

SERMON: "JESUS' INAUGURAL ADDRESS"
TEXTS: OLD TESTAMENT NEHEMIAH 8:1-10
NEW TESTAMENT LUKE 4:14-21

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INTRODUCTION

One of the fears I have wrestled with and defeated is a preacher's worry
It is this question, "have they heard this story before?" I've come to the conclusion
some stories are worth repeating. This won't be the first sermon you've heard
on this story from Luke's gospel. The lectionary repeats it more often
than the classic rock radio station plays, "The Boys Are Back in Town."

Stories can be told several times. The consistency is helpful
It's okay to repeat, re-tell a story ... but repeating an entire sermon. No. Not good.
Preachers shouldn't repeat sermons ... except maybe some children's sermons
I think the Easter one about Jesus being on the loose is worth making a tradition

I will readily admit I have told children's sermons here in Iowa that I told before
in Georgia. One I remember because it kind of went sideways.

I told the story about when I went snow skiing with some college buddies
We played "follow the leader" down a moderately difficult blue run
About halfway down, our 'leader' spotted a jump. Went for it. Wiped out.
The second guy followed him and took the jump. He wiped out.
The third guy – same thing, same result.

I was the fourth guy. As I've told you before, I'm a 'trial and error' learner.
I too took the jump and wiped out. When I've told this as a children's sermon,
I act it out – jump and fall ... multiple times. Worn out from my efforts,
I asked the kids (the time I did it in Georgia) what they learned from this
One youngster spoke up eagerly, "You're not a very good skier."

Dangerous thing – asking questions in a children's sermon.
I was thinking more about being careful about following the leader
Choose your leaders wisely. Follow courageously but carefully.

We are followers of Jesus, Jesus of Nazareth.
Here, in his first public address Jesus tells those who heard his words then
and those who hear his words now where he will lead us. He points out the road ahead
This is what I'm going to spend my time doing.
These are the people I'm going to focus on

I have often have likened Jesus' words here to a leader's stump speech
I do so not so much because it fits this time of year for us, with an inauguration
on Monday, but because of when it fits in Jesus' schedule
As his first public message, it is his way of introducing himself

TO ...

Quoting from the prophet Isaiah, Jesus takes that biblical agenda and claims it as his own. Jesus lays out his agenda beginning with those who so often get overlooked or left out of other agendas – the poor, the captives, the blind, the oppressed.

And Jesus stood up to read; and there was given to him the book of the prophet Isaiah. He opened the book and found the place where it was written: “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 recovering of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.”

Let’s spend some time together here and now thinking about the where to of this?
Where and to whom does Jesus lead us? He tells us here as he begins his ministry
And that tell will be followed up very much so by the ‘show’ of his ‘show and tell’
Think about what Jesus does throughout his ministry, who he serves
What he says he is going to do here in Nazareth is what he will do

Jesus is saying he is being sent to bring good news to the poor
to proclaim release to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind
to let the oppressed go free
Where to ... to the poor, to the captives, to the blind, to the oppressed

Following Jesus of Nazareth leads us to these people
The gospel accounts of Jesus’ life and ministry are quite clear about that
This kind of focus on the poor, the captives, the blind and the oppressed
is what Jesus said he would do, what he did ... and what he calls us to do

These are unique groups of people. The prophet Isaiah names these people,
as does Jesus, not to single out these subsets – just these people.
These people are named so as to focus our attention on people in need
What is it that these (the poor, the captives, etc.) all have in common?
One – they are in need. Two – they often go overlooked

So then where are we to go in our ministry as followers of Jesus of Nazareth?
We are to go to people and places in need, to people who are often overlooked
Okay then. What does that look like for you?

What might you do to follow the leader, where might you go?
How about I give you a few leads based on my own efforts to follow?
This has been my focus in life and in ministry with you for ten years
and will continue to be the case as long as I have the energy to do so

Let me start with a word of caution, a word about charity. It can be toxic charity
Bob Lupton wrote a book called Toxic Charity. He tells a story of something
he noticed ... and noticing it changed him. People from his church loved
to support families at Christmas, poor families. The church folks loved
taking the gifts to the family, watching the kids open them.

WHERE TO ...

They did this with multiple families over several years. Lupton noticed a pattern
The fathers in almost every household would leave the house just before
the good church folks brought their gifts. He later learned talking to these dads
that the reason they left was they couldn't stand the shame – someone else
providing Christmas for their kids when they could not. It was humiliating.

