

Fourth Sunday after Epiphany
1 Corinthians 12:12-31a, Psalm 19, Luke 4:14-21
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I can't help but compare the beginning of Jesus' public ministry in John's gospel, which we heard two weeks ago now, to the one we just heard this morning in Luke. Earlier, you'll remember, Jesus was attending a wedding when he was asked by his mother to save an unfortunate and potentially embarrassing situation – the wine running out before the festivities were over. Even Jesus questioned whether this was a good use of his divine faculties. In the end, however, he produces more than enough high quality wine, and the wedding couple and their host families are rescued without knowing how.

In Luke, we know that Jesus was first baptized, and then immediately afterwards, he spent 40 days in the wilderness, some of that time being tempted by Satan. Emerging directly from these formative experiences, Jesus has been attracting attention because he is filled with the power of the Spirit. All Luke will tell us is that Jesus has been teaching in the synagogues of villages around the Sea of Galilee.

Now returning to his home town of Nazareth, we get to hear what Jesus may have been reading and saying in those earlier synagogues to generate so much excitement.

If in John's gospel, Jesus is saving a couple from what could be a disastrous start to their married life, here in Luke, Jesus is identifying himself as the one who has come to liberate everyone who is poor, captive, blind and oppressed. If Isaiah can be understood to include those both literally and figuratively compromised by poverty, captivity, blindness and oppression, then Jesus is the savior of everyone both then and now.

Luke records Jesus launching his public ministry in his hometown much like politicians today announce they are running for a significant political office in a familiar place. Jesus chooses a few short verses from the long prophetic scroll of Isaiah. His listeners would identify these verses with words that evoke messianic expectations. When Jesus rolled the scroll up and sat down to offer commentary or interpretation, as was the custom in local synagogues, the people were waiting with bated breath to hear what he would say next.

It's possible that no one would ever have guessed what would then roll off Jesus' tongue. Instead of saying what the verses from Isaiah meant and what the old prophet was trying to say to the Jews many, many years ago, Jesus says, "Today, this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."

Another way of saying the same thing might have been, “These ancient words are coming true as I speak them.” Or again, “I am the one who makes these things happen.”

In perhaps the shortest sermon ever preached, Jesus is making audacious and world-altering claims. Either he is who he says he is, or he is completely delusional and mad. The Jews would be by and large divided over his true identity depending on their place in the pecking order of their society.

The majority of people on the margins of society who were poor, powerless, sick, handicapped, considered sinful or of outsider status were drawn to him and open to receiving life-changing inspiration, healing and solace. The affluent and successful leadership, on the other hand, mostly contended with his message and rejected his claims that he was sent from God.

Immediately after these verses, in Luke’s chapter 4, the people of Nazareth will themselves disregard any notion that Jesus might be the messiah, and they will try to kill him by hurling him off a cliff.

Today we likewise understandably reject or ignore people who have a message we don’t agree with or one that we perceive will impact our lives negatively. We have high regard for people who we, in retrospect, call prophets because they led efforts to secure equal rights for people who formerly were unfairly held back or held down. In some cases, they saw a future that God wanted well before most of the people did. We also call them visionaries.

Jesus was certainly one of these and much more. Jesus preached and lived an inclusivity that horrified the powerful of his day. He wanted to enlarge the circle of God’s embrace to include everyone – rich and poor, sick and well, sinner and saint.

St. Paul was another prophet and visionary when he said in Christ there is neither Jew nor Gentile, slave nor free, male nor female. In the epistle today, he clearly states by way of body imagery that everyone in the church is of equal importance, and each has a valuable and much needed contribution to make.

One of St. Paul’s earliest opponents, you might be surprised to find out, was none other than St. Peter. It’s fair to say, 2,000 years later, we still haven’t attained to Jesus’ or St. Paul’s hopes for humankind.

Christianity has a mixed past. Christian missionaries were some of the first to start soup kitchens, schools, hospitals, orphanages and prison ministries for everyone in fulfillment of Isaiah’s vision of bringing good news to the poor, release to captives, sight to the blind and freedom to captives. That work continues. At our recent DCU meeting, we formed a committee

to explore ways of making sure no one has to spend the night out in the cold here in Petersburg.

At other times, however, Christians ex-communicated, persecuted or killed people or groups who weren't like them or had different understandings of the sacred. Some in this country are in danger of making that mistake again with citizens of the Islamic faith much as we once did with Jewish Americans, Native Americans, Black Americans and in some cases Catholics.

An Anglican priest perhaps summed it up best when he said, "It is the business of the church to kiss frogs." Let's be on the right side of God's vision by ourselves continuing to live into Christ and Grace's mission statement of *offering hope, healing and hospitality*. Let's show equal respect for all in the body of Christ and the body of earth and kiss our share of frogs for the love of Jesus, the Christ, our Lord. AMEN.