

Foothills Congregational Church
United church of Christ
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“THE POWER OF LOVE”

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Luke 4:14-21

These are trying times.

No matter where we stand socially or politically, we don't feel like winners. The news cycle causes us great anxiety. As of yesterday, the 26th day of the year, there had been 22 mass shootings in the US even though we took a week off. (From January 6-13, there weren't any mass shootings.) Should we ban guns or should we have more of them?

We are either determined that this country needs a wall to keep people from Mexico and South America out of our country or determined that such a wall hurts too many people or is a poor use of resources.

We worry that weather will get more dangerous and sea levels will rise precipitously or we worry that unnecessary fear of climate change will increase regulation and cool our economy.

I could go on and on.

But sitting still and being worried or afraid isn't doing anything about any of it. And we are called to do something.

The passage in Luke that Ann read for us takes place directly after Jesus spends 40 days in the wilderness being tempted. He comes out of the wilderness filled with the Holy Spirit and sweeps through the synagogues of the Galilee. He is one of those rockstar preachers, and everybody loves him! He is what they are all talking about at the well and in the fields and in the marketplaces. And then he finally makes it home to Nazareth, to the people who raised him, nurtured him, wondered at him as he grew up.

He is an observant man, and he goes to the synagogue and stands up to read. He is handed the scroll of Isaiah. This is not the most important reading for that day--that would have been the torah portion--but the haftorah is important also. Remember when Jesus later describes the most important commandments, he will say that they are the foundation of all the law and the prophets? Isaiah is one of the prophets.

Jesus unrolls the scroll and reads from what is now numbered as Isaiah 61:1-2: “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,¹⁹ to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.” And then he sits down.

This passage is one that that Jesus’ contemporaries would have known, and its theme is not uncommon in the prophets. It is the continuous reminder of the prophets that good news is on the way, that God has guaranteed God’s people peace and freedom and good health. The year of the Lord’s favor is a year in which slaves go free and all debts are released.

If you ever wonder if it is legitimate to pick and choose from the Bible, here is your evidence. Jesus stops reading this passage mid-sentence. Isaiah proclaims the year of the Lord’s favor AND the day of vengeance of our God. Scary stuff!

Sometimes what Jesus chooses not to say is what is most important.

Jesus concludes with the year of the Lord’s favor, the year in which people, because of their gratitude and trust and faith in God, release people who are held captive by imprisonment in some form or debt to someone. Jesus does not proclaim vengeance. He emphasizes a loving God and refuses to give air time to belief in an angry one.

This is the root of the new understanding of God that Jesus brought to the people then and brings to us now. The ancient people believed in a God who punished individual people and even whole civilizations for not being respectful and faithful, a God who played favorites with certain humans and certain peoples while completely ignoring the needs of others, a distant unreachable God who sometimes seemed to disappear, to go silent, for generations. God sounds kind of like humans in some of these traits, right? I mean who doesn’t want a little revenge when we’ve been done wrong? Who doesn’t treat the people whose company they enjoy better than people who are annoying? Who doesn’t get distracted by the minutiae of life and neglect to spend time with their loved ones now and then?

But this is not the God who Jesus presents to us. There are some whispers of God’s wrath in the gospels, but not many. God is a God of love, of hope, of caring for people, of seeking justice for all.

I wonder how much of this is because wrath and revenge are emotions that feel powerful. The loudness and forcefulness of these feelings certainly do make things happen sometimes, but ultimately love is much more powerful.

In our increasingly polarized world so much is us vs. them, so often we believe that to keep what we have we must deny it to others, that to be safe we must keep people not like us at a distance, that there isn’t enough food, money, water, work to go around. Guess what...there is enough. We just have to be willing to set aside our worries and choose love over power. And choose love over power. And choose love over power again and again and again.

Mahatma Gandhi said, “The day the power of love overrules the love of power, there will be peace.” Jesus reads that passage from Isaiah proclaiming good news to the poor, release to the captives, freedom for the oppressed and then he sits down. His interpretation of the scripture is just one sentence. “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.” It’s the shortest sermon ever. And the most controversial. The people

who hear it, Jesus' own neighbors, try to run him out of town and you have to wonder why. These people were poor, the oppressed, the indebted. Wouldn't you think they'd be thrilled? The people of all the other towns were...

But this is his hometown, the people who know him best, and he is shaking things up. They were accustomed to a way of life in which the Romans (and the Persians, Babylonians, and Assyrians in centuries past) could be blamed for everything. They were accustomed to a culture in which the haves and the have nots were miles apart and the chasm between them could not be crossed. They were accustomed to their own desperately poor, their lame, their blind, their sick living in the streets without shelter, without food, without care.

Jesus opened their eyes to the power of love. In saying that the prophecy is fulfilled, he is giving them the power to fulfill it. He is giving us the power to fulfill it. All we need to do is love one another. We need not like one another, though that makes the work easier, But we must love one another as God loves us. We must love others for who they are and for who they have the potential to be. Loving one another means proclaiming freedom rather than seeking vengeance. It means overlooking differences and emphasizing common ground. It means protecting the dignity of all people, regardless of how they look or even how they act. It means striving for peace instead of striving for power. When we can do that, when we all choose love as individuals and even more when we can work together as the body of Christ to, then these scriptures are fulfilled.

It's a lot of work, but imagine a world in which all are fed, clothed, homed, cared for. Imagine watching the news without feeling anxious or angry. Imagine a world of peace and harmony.

I'll end with these words from the prophet Huey Lewis in the year of our Lord 1985:

Don't take money, don't take fame
Don't need no credit card to ride this train
Tougher than diamonds and stronger than steel
You won't feel it until you feel
You feel the power, feel the power of love
That's the power, that's the power of love

Amen.