

sermon-1/24/10 Newport Presbyterian Church
“A Reversal in the Polls”
Luke 4:14-30

Popularity is a fickle thing. Just ask politicians. It is amazing how the poll numbers can go up and down so quickly when it comes to politics and political parties. Certainly President Obama knows how quickly things can change. So did Jesus. We read about his first trip back to Nazareth as an adult and watch his poll numbers take a huge hit right in the middle of his speaking at the synagogue. The question for us to explore is why did this happen?

Luke presents this as Jesus’ first “sermon”, as it were. He has been all over Galilee gaining notoriety, but we don’t know what exactly he has done or said. But now he is back in his hometown and Luke gets specific.

Jesus is given the scroll of the prophet Isaiah to read. He reads parts of Isaiah, chapter 61 and 58. It is powerful stuff. Isaiah talks about concern for the poor, the oppressed, and the prisoner. He then writes about “the year of the Lord’s favor.”

That last phrase refers to the Year of Jubilee. That year came around every 50 years. When it did, Israel was commanded to do two things. First, any Jew who had become enslaved to another Jew due to economic problems was to be set free. Second, if any Jew had sold the family property to cover debts, that land was to be given back to the original owner.

Israel was to start over, in other words. You could make money off your fellow Jews by enslaving them or buying their land, but when the Year of Jubilee came, you were to start over again. The rich couldn’t keep getting richer and the poor poorer generation after generation.

This, of course, is pretty radical stuff. In fact, it is never verified that Israel ever lived up to the demands of the Jubilee year. But, says Jesus, his life, his ministry, his perspective, was all about what the Year of Jubilee affirmed. Jesus was pushing a kind of leveling of wealth so that all would have a chance. His life was about deep concern for the poor and the oppressed.

Interestingly, the response of his hometown people was favorable to this message from Jesus. They were a bit surprised that someone they knew could be so eloquent, but, none-the-less, they liked what they heard. Luke writes, “All spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his mouth. They said, ‘Is not this Joseph’s son?’

Perhaps many of those listening were poor themselves. This was sounding pretty good. God was on their side. Jesus’ poll numbers were on the rise. But then things changed quickly. What happened?

Apparently Jesus saw his hometown expecting things from him, maybe even wanting special treatment. Maybe they thought because they were Jews, God must love them best. Luke doesn’t say what made Jesus say what he said next. We just see that Jesus decides to push it a little further with them. He tells them two stories, one about Elijah and the other about Elisha.

If you go back and read those stories you would see that Elijah helped a poor foreign widow during a time of drought and famine. Elisha goes even further. He heals Naaman who was

not only a foreigner, but also someone of a different religion than Judaism, and an enemy combatant to boot. Naaman was a soldier in the Syrian army, a country that had attacked and oppressed Israel.

The people hear these two stories and they want to lynch Jesus. They did not like hearing about God caring for foreigners and enemies. It is hard to get inside the heads of those people or put ourselves in their shoes to explain why they reacted the way they did. We need to know they were being oppressed by Rome. They were angry, frightened, and very defensive.

The closest I can get to that is to see how many Americans would respond to Jesus if he came to the United States after 9/11. What if he talked about God healing a Taliban general and not someone equally sick in our country? How would he be received then? Even that is not an exact parallel, but you get my point.

Jesus was trying to show his hometown that he believed in a God much bigger than their narrow understanding of God. Jesus' God was one that loved all people, even those we would call enemy. Jesus' God was a whole lot more about grace than judgment. My guess would be that Jesus' God is a whole lot bigger than any of our conceptions of God. And if Jesus came to us today, I am afraid it would be good church folks who would turn against him like they did in his day.

So, what are we to do with such a passage, beyond just feeling guilty or beating ourselves up over our narrow understandings of God? Where is there good news in this passage? Certainly if you are poor or oppressed, this passage sounds like great news. But, what about most of us who are not poor or oppressed? What should we do?

This passage is challenging us to live ever more deeply into supporting Jesus' agenda. It is urging us to find a way to take the next step in our journey following Jesus' example. I want to tell you three stories that flesh out what this might look like.

This past week Sandy and I watched the Golden Globes award ceremony. Most of it was full of self-absorbed people and cruel jokes by the emcee. But there were a couple of shining moments. One was when Meryl Streep stepped to the podium to receive a best actress award for her role in "Julie and Julia." She talked about how hard it was to act happy with all that was going on in Haiti. She said it was moments like this when she remembered her mother who had given her such good advice when she was younger. Streep said she could envision her mom telling her to go ahead and be happy accepting this award, but also to make plans to give to a Haiti relief effort. It is not just the choice between one or the other. It can be a both/and. Be happy with all that you have been given and achieved, but give at the same time. She said this very simply and eloquently, far better than I have just done. That is one way to take the next step. It is simple, but clear.

The next story goes even deeper. Perhaps you read in last Sunday's Parade Magazine the story about the family who downsized. This was a very well-off family who lived in a large house with plenty of stuff. The teenage children wanted the family to respond to the great needs in their world. So, this very comfortable family of four decided to sell their house and buy a much smaller place and then give away the profits to charity. They researched all the possibilities and then decided on one they all agreed on.

I don't remember the name of that family. They will be forgotten by most who read that article. They did not do this for fame or recognition. But their act of generosity was absolutely stunning. To me it was a modern day step toward the Jubilee Year. They lived on less so that others could live on more. It was their small attempt to level the playing field. And, they said they were happier as a family as a result.

The final example goes one step further. It comes in a story about a man named Scott Neeson. I had never heard of him until I read his story in a book called *The Life of Meaning*. Neeson used to be the president of 20th Century Fox International and then took on a senior job at Sony Pictures. Scott gave up everything: his cars, his houses, his whole lifestyle and moved to Cambodia to help poor children there get an education. His moment of decision to do this came while he was on vacation in Cambodia and his office back home called him. Let me let him tell it in his own words.

“The phone rang and it was my office. The actor who was on tour was having quite a serious meltdown because the private jet didn't have the right amenities for him, and he didn't want to get on the jet. The whole tour was in jeopardy, and the quote was that their life wasn't meant to be this difficult. That's what his staff said to me on the phone. And I thought: I don't want this to be my world. Here we've got this jet sitting on the tarmac, and I'm sitting with these dying children, and I just wanted to scream into the phone, 'Come down here for a day and see what it's all about!'”

Neeson says he can't go back to his old way of life because there are so many children who depend on him to do what he is doing. Besides, he writes, “There is no home anymore. I've sold everything. There is no house, no car. I'm going back for a visit with no place to stay, and I'm trying to find a friend with a spare room. When I'm back in the States and I see people having minor tantrums over certain things, whether it's at a coffee shop and the coffee is not right, or they don't have the organic cereal they're after and it's a major trauma in their lives, it's somewhat entertaining and somewhat sad. I can't really judge because I was one of those people. I was exactly the same way.”

There are people we never hear about living out the Year of Jubilee, getting on board with Jesus' agenda to take care of the poor and oppressed, leveling the playing field so that all might have enough to live. We may not be up for going as far as Scott Neeson, or even that family in Parade Magazine, but we can all do what Meryl Streep suggests. We can all take the next step in following Jesus, in seeing God in a bigger way than we have before. It sure beats doing nothing, or worse yet, being part of the crowd that would lynch Jesus because his God is bigger than our parochial God and religious prejudices. Amen