

“Gospel Preaching”

Sermon preached at the Congregational Church of Salisbury, UCC
Salisbury, Connecticut

Third Sunday after Epiphany • 26 January 2025

The Rev. Dr. John A. Nelson

Text: Luke 4:14-22

¹⁴ Then Jesus, filled with the power of the Spirit, returned to Galilee, and a report about him spread through all the surrounding country. ¹⁵ He began to teach in their synagogues and was praised by everyone. ¹⁶ When he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, he went to the synagogue on the sabbath day, as was his custom. He stood up to read, ¹⁷ and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written: ¹⁸ "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, ¹⁹ to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." ²⁰ And he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down. The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. ²¹ Then he began to say to them, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." ²² All spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his mouth. They said, "Is not this Joseph's son?"

1

Last Tuesday at the Inaugural Prayer Service at the National Cathedral, Bishop Mariann Edgar Budde preached a call for:

... unity that incorporates diversity and transcends disagreement, and the solid foundations of dignity, honesty, and humility that such unity requires....

Initially, her call for unity seemed to elicit nods of approval: who could object, to a goal so noble? Then her sermon continued to name the requirements of actually acting with dignity, honesty, humility. She concluded with a plea for mercy, delivered directly to the president: Mercy for those who are LGBT+ and are living in fear for their lives; mercy for those who are not citizens or lack documentation, mercy for those fleeing war and persecution, mercy for any who might be seen as a “stranger.”

Some public responses to the sermon levied blisteringly harsh criticism against Bishop Budde. Accusations of politicizing an event that ought to have been above politics. Calls for her to be deported. Attacks on the validity of her status as bishop because she is a woman. Disparagement of her vocal tone (despite the uniform gentleness of her speaking). I didn’t read all the criticism: a sampling of that toxic sludge was as much as I could take. I did notice that none of the attacks that were shared widely challenged the substance of her preaching. She was simply speaking the Gospel. And in that setting, on that day, the Gospel stung.

In our time, which is hostile to Gospel values, preaching the Gospel will likely be dismissed as “political.”

2

In times that are hostile to Gospel values, preaching the Gospel will generate opposition and outrage. That's what happened to Jesus. Our reading of Luke 4 continues:

Luke 4:21-30

²¹ Then [Jesus] began to say to them, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." ²² All spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his mouth. They said, "Is not this Joseph's son?"

²³ He said to them, "Doubtless you will quote to me this proverb, 'Doctor, cure yourself!' And you will say, 'Do here also in your hometown the things that we have heard you did at Capernaum.'" ²⁴ And he said, "Truly I tell you, no prophet is accepted in the prophet's hometown. ²⁵ But the truth is, there were many widows in Israel in the time of Elijah, when the heaven was shut up three years and six months, and there was a severe famine over all the land; ²⁶ yet Elijah was sent to none of them except to a widow [outside Israel] at Zarephath in Sidon. ²⁷ There were also many lepers in Israel in the time of the prophet Elisha, and none of them was cleansed except [a foreigner:] Naaman the Syrian."

²⁸ When they heard this, all in the synagogue were filled with rage. ²⁹ They got up, drove him out of the town, and led him to the brow of the hill on which their town was built, so that they might hurl him off the cliff. ³⁰ But he passed through the midst of them and went on his way.

3

At first they loved what Jesus had to say: "amazed at the gracious words that came from his mouth." The hometown neighbors had known him for years, but he had become so impressive: "'Is this not Joseph's son?'"

But Jesus was not there to teach or preach what people wanted to hear. He did not have a simple message: "Let's all get along"; "There is good in everyone"; "Religion is concerned with the state of your soul, not with affairs of state." Instead, he had a message as pointed as the prophet Isaiah: persons who were outside the nation, outside the covenant with God, not only received the blessing of God: sometimes they received it before our people.

Jesus said that God had sent Elijah to relieve a starving widow who had no relationship with God, even as God's people were still suffering famine.

Jesus said that a foreigner, who had no relationship with God, was cleansed of leprosy even as many faithful Israelites still suffered from that dread disease.