Learning this made him question why and how we do charity, good works
Is it to make us feel good about our good works?
Is it a photo op or a feel good thing for us?

I'm cooking twice today – once for our lunch after worship
Then an hour or two later for the Sunday Supper Community Meal
When people go to get their meal at Sunday Supper, a few important
things happen (in addition to the food and fellowship)

They will be offered choices – maybe two different seasonings on the protein
choices of several vegetables, even (on occasion) a dressing other than ranch
And they will be treated with respect - as an equal, as a guest

Jesus calls us to follow his lead ... and he leads us to people in need
We follow his lead most faithfully in our charity when that charity
treats people with respect, not pity – as neighbors, not numbers

With that note of caution, a few leads on the 'where to' of following
One is to explore. The other is to expand. You've heard me talk about both before.

This focus on the simple word for today from Luke, chapter 4 'to'
To the poor, to the captive, to the blind, to the oppressed can and does
challenge us to go out of our way, to go to those people and places
I've certainly learned that here. Our community (Waterloo & Cedar Falls)
was named the worst place in this country for black people to live in 2017

It is now listed as the 5th worst place. A whole lot of people in this community
have been and will continue to work to address that reality. What I have learned
as a white guy in Cedar Falls who is very much challenged to this particular 'to'
is that denying that reality (acting like discrimination is a problem of another
time and place or worse that diversity is a threat) is not helpful. It is harmful

I have also learned that I cannot in good faith sit on my backside in Cedar Falls
and think "Waterloo might want to work on that." No, I have to explore
I need to be in Waterloo. I need to go 'to.' I need to listen, to learn, to love

I've been encouraging you to explore since I have been here
Praying for the world one nation at a time and for the country
one state at a time isn't just me being a geography nerd. It's a reminder that
loving your neighbor means making the effort to get to know them
Please love your neighbor as you are commanded to do. Explore

EXPANDING

Another way you might love your neighbor, follow Jesus 'to' is to expand
You are part of a church that takes seriously its calling to be
'A Place for Everyone.' Shouldn't that apply to more than this building?
Following Jesus 'to' wherever it is he is leading us means making
this "Place for Everyone" mobile. Anybody need a 'to go' container?

Here is how I am trying to do that with your support and encouragement
This is me trying to expand. I'll give you the why, the who and the how
This is my theology and my life's work in a nutshell. My where to

Why – because God so loves the world, including me and you, us and them
And why part two – because Jesus commands me to love my neighbor as myself

Who – loving my neighbor, for me, means going to the people
who have historically been (and are currently now) overlooked and oppressed
going to the people we may call "those people" – to be with them and for them

Doing this means being an honest student of history and our current context
I'm not buying the fear that somehow my way of life is under attack
that Christians are being persecuted. Not true. Not here, not now
Truth is that white Christians are most often the discriminators
Reading history, without that honest admission, is whitewashing

As a Son of the South who learned the Lost Cause and was taught that Robert E Lee
and Stonewall Jackson were role models going 'to' means going to work for
civil rights, for equal rights, for and with black people and all people of color

You know that about me. I pray you also know I have that same calling
to stand up for and with another group of people who suffer from discrimination
I want to be, and work to be, an ally to the LGBTQ community

Let me be clear. I respect traditional views of sexuality and marriage
For me being "A Place for Everyone" means accepting traditional people
and the values they hold. That said, I will love and challenge you all.
I will challenge you all whatever your experience, whatever your worldview,
to expand the place for everyone in your mind and heart.

As your pastor, your neighbor and your friend ...
I will work against efforts that seek to marginalize a people
I will speak up against the bullying and the belittling
I cannot and will not be silent in the face of discrimination
especially when that discrimination is done in the name of Jesus

SUMMARY

That's the why and the who I hear Jesus calling me 'to.'

The how, for me, begins with confronting my fears and confronting the fearmongers who want me to be afraid of my neighbors. No, not doing that. Nothing Jesus said or did is about fearing my neighbor ... quite the opposite really

The work to which we are called, loving our neighbors, calls for an adventuresome faith - a faith willing to go 'to' a faith eager to explore and to expand

That's my 'where to'. What's yours?

I want to hear about your exploration and expansion.
Where to?