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Sunday, Jan. 17, 2021
Sermon Series: Love in Action

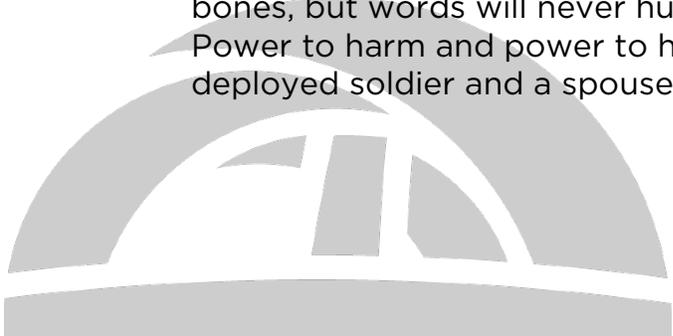
Love Speaks a Hard Word
Pastor Jason Bryan-Wegner

Luke 4:14-30 NRSV

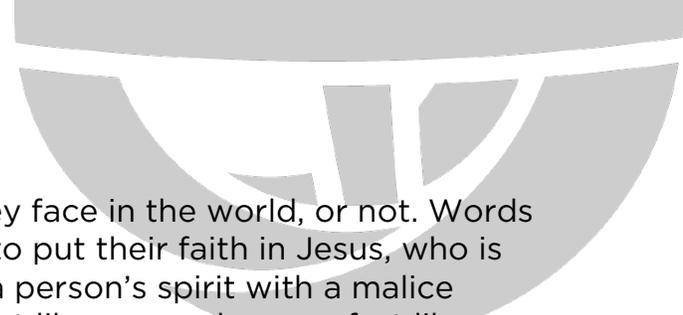
¹⁴Then Jesus, filled with the power of the Spirit, returned to Galilee, and a report about him spread through all the surrounding country. ¹⁵He began to teach in their synagogues and was praised by everyone.

¹⁶When he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, he went to the synagogue on the sabbath day, as was his custom. He stood up to read, ¹⁷and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written: ¹⁸“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, ¹⁹to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.”

²⁰And he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down. The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. ²¹Then he began to say to them, “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.” ²²All spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his mouth. They said, “Is not this Joseph’s son?” ²³He said to them, “Doubtless you will quote to me this proverb, ‘Doctor, cure yourself!’ And you will say, ‘Do here also in your home town the things that we have heard you did at Capernaum.’ ” ²⁴And he said, “Truly I tell you, no prophet is accepted in the prophet’s home town. ²⁵But the truth is, there were many widows in Israel in the time of Elijah, when the heaven was shut up for three years and six months, and there was a severe famine over all the land; ²⁶yet Elijah was sent to none of them except to a widow at Zarephath in Sidon. ²⁷There were also many lepers in Israel in the time of the prophet Elisha, and none of them was cleansed except Naaman the Syrian.” ²⁸When they heard this, all in the synagogue were filled with rage. ²⁹They got up, drove him out of the town, and led him to the brow of the hill on which their town was built, so that they might hurl him off the cliff. ³⁰But he passed through the midst of them and went on his way.

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When we were kids, we probably learned that “sticks and stones will break my bones, but words will never hurt me.” But words matter. They do have power. Power to harm and power to heal. Words are what kindle love between a deployed soldier and a spouse at home. Words from a parent are what give



children confidence to brave the challenges they face in the world, or not. Words of Scripture are what inspire billions of people to put their faith in Jesus, who is the Word made human. Words can also break a person's spirit with a malice comment or an angry online post. Words can cut like a sword or comfort like a mother – and depending on how they are said, the same word can do both at the same time.

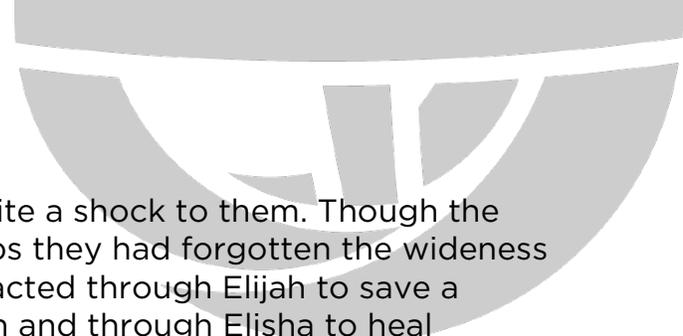
It was no accident that Jesus read the words that he did when he returned to his hometown synagogue in Nazareth. Jesus had been filled by the Holy Spirit in his baptism. And he had faced adversity as Satan tested him in the wilderness. Now he was going public. His circuit-riding preaching from synagogue to synagogue broadcast his Spirit-led mission. “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because God 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, and to proclaim the year of the Lord’s Jubilee.” In case you’re wondering, a jubilee year was a declaration of the forgiveness of debts, an economic reset button.

Jesus’ intention was not just to speak words that day, but to embody them, to give this 500+ year-old prophetic utterance life and breath through his ministry. “Today, this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing!” You don’t have to follow Jesus very long before you realize that he is serious about this mission. People will be healed, prisoners will be released, the blind will see. Jesus’ words matter. They have consequences for how God acts in the world. They have consequences for us for how and what we do with the trust we place in Jesus.

The people who heard Jesus in the synagogue that day were impressed, proud that this teacher was a hometown boy. Good news to the poor, release of the captive, the year of the Lord Jubilee – all sounded like what they had been waiting for God to do for a long time. This good news sounded both familiar as home and fresh as new life.

