

The scripture lesson today is taken from the gospel of Luke, the fourth chapter beginning at the fourteenth verse. It will be a bit longer today because I am reading the text from last week and this week which actually are a complete story.

"Jesus returned to Galilee powerful in the Spirit. News that he was back spread through the countryside. He taught in their meeting places to everyone's acclaim and pleasure. He came to Nazareth where he had been reared. As he always did on the Sabbath, he went to the meeting place. When he stood up to read he was handed the scroll of the prophet Isaiah. Unrolling the scroll, he found the place where it was written, God's Spirit is on me; He's chosen me to preach the Message of good news to the poor, Sent me to announce pardon to prisoners and recovery of sight to the blind, To set the burdened and battered free, to announce, "This is the year of the Lord!" He rolled up the scroll, He handed it back to His assistant, and sat down. Every eye in the place was on him, intent. Then he started in, "You've just heard Scripture make history. It came true just now in this place. All who were there, watching and listening, were surprised at how well He spoke. But they also said, "Isn't that Joseph's son, the one who we've known since he was a youngster?" He answered, "I suppose you're going to quote the proverb, 'Doctor, go heal yourself. Do here in your hometown what you did in Capernaum.' Well, let me tell you something: No prophet is ever welcomed in his hometown. Isn't it a fact that there were many widows in Israel at the time of Elijah during that three and a half years of drought when famine devastated the land, but the only widow to whom Elijah was sent was in Sarepta in Sidon? And there were many lepers in Israel at the time of the prophet Elisha but the only one cleansed was Naaman the Syrian." That set everyone in the meeting seething with anger. They threw him out, banishing him from the village. They took him to a mountain cliff at the edge of the village to throw him to his doom, but he gave them the slip and was on his way."

Here ends the lesson.

So the story of Jesus giving what I would say is His inaugural Sermon. I like to think of it as Jesus' manifesto, the first time He's preached. He's been travelling around the countryside, He's been doing miracles which is referenced in the story and He's kind of gotten a name for Himself. So people are excited that He's come back and He comes back and He says a couple things that really piss off people. First He walks in and He says "You've heard this prophecy that this person is going to help the poor, free the captive but you're seeing it in me" It's a really dramatic moment. You might see in some of these pop/rock stars today-they do this moment where they'll do a song and they'll just drop the mike you know, and it's this dramatic moment. They call it 'drop the mike moment' well that was a drop the mike. Jesus sort of says "You like this text? Well, boom! It's me." So first of all the arrogance that He's claiming that He is the one that can deliver it-that gets them upset. But also they wanted Him to do some miracles. They wanted Him to do a show. We know you did this stuff in other towns do it here and He says "I'm not going to do it here. I don't do these just for show. It's not a magician act. I'm not here performing." And in fact, His references to Elijah and Elisha, what He's talking about there is He's saying "It is not unusual in the story of the Bible that God's unchosen people are picked first. I'm speaking to the unchosen people. You're the chosen people, you're the synagogue, you're in the synagogue community but I'm actually going to the unchosen people and they are more receptive to my message. So that's underlining what the anger is and the anger is so dramatic that they actually tried to kill Him right away, while He was ministering; They walked Him to the edge of town and tried to literally throw Him off the cliff for fear of what He said.

So, that's actually a lot to unpack in a text and it has that famous text that we're all really familiar with throughout common English language: "A prophet is never welcomed in their home town," and I'm sure we've all kind of experienced that-that expression 'You can never go home.' You kind of go, I don't know if you're like me but even at my age with my parents who are still alive, I'm still their kid when I go back home. And you

can't sort of be who you are in a way. You're their kid and Jesus is saying that but He's also saying that it's very hard for people who know you very well to appreciate you; maybe your development and your growth and your change in your life and so very profound, we get that. Now, what I'd like to focus on are two things: one, what does He say in this manifesto? What's really the first thing He wants to tell us and I think I want to also take a lesson from the response that it gets.

