

# **“GOOD NEWS DOESN’T MAKE EVERYONE HAPPY”**

**Luke 4:16-30**

**January 24, 2010**

**Third Sunday after Epiphany  
Antioch Missionary Baptist Church**

1) Our story today tells us of Jesus’ return to his hometown of Nazareth, of how he went to his childhood place of worship and how initially the people were amazed at the changes in him, but how ultimately the reunion ended badly. Thomas Wolfe, the popular North Carolina novelist, once wrote, “You can’t go home again.” And that was the hard truth Jesus experienced that day.

This morning I invite you to explore with me Jesus’ return to his hometown through a sermon titled, “Good News Doesn’t Make Everyone Happy.”

Luke tells us that soon after Jesus was baptized and had a spiritual retreat in the desert, where he was tempted by the devil, he began his preaching ministry. He traveled from village to village across Galilee, which is about the size of Mecklenburg County. Imagine walking from Grier Heights to Mint Hill and Matthews and Ballentyne and Freedom Drive and Beatties Ford Road and Davidson and University City. Well, that’s what Jesus was doing over a period of weeks. He traveled from village to village preaching the word of God in their houses of worship. And Luke tells us in chapter 4, verse 15 – the last verse before our passage today – “He... was praised by everyone.”

And then, it was, that he returned to Nazareth, his hometown. He’d been preaching all across the villages of Galilee and everyone was praising him and then he came home. Now keep in mind, this was so early in his ministry, that according to Luke, he hasn’t selected his disciples yet. Jesus is traveling by himself, going from town to town.

By the time he returns to his hometown; people have already heard the rumors about Jesus and he is asked to speak in their synagogue, in his childhood house of worship. No doubt his mother, Mary, was as proud as she could be that day. His brothers and sisters and their families were there to witness their brother’s return, I’m sure as well. His neighbors and playmates. His teachers and mentors.

At the appointed time in the service he is handed the scroll of the prophet Isaiah. He stands and reads:

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.

He sits down and says, “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.” And that’s it; that’s all he says according to Luke. Now, it seems reasonable to think that he said some other things because it says, “All the people... were amazed at the gracious words that came from his mouth.”

And while “Today, this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing” is a profound sentence coming from the mouth of Jesus; they aren’t particularly gracious words that amaze me and probably do not amaze you either. So, he must have said some other things – things that were gracious and amazing – but Luke just recorded that which he felt was most important as well as the passage that Jesus read.

And that passage is worth remembering.

“The Spirit of the Lord has anointed me to bring good news...”

Good news. The Spirit of the Lord anointed Jesus to bring good news.

Everybody likes to hear good news. We want to hear inspiring sermons, idealistic speeches, messages of hope, stories of a bright future. We want to believe that things will be better, if not for us, then for our children and grandchildren. Everybody likes to hear good news.

Jesus said he’s been anointed to bring good news to the poor; that he’d been sent to proclaim freedom to those who are captive, to give sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free and proclaim the year of the Lord’s Jubilee.

This is lofty good news, inspirational good news. Freedom for those who are captive. Sight for those who are blind. Freedom for those who are oppressed. Forgiveness for those who are debtors. This is good news for the poor!

And who could not wish freedom for those who are oppressed? Who could not wish for sight for those who are blind?

It is not surprising that Jesus’ hometown folks spoke well of him upon hearing his words. Who could not wish for such good news?

Everybody likes to hear good news in the abstract. We dream of peace on earth and of all peoples treating each other like sister and brother. We proudly proclaim our nation’s ideals that all are created equal and have the right to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.

Is there a person of good will in America, today, who would denounce Martin Luther King’s “I Have a Dream,” speech?

When he said, “I have a dream that one day on the red hills of Georgia, sons of former slaves and sons of former slave-owners will be able to sit down together at the table of brotherhood,” who could oppose such a hopeful vision.

When he said, “I have a dream my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character,” does not the same hope run through the veins of every parent in America today?

