



SAINT THOMAS CHURCH FIFTH AVENUE
in the City of New York
The Reverend Canon Carl F. Turner, Rector
www.SaintThomasChurch.org

Sunday, August 25, 2019
The Eleventh Sunday After Pentecost

Choral Eucharist
at 11:00 a.m.

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A Sermon by
The Reverend Canon Carl F. Turner, *Rector*
on
Isaiah 58:9b-14, Hebrews 12:18-29, and Luke 13:10-17
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“It’s rude to point.”

“If you remove the yoke from among you, the pointing of the finger, the speaking of evil, if you offer your food to the hungry and satisfy the needs of the afflicted, then your light shall rise in the darkness and your gloom be like the noonday.”

The synagogue at the time of Jesus was hugely important to the life of the local community. While the Temple in Jerusalem remained the place for the offering of sacrifice and national ritual, the synagogue was at the heart of family life and the place where friends and neighbors met to share their faith and deepen their spirituality through exploring and meditating on the Torah, the psalms, and the books of the prophets. The Temple complex in Jerusalem was huge, noisy, and impersonal. By contrast, the synagogue had seats and arranged in such a way that the people could see one another and respond in song and in prayer.

On the “green” Sundays of the year, we have been listening to Luke’s Gospel and, in Luke’s Gospel, the synagogue is of particular significance in the life of Jesus.

If we turn back to Chapter four we find Jesus on his extended period of retreat and fasting in the wilderness, a time when he was tempted by Satan, and the very beginning of his ministry. And **where** does he choose to begin that ministry? In the synagogue.

First, in his home town of Nazareth, Jesus reads from the scroll of the prophet Isaiah: *“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.”* (Isaiah 61:1-2a)

The contrast between the temptations that Jesus has just endured and the passage that he chooses to read is remarkable; in his temptations, Jesus turned down the chance to sate his hunger – to think of just himself. He also rejected fame, glory and power. In the wilderness he had made himself poor, hungry, nothing, marginalized, fearful, and he experienced loneliness and desperation –

something that would prepare him for the burden he would feel as he prayed in the garden of Gethsemane.

Thus, when Jesus reads from the prophecy of Isaiah he does so with an understanding of the liberating power of his ministry – good news to the poor – release to captives – recovery of sight – freedom to the oppressed – which is, after all, at the heart of the worship of the synagogue for it flows from his reading of the Torah. Perhaps we begin to understand why Jesus said *“I did not come to abolish the law but to fulfill it.”* (See Matthew 5:17) And he would fulfil it in his very person; for as the Word made flesh, he embodied the law which was about a depth of relationship with God and a commitment to living in community that reflected the love of God.

It must have been quite natural for Jesus to have felt at home in the synagogue – but it was also in that synagogue that he first encountered conflict and hypocrisy from those whom he had known since he had been a boy. The carpenter’s son was, somehow, seen out of place in that synagogue and they became so enraged with him that they actually wanted to throw him off a cliff. But, instead of giving up, Jesus immediately went to another synagogue – this time to Capernaum - where he taught again on the Sabbath Day and healed crowds of people.

The fourth chapter ends with Luke telling us that Jesus preached in many synagogues in Judea before he chose his first disciples. As the Gospel continues, this theme of calling, healing, and teaching linked with the Sabbath continues but becomes a stumbling block to the Pharisees in particular. That brings us to Chapter thirteen and today’s Gospel reading. Yet again, it is the Sabbath and Jesus is teaching in a synagogue and encounters the woman who is bent double and cannot stand upright. Perhaps there was a physical reason why she was so disabled but Luke tells us that it is a spirit that has made her like this and, indeed, Jesus describes her condition as being due to Satan. What Luke now describes is not just a healing but, rather, a release. *“He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives,”* said Jesus, in the synagogue in Nazareth. Now, in this synagogue where the Torah is proclaimed he brings release to this poor woman and makes her whole in the midst of the synagogue.

Let us pause for a moment and consider what difference this makes to the woman and to the community to which she belongs and how we might reflect on this story ourselves. First, there is the confrontation of evil and the casting out which brings release. This woman had been burdened for 18 years and she could not lift up her head in the community; **what is it that burdens you and me and causes us to feel trapped and marginalized?** And what is the consequence of Jesus’ healing ministry here? The woman is able to stand straight for the first time in 18 years and that means that she could look at Jesus face to face; she could look him ‘straight in the eye.’ Sometimes, my friends, we can be so burdened by sin or guilt or memory that we are unable to lift up our heads – perhaps because of shame or pain, but Jesus invites us to gaze at him for he loves us for who we are and wishes to release us from our burdens, whatever they may be and whoever caused us to carry them in the first place.

But, there is another consequence to all of this in Luke’s Gospel - the leader of the synagogue is now put out! The one who is charged with building up the community now injects division and hostility prompted by his own mean-spirited interpretation of the law: *“There are six days on which work ought to be done; come on those days and be cured, and not on the sabbath day.”* He doesn’t even have the courage to tackle Jesus face to face choosing, rather, to go behind his back at coffee hour! The

response of Jesus is sharp and simple: *“You hypocrites!”* He cuts them to the quick and silences them because they are more concerned about their pets than a member of their own community.

This kind of attitude – an attitude of self-righteous *“I know better than you”* or, worse, *“I am better than you,”* can be just as divisive in the Christian Community today as it was in the synagogue in Jesus’ day. To build a community where all can belong and those who are marginalized, burdened, or oppressed can feel release and freedom should be a natural quality of the Christian Church; a place where we rejoice at forgiveness and restoration. Why? Because it was the hallmark of the ministry of Jesus and he put it into practice; because he brought it to the heart of his own worshipping community. Thus, it must also be the hallmark of our own worshipping community for we are called to be Christ-like by virtue of our baptism into his death and resurrection. However, the Christian Church has not always lived up to that calling.

Some words of Saint Oscar Romero *“A religion of Sunday Mass but of unjust weeks does not please the Lord. A religion of much praying but with hypocrisy in the heart is not Christian. A church that sets itself up only to be well off, to have a lot of money and comfort, but that forgets to protest injustices, would not be the true church of our divine Redeemer.”*¹

The ministry of Jesus was based on a perfect relationship with the Father, invigorated by the Holy Spirit: *“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor.”*

As Jesus started his ministry with those words of Isaiah, he would also have known the passage that we heard in our first reading today: *“If you remove the yoke from among you, the pointing of the finger, the speaking of evil, if you offer your food to the hungry and satisfy the needs of the afflicted, then your light shall rise in the darkness and your gloom be like the noonday.”*

My friends, Jesus said, *“let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.”* (Matthew 5:16)

¹ Sermon preached on December 4, 1977