

We have returned to the story we left off last week from Luke chapter 4, where Jesus stood up in his hometown synagogue and read Isaiah 61. Jesus begins interpreting the Isaiah passage he read by saying, “Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing.” (Tissot, a French Painter in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century)

In verse 22, Luke says that all spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his lips.

Matsen Neal, a commentator on this passage, points out that in reading from Isaiah 61, Jesus leaves out the part where Isaiah mentions a year of vengeance. Jesus focuses on delivering gracious words and aims to bring comfort, not fear, highlighting God’s compassion instead of anger and destruction that precede salvation and redemption. However, things changed pretty quickly when people said, “Who is this?” “Isn’t this Jesus, carpenter’s son?”

In the other gospels, Matthew 13: 57 and Mark 6:3, the question, “Isn’t this Joseph’s son?” appears more negatively, followed by “They took offense at him.” It is not clear how Luke uses this comment from the people. However, we can safely say that, at least in this passage, Luke reveals their expectations and how they perceived Jesus, a boy from their town. It might not have been easy to believe that anything good could come from what they already knew about him. It’s also true that the Jews of that time did not hold Nazareth or Galilee in high regard. In John 1:46, we see Nathaniel, a student of the Torah, asking, “Can anything good come out of Nazareth?”

Jesus seemed to have understood what was in their hearts. “Surely you will quote this proverb to me: “Physician, heal yourself. Do what we heard you did in Capernaum here in your hometown.” The phrase “Physician, heal yourself” appears in both Jewish and Greek writings, suggesting a hint of sarcasm that implies Jesus should address his shortcomings before discussing the shortcomings of others. They also demanded that Jesus demonstrate what they had only heard about in Capernaum — the immense power he claimed to have possessed. Yet, Jesus did not perform any miracles there, then, or at any other time.

Although there are no specific references to Jesus’ words, what he said in verse 24 resonates: no prophet is accepted in his own hometown. This is undoubtedly true. Nearly all prophets faced rejection from their communities and went unheard. Those who came to deliver messages from God, like Elijah from 1 Kings 11, confronted rejection and threats to their lives. Likewise, Jeremiah, known as the weeping prophet, and many others like him experienced rejection and even threats from their communities. It appears that Jesus understood this from the start; he mentioned it even before any actions were taken against him by his people.

Then Jesus told these two stories to illustrate his point, further insulting their already hardened hearts.

The story of the poor widow is found in 1 Kings 17, where God sends Elijah to Zarephath, a Phoenician city on the Mediterranean coast of what is now Lebanon. This city was the home of Queen Jezebel, a worshiper of Baal who came after Elijah. Elijah was sent to her, who had shown obedience and faithfulness to God, willing to give the last of what she had, and Elijah stayed with the widow until the famine concluded. God made sure that her jar of flour and jug of oil never ran out, providing for both Elijah and the widow's family.

Likewise, the story of Elisha cleansing Naaman of Syria from leprosy can be found in 2 Kings 5. Reluctant at first, Naaman did what Elisha told him to dip himself seven times in the Jordan River, and he was healed of his leprosy. Naaman was the commander of the Syrian army, which was an enemy of Israel at that time. There was great animosity between Syria and Israel. This led to the Syro-Ephraimite war between Israel and Syria, resulting in the scattering of God’s people, the fall of the Syrian empire, the captivity of Judah, and the fall of Israel itself. Not only did God choose people outside of Israel to help them, but God also chose those who were the enemy of God’s people. Jesus repeatedly reminds them, “None of them” among the people of Israel receive God’s blessing, but these people among the enemies of Israel have.

These stories seem to suggest that they do not have a claim on God’s blessing; in fact, no one has a claim on what God does or does not do. God often worked in those we might consider outside the realm of His glory.

And it seems that Jesus perceived their sense of entitlement. They took pride in being the people of God, bearers of God’s Torah. They believed that the glory of God should, first and foremost, fulfill their needs.

Perhaps hearing otherwise is an insult that cuts deeper into their hearts, breaking through their pride, sense of identity, and everything they cling to, kept tightly in their fists. They were angry because Jesus said there would be no special favor just because you go to the Sabbath and observe all the laws. They all miss the point... that God and his mercy have no limits in his ministry of compassion and healing. God works beyond the boundaries of their expectations and expands our understanding, taking us beyond what we can see, hear, or comprehend.

“If I speak in the tongues of men and angels but do not have love, I am merely a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal.” The second passage from 1 Corinthians 13, known as the love chapter, is part of Paul’s letter to the church in Corinth. Earlier, he wrote in response to conflicts and disputes concerning spiritual gifts and competition for leadership. In chapter 12, Paul explains that every believer in Jesus receives the Spirit, who gives each person one or more spiritual gifts. The Spirit cannot be confined or controlled; she freely distributes gifts to whomever she wishes. Each of us possesses different gifts and abilities; ultimately, these gifts are meant for the common good, the body of Christ. Every individual’s role in the church should support God’s purpose. Therefore, it’s not about personal glory but about glorifying God. We don’t control the Spirit; instead, the Spirit controls us. We must surrender and allow God to guide us. Consequently, Paul states that rather than worrying about what we possess or lack, of all the gifts the Spirit provides, there is the most excellent way of God: the greatest gift of all that we should desire: love.

“So, if I speak in the tongues of men and angels but do not have love, I am merely a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal. If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have faith that can move mountains but do not have love, I am nothing. If I give all I possess to the poor and surrender my body to the flames but do not have love, I gain nothing. Love is patient; love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It is not rude; it is not self-seeking; it is not easily angered; it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth.

Love is the way of God that moves us beyond what we know and how we see. Love broadens our horizons. Love releases our clenched hands and does not seek to tame or control. Love lets go, no matter how painful that may be.”

There was no love among those who drove Jesus outside the town, surrounding him with anger and clenched fists, furious that they could not get their way.

Perhaps we often stand on the brow of the hill, completely blind to how God works in our lives. We may feel angry and disappointed that He does not conform to our expectations or follow our rules. Maybe God has entirely different plans, pushing us to the edge of the realm of His glory.

Calling us to unclench our hands... for God’s blessings pour out for us, flood us with his mercy, fill us with his love...