When he looked to “the day when all of God’s children will be able to sing with new meaning – ‘my country ‘tis of thee; sweet land of liberty; of thee I sing; land where my fathers died, land of the pilgrim’s pride; from every mountain side, let freedom ring’ – and if America is to be a great nation, this must become true,” who could say, “No,” to that today?

The good news of King’s “I Have a Dream” speech is accepted, today, as the picture of how the United States of America should look.

If you are hired by one of the great multi-national corporations today, run by some of the most elite and sequestered people in our land, by people whose multi-million dollar salaries put them in an exclusive club, if you are hired by one of those corporations chances are that you will be attending diversity training, because even the richest know they should be for that good news. If you were to drop by one of our city’s premier private schools, schools populated by students whose parents, for whatever reason, do not want their children to go to school with the rest of us, you will be amazed at how they emphasize the diversity of their student body, because even the most privileged among us know they should be for that good news.

When recalling King’s words, “not the color of their skin, but by the content of their character” both liberals and conservatives champion those words and then use them for their own causes. No one would publicly denounce such good news.

You see everyone loves good news in the abstract. As long as good news is packaged in lofty ideals and noble visions everyone loves to hear it and all are quick to repeat its truths.

Jesus finished his sermon at Nazareth, at his childhood house of worship, and Luke tells us, “All spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his mouth.” And some of them said, “Is not this Joseph’s son?” Can you see them, elbowing each other, “Where did he get such thoughts? His mother must be so proud. Can you believe that’s the same boy who used to hang

around my fig trees, hoping I'd ask him to pick some for me in the chance I'd tell him to keep a couple for himself? Can you believe it's the same boy?"

All was well. Jesus' return home was a grand success. Jesus announced God's good news. His hometown neighbors were amazed at him and praising him as people had all across Galilee.

Why Jesus didn't just smile and shake everyone's hand as they left the sanctuary and laugh at the old "Remember when" stories that some of his former playmates told him at the receiving line, I do not know. Why he didn't just make nice with everybody and then leave Nazareth for the last time the next morning, I can only speculate.

All I can tell you is that it didn't happen that way.

Just at the moment everyone was saying nice things about Jesus, he started stepping on some toes.

2) The problem with lofty ideals, with inspirational messages, the problem with good news is that it has to be lived in the real world in order to make a difference. They look pretty on paper; they sound wonderful over a speaker system, but if all we do is admire them like artwork at the Mint Museum or the Harvey Gantt Center they haven't fulfilled their purpose. And the problem is that when we take lofty ideas and noble good news and try to live them out in everyday life they get messy.

Jesus said he'd been anointed to bring good news to the poor. This is all well and good, people will say, as long as this doesn't mean bad news for the rich.

Jesus said he'd give sight to the blind. This is all well and good, people will say, as long as this doesn't require us to give up something to help him.

Jesus said he'd been sent to release the captives and bring freedom to the oppressed. This is all well and good, people will say, as long as this doesn't mean that the oppressors might have to sacrifice their privilege.

Jesus said he was coming to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor, meaning the year of Jubilee, the year when debts are forgiven. This is all well and good, people will say, as long as we're not stuck with the defaulted loans.

Everyone is for good news as long as it doesn't cost him something. Everyone loves inspirational speeches as long as she doesn't have to sacrifice anything. Everyone admires noble ideas as long they favor his people and not the other people.

The people of Nazareth loved Jesus' words and they wanted him to bless them because they were his people, his hometown. If Jesus could do wonders with others, then they should get a double portion because they were his family, his neighbors, his people.

Jesus, however, tells them he didn't return to give them special favors. Then to explain himself he reminds them of the prophets Elijah and Elisha, who performed miracles for their enemies and in doing so bypassed many of their own people.

When the townspeople found out that Jesus' gracious words and amazing speech wasn't going to favor them and in fact would bring good news to their enemies, they quickly turned on him. Drove him to the edge of town to hurl him off a cliff.

Noble ideals usually come with a cost. Good news when you try to live it out doesn't make everyone happy.

