

He was a hometown boy who had done well for himself, even gained a measure of public acclaim, who had come home for a visit, his first visit since beginning a public ministry. And, as was his custom, he went to the synagogue on the Sabbath to teach. He took up the scroll of the prophecy of Isaiah, found this passage, and read these words to his friends, family, and neighbors: "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." Then, closing the scroll, he told them: "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." And, they nodded approvingly, congratulating him on the "gracious words that came from his mouth." As if to say: Isn't that nice. Mary must really be proud. Who would have ever thought the carpenter would be capable of such wisdom and insight? And he spoke with such eloquence." Jesus, though, rather than capitalizing on this admiration, seems to go out of his way to put his listeners off, if not to offend them. "Don't look for me to heal anyone here or accomplish any other great things here, not because I am unwilling or unable, but because I know you will not accept it." And the admiration quickly melted into contempt. "Who are you to be talking to us like that?" Had he not managed to slip away, they would have stoned him to death.

This story stands at the beginning of the public ministry of Jesus in Luke's Gospel as a warning to the reader that in spite of the initial wave of popular approval and acceptance experienced by Jesus in Capernaum, this "prophet" would not find broad acceptance among his own. Rather, they would reject him, and that, primarily, because he believed and proclaimed that the "year of the Lord's favor,"—the grace and love of God—extends not merely to the children of Israel but to all the people of God's making: the best and the worst, male and female, Jew and Gentile. The tension that erupts in the synagogue in Nazareth and which will erupt again throughout Luke's narrative of the life of Jesus reflects not a conflict between Jesus and Judaism, but between Judaism and its own scriptures. Israel knew of God's grace towards the Gentiles as early as the covenant with Abraham, to whom God revealed his intention to bring blessing to all the nations of the earth. But knowing something and really believing it, incorporating it into your heart and soul so that it shapes your life and your conduct are often two entirely different things. Israel correctly understood herself as God's chosen people, God's light to the nations, but drew the line at the limits of privilege and failed to go beyond to the global implications of her election.

What Israel neglected to do, God has done in his Son Jesus Christ. In him the light of God's love shines in the world. In him is the life of the world, for through him we are drawn into a relationship with God which restores us to life as God created us to live and to enjoy it. In him, in some respects, it may be said that we become fully human in

Jesus Christ. Reconciled with God in Christ we find ourselves coming to life in new ways, ways we never dreamed possible. In him, indeed, we come to *life*, life as God created it to be lived and enjoyed. The “year of the Lord’s favor” finds expression in our own lives. This good news, this Gospel, is never intended as a gift to be hoarded but as a treasure to be shared. Like Israel, you see, we are saved not merely for the privilege of being the children of God but also living as the servants of God in the world. Jesus specifically commissioned the church to “go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you.” This is the church’s primary mission, but not our only mission. Doing the work of Jesus means doing what he did: reaching out to the fallen, embracing the lonely, feeding the hungry, comforting the mourning, healing the sick, acting with compassion in the world, and so much more.

We do that, in the first place, simply by being who we are—God’s redeemed and reconciled people in Jesus Christ. The church, you see, exists in the world not as a quotation mark of the surrounding culture but as an embodied question mark that challenges the standards, values, and business as usual mindset of the world. The values and priorities that shape the world’s view of life are not the ones that shape our view of life. We are, in fact, the first fruits of a new creation, an alternate reality to the one around us in the world. Simply being true to our identity is a counter-cultural thing to do. In this community, everyone who claims Jesus as Savior and Lord has a place. It doesn’t matter how much money you have or how little you have. It doesn’t matter if you are black or white, Hispanic, Asian, or some other racial identity. It doesn’t matter if you are male or female, well-educated or illiterate, straight or gay, boringly sane or mentally ill. You have a place here with God’s people because you are one of God’s people, and it is as we worship, pray, sing, study, and fellowship together that we are nurtured in our love for God, our love for one another, and the life of faithful discipleship to which we have been called. Here each of us finds sanctuary, mutual support, understanding, and love, but our mission extends beyond these walls in the proclamation and the realization of the gospel in the world.

What distinguishes our work in the world from any other group—service organizations or leagues, or social service programs with devoted volunteers—who seek the welfare of others is that we do it in the name of Jesus. I wonder sometimes—and I may be skating on thin ice here with some—but I wonder sometimes if the reason that mainline denominations in this country have experienced such a steep decline in membership and activity decade after decade has less to do with liberal stances taken by the church, changing demographics, and “traditional” styles of worship and more to do with our failure to remember and to honor the centrality of Jesus Christ to our life. We have focused so intently upon programs, policies, structures, politics, and political correctness that we have lost our distinctiveness. You see, it’s not about you and me; it’s not about any pressing issue that we feel the need to win the day on; it’s not about any program or strategy or new and catchy mission statement, it’s about our fidelity to God

in Jesus Christ, our worship of him, and our witness and service in his name to one another and in the world.

Doing the work of Jesus means drawing the circle wide, as he did, as wide as the globe and welcoming within its embrace not only those are like us but all those seeking Jesus and his gift of love and new life. As we go about this work, we will discover, as Jesus did, that people respond to our overtures in unpredictable ways. There will be those who embrace the good news, those who simply ignore it, and those who reject it, even with scorn and violence. Our calling, though, is not to be popular or even successful by the world's standards but faithful to God's call to us in Christ. God grant us grace, in this place and in this community, to do precisely that.

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