The Gospel message says that we who believe in God may not be first in line to receive mercy. But if we are to follow Jesus, we had better be the first in line to act mercifully — and to act mercifully regardless of whether we think the recipient of our mercy is deserving, because scripture insists that "the rain falls on the just and the unjust alike," and in our God's sight every person merits mercy. We say, "our God," yet God is no tribal deity, belonging to one people only, and God will pour out saving mercy on one who is in need even if they are unbelievers, or do not belong in the land.

The Bible is full of references to land and borders, and wars fought over the same, but Jesus moved the morality of scripture into new territory by consistently, flagrantly ignoring borders, crossing them at will. Jesus demonstrated in his teaching and healing that not one person is an outsider. In all four Gospels, the one occasion that Jesus rejected someone as an outsider is the one occasion that Jesus took a correction — from that same outsider! — and changed his mind, and lauded her faith (Mt 15; Mk 7).

There may be arguments in favor of establishing and protecting borders. I imagine many of you have strong and thoughtful arguments for the necessity of borders, identifying who belongs and who does not, who gets access to resources and who does not. I confess to you that I believe those arguments to be an anti-Christian distraction, because what matters above every real-world argument is the teaching of Jesus: that to follow him, I must consider every person on this planet as a sibling, and I am to treat every person as a family member, belonging to me. (A sidenote: if you happen to have lousy relationships with your family members, please find a different example for inspiring your mercy.)

To the argument that talk of borders or immigrants or LGBT+ neighbors or economy is political talk, inappropriate in a religious setting, I say: read the prophets, and read the Gospels. The Bible far pre-dates any modern politics, and the Bible makes abundantly clear that God's concern, God's religious topics, are resolutely focused on the wellness of all living beings, and how we treat one another, and how we organize our common life. And as soon as a policy or an administration has created hardship for any person — it is not the church or preacher wading inappropriately into political territory, it is the politicians flouting the core message of God's Living Word.

If the lens through which you view the world is first a lens of politics and national identity, then Jesus' teachings may appear misguided, naïve, out of place. If, instead, you remember your baptismal promise, then the teaching of Jesus will guide you to reject the anti-Christian policies that are now ascendant. Because in the Gospel right does not make right, vulnerability makes right. In the Gospel there is no justification for harsh treatment or expulsion of persons who are here illegally, because every person is our neighbor, and those laws fail God's requirements of morality and mercy. In the Gospel the accumulation of wealth is a grotesque abomination, an act of blatant infidelity which deserves no reward, and certainly no position of influence. In the Gospel there is no outsider in God's eyes, only in human eyes, and God often will give first attention to someone we think of as unfit or undeserving or unwelcome as if to deliver a message laser focused on us: "your way to me, beloved, is through a loving relationship with them."

God knows, all that I am saying may be dismissed as political. Call it what you want. I take my stand on the Bible, and I pray to be accountable to the Bible alone.

4

In times and circumstances that are hostile to Gospel values, preaching the Gospel will be described as "political." But that description is incorrect.

To a people who were hungry to know afresh what it means that God is in our broken world, and that words can express the will of God, and that the words belong to all the people, a holy teacher came to earth to reveal, once for all, the deep meaning of those holy words. In a way, what Jesus did was astonishingly simple. He read the Bible.

“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, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.” (Lk 4:18-19)

Then Jesus said — here I paraphrase, to emphasize — Jesus said, “These things are true. They are happening now, in me and in you — if you will take them to heart.”

There is no magic wand, in the life of faith. Jesus did not arrive with supernatural power to magically fix all that was broken. He taught the Living Word that came from God. He was the Word who came from God. No magic wand, but holy presence. The holy presence of God's mercy is sufficient to feed a hungry person and heal a hurting person and change a society and transform the entirety of the universe.

5

The words and actions of Jesus declared: “If you will stop waiting for a Messiah and start living as though God has blessed you; if you will help to ensure that no one is held captive by the unjust greed and fear of humanity, and that no one carries debt past their ability to pay; if you will act towards each other as though your own well-being depends on the well-being of everyone, well: that is what I am here for. It is time for Jubilee: a no-holds barred celebration and reestablishment of God's liberation from every form of earthly bondage. This scripture is fulfilled in your hearing: get on board!”

May God add blessing and encouragement to the reading and hearing of the Living Word. May all other words, like chaff, be scattered to the winds.