While nearly everyone loves Dr. King's "I Have a Dream" speech, the same cannot be said of his "Letter from Birmingham City Jail," or of his sermon, "A Time to Break Silence," which he preached on the Vietnam War exactly one year before he was assassinated.

In the Birmingham letter, King said that he had almost reached the conclusion that the greatest stumbling block to Civil Rights was not the Klansman, but white moderates who were more devoted to "order" than to justice. "Shallow understanding from people of good will is more frustrating than absolute misunderstanding from people of ill will. Lukewarm acceptance is much more bewildering than outright rejection."

Pointing to the hundreds of steeples in Birmingham King continued, “In the midst of blatant injustices inflicted upon [African-Americans], I have watched white churches stand on the sideline and merely mouth pious irrelevancies and sanctimonious trivialities... I have looked at her beautiful churches with their lofty spires pointing heavenward... Over and over again I have found myself asking: ‘What kind of people worship here? Who is their God?... Where were they when Governor Wallace gave the clarion call for defiance and hatred? Where were their voices of support when tired, bruised and weary [black] men and women decided to rise from the dark dungeons of complacency to the bright hills of creative protest?’”

There is no good news that hasn't first been carried on a cross. Good news when you try to live it out doesn't make everyone happy.

3) My children have been in our public schools for the past 6 years at Cotswold Elementary, a diverse school, where their classmates have been almost even numbers of white and black students with a smaller portion of Hispanic immigrants. My children are richer because they have friends who immigrated from Venezuela and Guatemala, because they've had the chance to befriend a Muslim boy from Russia, because they've attended parties just across the street from this sanctuary and their own birthday parties have looked like the world King dreamed of from the steps of the Lincoln Memorial.

This is an example of what can happen when parents and teachers from different racial and ethnic and economic class come together for the common good of all. Unfortunately, I've watched Cotswold become a rare school in CMS during these six years as the school system as a whole has virtually resegregated. Most schools in our system now either have high concentrations of white students or black students.

When we did away with busing to integrate our schools we gave up the idea that we should all share the responsibility to educate the at-risk student, the child who lives in poverty, the student with behavioral issues, the pupil whose parents do not help her with homework and leave the TV on all day and let her stay up till midnight. All of us, black, white, Hispanic, rich, poor, we used to share in that responsibility. Now, it's every school for themselves, every neighborhood out to protect their school boundaries. And more and more white and upper income families are just opting out for private school.

What is even more alarming is how this has happened with hardly a word of protest. The school board is even considering doing away with the citizens council for school equity. One board member simply called it a relic.

If Dr. King were alive today would he drive through our city of beautiful churches and ask, “What kind of people worship here? Who is their God?” Where were they when public school resegregated and relegated thousands of students to a poor education with inexperienced teachers and rowdy classrooms?

Every child deserves a quality education, but that good news must be carried on a cross by all of us. And that's not going to make everyone happy.

4) We have to will things to be different. The privileged have to be willing to sacrifice some of their perks. The poor have to be willing learn new ways. If we are not willing to sacrifice some things for each other, then noble ideas and lofty hopes will just be artwork hung in a museum for us to admire.

We have to stop caring just about ourselves and our people – however we define our people – and start working for the betterment of all of us. We have to become less tribal and more open to our neighbor.

This is a task that has confounded humans for centuries. The prejudices that continue to divide our nation and the body of Christ are as wide as the earth is round and as old as human nature. It

seems there is an innate tribalism within human beings. We mistrust the outsider, the other. Xenophobia, fear of the foreigner, runs in our veins.

In the small African countries of Rwanda and Burundi peoples from two tribal heritages – Tutsi and Hutu – butchered one another with machetes 15 years ago. During the short span of 100 days nearly a million people were killed. Tensions between the two peoples are still heated just below the surface.

Yugoslavia had to be broken up into seven different countries because Serbs and Croats and Bosnians could no longer inhabit the same land without killing each other.