So what does He say in His first manifesto? He talks about the poor. That's the first thing He talks about. So what's interesting about this is He will talk about the poor in His first sermon, He will talk about the poor in most of His preaching and Jesus, in the New Testament is so much about the poor that it's kind of amazing that we as Christians don't [00:05:36]. Christian means people who help the poor. That's really what Jesus is saying. This is what my new message is. So what has happened is that we often take texts and we make these radical comments of Jesus and we make them comfortable for ourselves, particularly around the poor. So modern scholars today would take that text and say 'He's not really talking so much about the poor, poor like you're thinking, He's talking about the poor in spirit.' And that kind of makes it more comfortable. Oh, we're all poor in spirit so don't feel so bad, I have to be with the 'poor'.

Now the funny story in my life that I experienced, almost this exact story through a great preacher friend of mine. My mentor was this guy named Peter Gomes. Peter had a voice like yours. I love your voice when you're doing these readings and stuff. You should be doing the liturgy. It's just beautiful. I mean, you know, Americans are sufferers for that English accent and I love it. Peter was African-American, the champ on Harvard and he had a New England Brahmin Accent. He talked like this. Richard I gave my first seminary in morning prayers and I had a thick Philadelphia accent from where I grew up. And he said "Richard, you're going to have to do something about that Philadelphia accent if you're going to remain in Memorial Church of Harvard University,

it is not going to work." So I was horrified. I mean, oh my, what accent? I didn't know I had an accent. Now I hear tapes of myself, Whoa! This really sort of a Baltimore, Philadelphia accent. And so Peter was my mentor and I was doing fundraising after my seminary and I was assistant to the Minister and we were doing fund raising. And a very wealthy Texas Businessman took interest in Peter's preaching. Peter became quite famous. He had done Reagan and Bush's inauguration back in the 80's and at the two inaugurations Peter had preached at them. So he was a world famous preacher and this Texas Businessman said "I'm a Christian, you're the greatest preacher, we're going to have you come and speak to my retreat in Texas; in Kerrville, Texas right outside of San Antonio at a lodge." Christian Businessman. "And you can preach from whatever you want but this is a powerful group and it's going to be really good for you to get in front of them for your fundraising purposes because there all wealthy." So we went to Texas and Peter got up and he preached on 'The Rich Young Man' as his gospel. And the gospel of course says, the young man says "How do I follow you?" and Jesus says "Give away all your money." And when Peter was preaching it was very funny to these Businessmen and he said "And so, let's take the scripture literally. You need to give away your resources." But this went over like, a loud balloon; our host started literally screaming and yelling at Peter who was in front of a room like this and said "I didn't bring a communist from Harvard to lecture Texas about the scripture. It means spiritually poor, not about poverty. Jesus wants us to be rich. That's what the story of Jesus is. Jesus is about prosperity and so you're misinterpreting it." So it's a very funny story. Peter stormed out. This guy was yelling at him. I of course was a Fund Raiser so I saw an opportunity. Later, he apologized because the business people felt bad for their guests. and it was so embarrassing. And I said "Well it would be very helpful if you did give a gift to the church; that might make you mend things out. But what was great about the story is, it was literally like that. I mean they almost walked him out to the edge of town for just saying "This is what the scripture says."

It makes us very uncomfortable to talk about money or poverty or wealth, and particularly in the United States, and very often, we take the scripture and we make it comfortable for ourselves. When we do that we actually water down the power of Jesus and we take away that impact that Jesus had. Like in the story, my mentor Peter was rejected by the crowd. That's the other part of the message I think in here. The gospel is calling us to be active in the world. Yes, we're talking about spiritual poverty but we're also talking about real poverty. We have to be agents of change in the world for those less fortunate. And the more the church is about that, the better. When I work with young social Entrepreneurs and they don't change, a lot of them say "Church, you're involved with Church that is the least relative thing in my life." I'm helping the poor. They are doing their thing and they're condemning this, that and the other group but I'm actually helping the poor so they don't see any positioning. They don't see a connection at all with spirituality and fighting for justice or fighting for the poor and things like that but the message is very clear-that's what Jesus is talking about. Now why don't we want to do that? Because most of us don't want to be rejected. We very much fear rejection. And Jesus is giving us a second teaching that we spend so much of our lives trying to please other people to be liked, to be nice- I think manners and courtesy is very important but there comes a time when you do have to just stand your truth and stand your ground and risk rejection.