Recent archaeological work in Nazareth has revealed that Nazareth was a deeply religious and anti-Roman town during Jesus’ lifetime. Their politics and their way of life were deeply influenced by their Jewish faith. They observed stricter religious laws than even their neighbors four miles down the road. They could see themselves in Jesus’ words. They felt poor. They felt captive to the political powers of their day. Many of them expected that God would act in explicitly political ways to overturn Roman rule. There are even accounts of a Nazareth rebellion against the Romans in their region in 4 BC, the most likely year Jesus was born. They were expecting a Messiah to overturn the government and usher in a new Jewish era.





So, Jesus' conclusion to his sermon came as quite a shock to them. Though the words from Isaiah felt familiar and fresh, perhaps they had forgotten the wideness of God's mercy in the days of old. As God had acted through Elijah to save a widow beyond the Galilean border in Zarephath and through Elisha to heal Naaman, the Syrian soldier and enemy of Israel, so God would bring this redeeming word to the Gentiles through Jesus, too.

The people's pride turned to rage as they heard that Jesus hadn't just come for them, but for their enemies, also. Good news to the poor, release to the captive, sight to the blind, freedom for the oppressed all of a sudden didn't sound so good, not if it was meant for others.

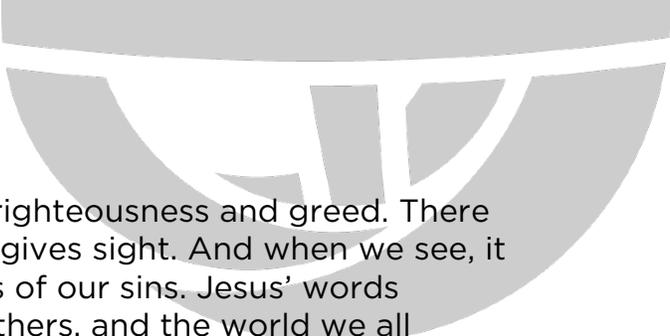
It turns out that words matter. They have consequences. And when Jesus preached to his hometown that there is still a wideness in God's mercy, good news quickly became offensive to those who were convinced that there should be limitations on where this good news goes.

The challenges facing Jesus' audience in Nazareth sound a bit familiar today. Whether it is justified or not, just about everyone in our country – east coast, west coast, no coast, black, white, democrat or republican is reacting to a feeling of being limited or left out. Protests for the rights of some have struck fear in the hearts of others. Rhetoric has reached a fever pitch. The more extreme the language, the more vilified the opposition the more attention it gets. Many can't even see the humanity in those who see things differently anymore. And the norms and institutions that have held this country together for nearly 250 years seem more fragile than ever. We seem locked in a mindset that has convinced us that it is a zero-sum game – that someone's got to win and others got to lose.

Our ego so often prevents us from being open to receive God's grace even when it does come. Like those in Nazareth, why is it that so often we assume that when something is intended for others that we are somehow entitled to it also? What is it in us that makes us think that we should have control of who God chooses to extend grace?

Remember, there's a wideness in God's mercy. Yes, Jesus made it clear that his mission extends well beyond the confines of Galilee, but that didn't mean that God's mercy wasn't also for them. That being the case, can we also trust that God's grace and Jesus mission extend beyond the confines of our immediate circles? That God's care extends across ideology and political affiliation. Can we see the humanity in each other and trust that God has created this world to equal something more than a zero sum game? Good news for the poor extends to white people scraping by as well as new immigrants from Central America who are starting all over. Jesus releases those who are captive to





slavery as well as those who are captive to self-righteousness and greed. There are times when we are the blind to whom Jesus gives sight. And when we see, it is both the beauty of his grace and the struggles of our sins. Jesus' words are a catalyst to reset how we view ourselves, others, and the world we all inhabit.

In March of 1865, Abraham Lincoln addressed a war weary nation at his second term inauguration. By then, hundreds of thousands had died in the Civil War, and countless numbers were returning home injured. There were still tremendous divisions in the nation, as Black slaves would soon be free, and Southerners were faced the prospect of defeat. Lincoln acknowledged in his speech that people on both sides read the same Bible and prayed to the same God, without either's prayers being fully answered.

Knowing all this, Lincoln still had faith that there was a way forward for the country. With courage and conviction he called on people to a new way beyond the violence of the past, "With malice toward none with charity for all, with firmness in the right as God gives us to see the right, let us strive to bind up the nation's wounds, to care for him who shall have to borne the battles and for his widow and his orphan - to do all which may achieve and cherish a just and lasting peace among ourselves and with all nations." Words matter, they can harm or heal. They can cut like a sword or comfort like a mother.

When we begin worship with confession and forgiveness, it's because those words matter, too. It's not meant to make anyone feel guilty but acknowledges that there are routinely places in our lives that aren't whole... And we speak this confession to God because we trust that what Scripture tells us of God is true. 1 John says, *"If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us, but if we confess our sins, God who is faithful and just will forgive our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness."* In this forgiveness, the wideness of God's mercy extends to each of us. When confessed together, God who is faithful and just will forgive - our sins, our neighbor's sins, our enemy's sins. Our confession and God's forgiveness does something that we otherwise couldn't do. We can't help but be changed because Jesus' words matter. Good news for the poor, release for the captive, sight to the blind, freedom for the oppressed - that's what Jesus does. Sometimes this feels like healing, and sometimes it cuts like a sword, but love does that sometimes. Love calls us to start over and try again with those whom we don't agree or whom we don't understand. Jesus calls us to love our neighbors, and our enemies as ourselves. We are called through God's mercy to seek that which we desire for our neighbor also. This is often a hard word but it is Jesus' word for all of us. And words matter. Thanks be to God. Amen.