India had to become India and Pakistan, two separate countries, after they received their independence from the British for the same reason. Even though ethnically they shared a heritage, they had followed two separate religions – Islam and Hinduism.

The old Shakespearean play, *Romeo and Juliet*, was a love story hinged by the hatred their two peoples had for one another – the Capulets and the Montagues. They were two forbidden lovers, or to use Shakespeare's words, "star-crossed lovers," who because they dared cross the line from one group to the other set off a tragedy. The old Bible story of Samson and Delilah walks the same path as Samson, an Israelite, falls in love with Delilah, who is a Philistine. The two lovers, whose peoples were enemies, were doomed to a tragedy similar to *Romeo and Juliet*.

Scratch the surface of the news, or scan great novels or human history or the Bible, and you will find again and again the age old story of tribalism's destructive forces.

The plot of Jesus' most famous parable is pivoted on the mistrust between two groups of people. The term Good Samaritan was an oxymoron – two incompatible words put together. In the minds of Jewish persons in Jesus' day there was no such thing as a Good Samaritan. Jews and Samaritans didn't trust each other, didn't like each other. A good Jewish person in Jesus day would travel around Samaritan villages; he wouldn't go through their neighborhoods.

A Jewish man travels from Jerusalem to Jericho. He is robbed, beaten and left for dead by the side of the road. In a short while two religious people pass at different intervals – one is a priest, the other is a Levite. Today, we might say one was a preacher and the other was a deacon. But had no compassion on their brother lying in the road. Then, along came a despised Samaritan, and he had compassion on the Jewish man; he administered first aid, put him on his donkey and took to into town for medical treatment.

The story of the Good Samaritan is not about providing roadside assistance to a stranded traveler – though that is a perfectly kind and good thing to do. The story of the Good Samaritan is a call for us to reach across the barriers of race and ethnicity, class and gender to love our neighbor.

If Jesus were to tell that parable today he might call it the Good Klansman at an NAACP Rally, or the Good Taliban on a US Army base, or the Good Palestinian, the Good Illegal Immigrant, the Good Muslim, or maybe the Good Lesbian at the Republican National Convention. The Good Samaritan is any person you are wary of because of their class, race, ethnicity or anything else that causes you to negatively prejudge them.

This sin of tribalism is within all of us. I am a recovering racist and a recovering male chauvinist pig, a recovering nationalist and a recovering elitist. Like the recovering alcoholic, everyday I have to make it my goal to love my neighbor as myself. This is not easy.

Just the other day I was in line at a lunch counter and I was in a bit of a hurry and right in front of me were two women who I soon realized were struggling some with their English. And I thought why did I have to get behind two Hispanic women on a day when I'm in a hurry?

Well, a moment later another worker came to the counter and started taking my order, so now I was between the two Hispanic women and I could easily hear everything that was going on between them and the workers taking their orders. One of the women was having problems understanding how much her sandwich cost, which I could understand. I have three college degrees and a solid command of the English language and sometimes I can't understand the menus at this lunch place. But the

worker, who was actually the manager, was clearly annoyed with her and began being rude to her. He made me mad, but I just minded my own business.

A couple minutes later after we'd all paid, the women sat down at a table and I prepared to leave with my to-go order. I looked back up at the counter and noticed no one was in line at the moment. So, I went back up, and told the manager that he'd been very rude to that customer. He apologized, but I said, "I'm not the one you should apologize to."

I could have left the store feeling a little self-righteous, if I hadn't realized something. I should have also thanked him. Part of my anger at his rudeness was caused by my shame for the impatience I had with the women in the first place and my apathy of minding my own business when I should have offered to help her understand the menu.

I was not the Good Samaritan that day. I'd been the smug Levite minding his own business until a rude worker reminded me that I'm a recovering racist and recovering elitist and I'm called to love my neighbor as myself.

Jesus stood before his hometown people and said:

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.

And they loved hearing him say those things until they realized he meant that good news for them and for people not like them and then they turned on him.

Good news doesn't make everyone happy, because God's good news must be carried on a cross. AMEN