Anybody who has changed the world that we would see as heroes of ours right, positive people; they become beatified, like Martin Luther King Junior. But when you look at their life they were rejected constantly within the groups, outside of the group- it's just constant. You have to be that kind of fearless person to face rejection. Two messages I think in that Manifesto Sermon of Jesus: One, that it really is about the captives, the poor, prisoners-it's physical and it's spiritual. It's working at both levels. But Jesus has also given us a warning. When we have the courage to live as the gospel calls us to, it has the chance of upsetting the apple cart or the status quo. And with that, we run risks and

it's interesting when I travel around I've done a lot of strategy work with churches and non-profits and I meet ministers and they say " I want to be a prophetic Minister in my community but guess who's writing my check?" Really, think about it, the people who are writing your check are the people they're suppose to guide so they said "So I've said some things challenging him about how we could spend money or do money and the word was "don't touch that if you want to stay employed here." My grandfather was a Minister in the Sweden Board Church in Philadelphia. My dad tells me the story that when he told his Deacons, in those days that church happened to be Republican, but when he told his Deacons that he voted for Frank Delano Roosevelt, they withheld his check and played with his check for months and just said "just so you know, that's not the way we want you to vote." So this is not that unusual when I hear from leaders. You have to be willing to risk something, and sometimes rejection and often it hits us where we hurt which is money.

Now where are there examples of what Jesus is kind of calling us to? I've seen it in two places, one historic and one recent. Historically, the early Christian church was known for surviving plagues, famine, hunger because it actually took care of each other. They actually shared their burdens and they said "What can we do as a community?" And so through various plagues they were known as the people that actually served the unhealthy, they actually pooled money and resources and with no insurance in those days. They looked after each other. So the early Christian church, before it became a state organization was really very much along these lines. But will we see this today? For me interestingly enough, doing a lot of work around poverty in Detroit, I went up and I met a lot of Black Ministers and the Black church is the place where I've seen it the most in my modern day experience, this story. I met with the Ministers and they said "If someone joins my church," and these are sort of mighty churches in Detroit, "if someone joins my church on a Tuesday, within three weeks somebody in the church will find them a job, we're committed to it. We're going to find a way to take care of them. One

reason we have big meals on Sunday, and church can go all day, we want to ensure people get fed and we give people food to go out. We know some people are hungry in our church so we have food things." But the black church, that was the place where I saw this responding to people's needs and not making our material needs so- something we can't talk about and instead making spirituality an esoteric experience of just the mind. The truth is, if you can't meet your material needs it's very hard to focus on Luke Chapter 4. And so, Jesus is calling us to do both and I bet those churches did a great job of combining both. So I think this is Jesus' Manifesto. This is His challenge. He wants us to deal with spiritual poverty and literally physical poverty.

I think in this church community with this location where we are and with our hearts, we can be open to what does that mean? What does that look like because it's not easy, the answer is not straightforward. It's not simply open the doors and just it will all work out-it has to be well thought out and thought through. But we can really be a beacon for responding to these needs, both within our community and in our service but also for the larger world. And I think that's the challenge ahead of us and I think we have an amazing opportunity here to do it.

So the questions I have as we leave today this Manifesto. So what are the ways we can both address physical and spiritual poverty? How can we in our own daily lives have the coverage to face rejection or take on the status quo at times? And then, in closing, as we go into prayer, let's pray for the courage to do that, to step into that.

At this time, if anybody has any questions or comments or disagreements- one thing I noticed last week, or two weeks ago, because we have this now, is that some people had some questions about the Sermon afterwards. I just [00:16:17] because I don't necessarily have all the answers and you know, I'm just one voice. The idea that the Minister has all the answers, I think is a bygone concept. I think, we as a community can

have answers and that was my take on it but I don't know if anybody had any questions on it or challenges or thoughts and we could take a few minutes if there are and just have a discussion about that.

