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Living with Purpose: Courage
A sermon on Luke 4:21-30
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Before our Gospel reading, let's review where we are. First of all, let's say our new mission statement together: "Loving God, loving neighbors and living with purpose." As followers of Christ, living with purpose means we look at what Jesus said and did, and try to do those things. This winter we are looking at the Gospel readings in the lectionary and asking, ok, what DID Jesus do? And what does that mean for us today?

Last week, we heard how Jesus, filled with the Holy Spirit, begins his ministry by traveling throughout Galilee and teaching in their synagogues. As his reputation grows, he returns to his hometown of Nazareth. He gets up and reads from the scroll of Isaiah, saying, "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, and to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." Then Jesus sits down to teach, and announces, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."

This is Jesus unveiling his mission statement. I gave the example of working a jigsaw puzzle. When we're working on a 1,000 piece puzzle, we continually keep in front of us the picture on the box, to guide us as we put the pieces together. Jesus and his mission statement are the picture on our puzzle box—this is what guides us. If you missed last week's sermon, or the one before that, you may want to go online and read or watch it, because Pat's and my messages will be building on each other in the weeks to come. Today we pick up right where we left off last week, at Luke 4:21-30. . . hear the word of the Lord.

How in the world does this story go from everybody speaking well of Jesus, to everybody trying to throw him off a cliff in just ten short verses?

I mentioned last week that when I was in the Holy Land last October, we visited a little church in Nazareth that was essentially a replica of the synagogue where Jesus would have proclaimed his message that day. It was plain and small, closer in size to our chapel than our sanctuary. Jesus would have looked out at the people gathered there, and he would have seen the teacher who taught him how to read the Torah, the neighbors who would have helped his father fix a hole in the roof and loaned his mother a cup of olive oil when she ran out. Perhaps the kids he grew up with had brought their families that day, just to meet him. Everyone was excited to hear the hometown boy who is putting their town on the map.

Problem is, the people of Nazareth expect Jesus to be Eric Stonestreet, the Emmy-award winning actor who plays Cameron Tucker on the sitcom *Modern Family*. Eric Stonestreet grew up in Kansas City KS and graduated from K State. Even though he lives in Los Angeles now, the man is loyal to his hometown. He comes back for K State football games, and roots passionately for the Chiefs and the Royals. He lends his celebrity status to local fundraisers, he mentions his hometown favorably when he's on TV, and gives who knows how much support to his alma mater. We're proud because he's one of us, and we love the way this highly successful star makes US glow a little brighter (we hope).

The people of Nazareth expect no less. Their boy Jesus is a big star now. Shouldn't Nazareth benefit from that?

Jesus starts off well. He announces his mission to bring good news to the poor, proclaim release to the captives, recovery of sight to the blind, and let the oppressed go free. Nothing wrong with that. Among the people listening to Jesus in that small synagogue that day, there

were people who were themselves poor, people who may have been blind, people who had a family member at home suffering from an illness. Everybody felt the oppression of living in a land that was under the absolute control of the Romans—paying heavy taxes, and live in fear of Roman soldiers. And everybody loved the reminder that some day, God would set things right for God’s chosen people. So far so good.

But Jesus doesn’t stop there. He says, “Today.” It’s happening today. Not just for you, but for people who are NOT the chosen ones. He reminds them of times when God miraculously came to the rescue of people who were complete and total outsiders as far as the people of Israel were concerned.

I struggled a find a good analogy for this, since like the widow at Zarephath and Naaman the Syrian, we too are Gentiles. It’s hard to relate to the fury that this reminder evokes for Jesus’ hometown congregation. The best I came up with is if someone in your immediate family—like say, your brother--won the lottery, I mean really won the big bucks, like \$500 million dollars or something like that. And you think, Oh, my goodness, this is great—he can help me pay off my house, and pay for my kids’ college, and the debt from all the medical bills I got when I had cancer. But instead of sharing with family, he gives it all to PETA. If my brother did that to me, I might want to throw him off a cliff.

Of course that’s not what Jesus is doing, but that’s how it might have FELT to his listeners. And I thought, are we really that different from the people of Nazareth? Think about the things that get people riled up today—who is allowed to enter our country and who is not, who gets to be a citizen, who gets health insurance, who gets to use which gender of restroom, who or what gets government assistance, who gets to own a gun, who gets to serve in the

military. Like the biblical hot topic of Jew vs. Gentile, these issues involve boundaries, and we often have strong feelings about them.

As someone who preaches for a living, I read this story and think: Jesus, did you really have to say all that? Your fellow Nazoreans had hard lives. They had very little money, few material comforts, and no worldly power to speak of. Infant mortality was ridiculously high. What did they have, if not the cherished belief that their faith and ethnic heritage made them special?

If I'd been there, I could have shared with Jesus a few of my top ten tips for how to survive and thrive in ministry. Number one, go easy on the ever-present donut holes, because you WILL have to buy new pants if you keep eating those things. Number two, people will forgive a mediocre sermon as long as it is short. Number three, always carry a pen, and number four, wear comfortable shoes. And number ten, do NOT poke people in their sore spots from the pulpit (do not wound their pride). You WILL get thrown off a cliff.

I spend so much time and energy trying to prevent myself from getting thrown off a cliff. Before I ever step up to the pulpit, I have gone over my sermon, sanding off the rough edges and yanking out potentially divisive or offensive remarks. Some of that is just being thoughtful, I hope, but I wonder if sometimes I'm just letting my fear of falling muffle the voice of the Spirit. As you proclaim the good news in your own life, do you ever feel like this?

Sometimes in the course of staying true to our mission, whether we are church professionals, nurses, teachers, or politicians, we will be called upon to show COURAGE. To look people in the eyes and say things they may not want to hear-- things that might hurt feelings, offend, or even provoke anger.

Now, we do have to be careful: expressing our opinion on every subject, being blunt to the point of being rude, is not showing courage. It's obnoxious. [Venting on social media is not the same thing as showing courage. In fact, it is both self-indulgent and lazy. It's much easier to criticize than empathize, which involves listening, assuming the best instead of the worst about someone, and trying to put ourselves in their shoes, which requires actual effort and imagination.]

Courage is proclaiming our God-given mission and holding to it, even when it is unpopular. If we're wondering if a mission is from God, look again at the picture of Jesus, who has this annoying habit of ignoring our most beloved barriers and including the most unlikely people in what he's doing. If our mission doesn't match that picture, it's not from God.

[Courage is speaking directly TO people, and being clear about our purpose. Jesus wasn't being rude—he was being open and honest about who he was, what his ministry was about, and who he intended to reach. (If people were going to feel angry and betrayed, better now than later).]

Courage is neither offensive or defensive. Courage is staying focused on the mission when chaos is erupting all around us. It's what enables Jesus to pass through the midst of an angry mob. He doesn't engage their fury. He stays calm and continues on his way, to do the things the Spirit has called him to do. (like Frodo and Sam, passing through Mordor on their way to Mount Doom).

When is the last time you had to show courage? As we live into our vision of loving God, loving neighbors and living with purpose, we will need courage. If we don't, we're probably not taking enough risks.

[We bear within us the image of Christ. We are meant to do the things he did. We are called to love unlikely people, as he did. We are called to live with courage.] If we weren't, then Jesus wouldn't have to go around telling people not to be afraid, as he will when he meets Simon Peter in next week's Gospel story. Let us pray . . .

Lord, you keep calling us to include.