read his text...a single Proverb 26:11. “Like a dog that returns to its vomit is a fool who reverts to his folly.” He then proceeded to tell his audience how they were fools because they listened to teachings other than his. You can just imagine how overjoyed the faculty was that they had invited him and how welcome he was after that.

This story ought to set the scene this morning to gain a clearer picture of Jesus and his interaction with those people from his home town of Nazareth. Jesus was the fair haired boy. Everyone knew him as a child and a youth. He had grown in wisdom and stature in their midst. At the age of 33 he had moved away from home (see parents every child leaves eventually) and begun his ministry. The rumors had come to the ears of those in Nazareth that Jesus had done some teaching and healing elsewhere. People were talking about miracles. His fame had caused the synagogue leaders to invite him to come and deliver the Sunday morning message. The message, about which Amy spoke last week, was one that the people had been waiting to hear. Luke records that the people spoke well of him and that they were amazed at his words. Jesus had them right in the palm of his hand. So why did he do the equivalent of what Bob had done at his seminary. Jesus insults them. The two stories he quotes are ones in which God’s people had become apostate, evil in the site of God. Jesus was comparing his listeners to the worst of God’s people! It is little wonder then that the people wanted to throw him off of a cliff! So what happened? Why did Jesus turn on these people who had only moments before been praising him?

The answer, believe it or not, has something to do with one of the most innocuous comments in the entire encounter...“is this not Joseph’s son?” I say this because this is the point at which everything heads south. Up to that moment everyone was all loving and nice. So the question becomes for us, how could such an innocent sounding statement cause Jesus to come completely unglued? If some said, look there is John...isn’t he Roger’s son? My response would have been yes I am. But somehow for Jesus those were fighting words. Why is that? Well there are two schools of thought about Jesus’ response. The first is that when they said, isn’t this Jesus son they were underestimating Jesus and his ability to carry out the ministry to which he had been called. In other words by saying he is Joseph’s son they are saying he is not capable of releasing, renewing and restoring God’s creation. He does not have the intelligence, the calling or the power to do what he said he going to do. He accuses them of wanting proof of his power, “Do here also in your hometown the things that we have heard you did in Capernaum.” In other words we only believe you if you give us enough proof. They were underestimating his power.

The second take on this is that they are underestimating his mission. When they say, “Isn’t he Joseph’s son?” they are intimating that he is not being a good Jew as was his father. Let me explain. Joseph was a good Jew. Though we do not see much of him what we witness is a man who listens to God and obeys the Torah..the law of God. We know this because he made sure that Jesus was circumcised and presented in the Temple for both the ritual presentation and for his coming of age ceremony at the age of

12. Jesus on the other hand is not following in his footsteps because he was probably healing Gentiles. I say this first because Capernaum where his first miracles occurred was a heavily Gentile town, which means at the least the gentiles got to see his power. The second clue that points to this possibility is that the two stories Jesus tells are of times when God sent his prophets not to God's people to perform miracles but to gentiles. Thus the people are questioning Jesus' mission. They underestimate its scope...that salvation is coming to while world and not just to God's chosen people. So the question becomes which of these do we choose? The answer...it does not matter because they each point to the same reality, underestimating Jesus and his work.

I say this because either way you look at it their vision was too small...and to be effective partners with Jesus in the releasing, renewing and restoring of God's world means a willingness to trust in both Jesus' power and in Jesus' mission. They are two halves of a whole. If either is missing then the effectiveness of our being Christ and God followers is compromised. In some sense this has always been the struggle of the people of God...to take hold of both sides of the person and work of Jesus. Sometimes we have only gotten a hold of the power of Jesus...Jesus' ability to transform lives and hearts. We have watched it change the lives of inmates, addicts and ordinary people. But what has happened is that we have assumed that Christ's power to change lives is only that...it is about releasing, renewing a restoring individuals only. The other side of the issue is that we have assumed that Christ's calling is to release, renew and restore the world through our own power...or political power...or military power. We believe that we can not only figure out how to change the world and but do so on our own. We do not need the power and presence of Christ...all we need is the mission.

What Jesus was trying to tell his listeners, and yes...in a not so nice way...was that they needed to rethink their attitude toward both his power and his mission. Jesus is telling us the same thing. Jesus is calling us to broaden our vision as to the power he offers and the changes that we can make in the world when that power is within us. Which is, by the way, something this church is good at. How so? Two examples. The first is Baldwin House. In the late 1970s members of this and four other churches believed they were being called by God to build senior housing in Birmingham. Over time that vision extended to low income senior housing in Birmingham. Their vision caused an uproar that went all the way to the United States Supreme Court. But in the end, after 14 years, this prayerful vision succeeded...and Baldwin house has helped to release, renew and restore God's world. A second example is our Pontiac Partnership. This partnership is an ongoing mission to equip the children of Pontiac with the skills and knowledge they need to succeed in the world. I believe it is based not only in the mission of Christ but in the belief that God is at work in those children making them want to take hold of the opportunity they are being given. These are but two of the ways in which by taking seriously both the power and mission of Jesus we can be God's agents of personal and societal transformation.

The challenge for us as First Presbyterian Church is to never settle for less than the complete vision that Jesus offers us. For we have been gifted and called to be partners in God's recreative work...both individually and corporately. So here it is, how am I allowing the power of Christ to work in my life that I might work with others in releasing, renewing and restoring the world.