[COMMENTS:]

CONGREGANT: I admit you're right but this community needs to serve the larger community out there [00:16:44] their needs and I think that will help us attract members, give us a sense of purpose as a church and you talked about having a retreat, maybe we could have a retreat but [00:16:56]

CONGREGANT: I was thinking of, I don't know whether it's something, I'll just put it out. There are organizations I contribute so I [00:17:06] there's a number of non-profit groups, I don't know whether we would want to partner with them or how, you know but I think that might be something that we could think about and how we could help. Especially, not just the homeless but those that are barely clinging on too. I mean, I think about Catholic Charities, it's just, I don't know if it's primarily run, I think about nuns, It's usually the nuns, I think, when I think about them helping the poor, helping the dispossessed in the world, more so than perhaps any other religious group that I am aware of that at least they're sort of devoted to the cause. But it doesn't have to be with another religious group to say we're all non-profit so I can't [00:18:06] something to think about.

Well I think to your point, there's so many people doing so many things and I noticed that Foundry, for example, they do something very specific. They focus on getting people their driver's license because it's very hard to get around, so I volunteer there. That's a Niche. It's a very specific niche.

CONGREGANT: Foundry has a lot of programs which do other things. For instance [00:18:31] they actually serve dinner to homeless people and then what's left over, everybody takes home. But they're also, they're known for closing. I use to know an Entrepreneur. His name was Tom Stanley and he lives in Seattle now and he has a brother [00:19:00] who was a famous lawyer in Seattle. He thought he was going to die of AIDS. Medication came around and saved him and now he has a radio program which he asked me to talk on a few weeks ago, about the homeless situation. He's taken this up as a mission for the country. I'm supposed to write a blog about it. The reason they chose me was that by homeless standards I'm educated and can express the opinions of the people that I listen to. Usually after this I've got to go to a [00:19:47] where I sit with a group of people [00:19:50] my first name and I know what their situations are in detail. I'm supposed to come up with some solutions. One of the problems is that being homeless is hard work. You know where to get food but it's never in the same place. So the Foundry is on one day and up here, St. Matthews, it's Monday morning to have breakfast and over here on Seventeenth Street, usually on a Friday breakfast and so on. If you want to shower, there's a place somewhere near [00:20:31] where you can shower. Everything is spread out. A lot of these charitable organizations have good intentions but they certainly want to stay in control. Yet for the homeless themselves, they are wondering Nomads from service to service from food to food. There are churches which specifically offer meals with prayers and things of this nature but I think if we can solve the program in some reasonable fashion, we have to kind of unify this. And it needs a leader, somebody to point this out. I don't know if we can get a lot of help from the DC Council but we need political input as well as charitable inputs, showing the charities where they can put their money and so that we don't have to [00:21:32] and we're centralized in some way. I'm looking at architectural schools to somehow get a program where they design a basic unit that would be cheap to build, that would provide the right amount of space for a homeless person to live in. There are principles in architecture like you can make the room size dependent on the amount of

time you spend there. So toilets and bathrooms are small but living rooms are larger and things of this nature. In South America there's a program like this and everybody has a simple family home of 50 square meters.

Okay well I think what you're raising is one, maybe there's a role for us in this local community to help leadership and bring things together and also the politics. And I think we do, we are looking at possibly doing a mini retreat or get together with [00:22:38] but I think we have to look at it in more practical ways and figure out where, there's so many people doing so many things, what role can we play? It's not just as easy as like, we're just going to open the doors.

CONGREGANT: Yeah. Well that's just it and like you were saying, there's so many different pieces and they are not blocked together in a cohesive way because various groups, non-profit churches, the city are you know, doing various parts.

CONGREGANT: There's actually a pamphlet which is twice as big as those four chairs 'Where to go for different things, which is a good thing. The only question is where can you get the pamphlet?

CONGREGANT: Exactly. Yeah.