

“Little Sermon, Big Words”

Rev. Ken McGarry at The First Congregational Church in Stoneham, Massachusetts
January 23, 2022 – The Third Sunday after the Epiphany
Psalm 19; Luke 4:14-21

Faith, Hope, Love: These short words are little in letter and syllable count. However, although they are but little words, they are also some of the biggest words, as they refer to things of the greatest importance. Next week’s guest preacher, the Rev. Dr. David VanArsdale, will be looking more closely at these little, big words when he preaches on 1 Corinthians 13.

Today, we are looking at another set of words that is also small in size, but great in meaning. We read in today’s lesson from the Gospel of Luke what may be one of the shortest -- but also moving -- sermons ever given. Jesus’ little, big sermon, delivered by him in the synagogue in his hometown of Nazareth, after his reading, presumably from the Hebrew text of a scroll of Isaiah, consisted of only a handful of words: “Today, this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.” Amen. The End. Drop the mic.

It was customary in his time and tradition, as it is in our time and tradition, for a worship service to have a scripture lesson followed by a sermon, which, in his day, the preacher delivered while seated. But the sermons, as they are today, were usually filled with many more words than what Jesus offered on that day (it is likely that many of you would love it if today’s preacher in this worship service would be similarly brief!). But his sermon didn’t need to be one word longer than it was for him to get this very big point across: The time hoped for by the prophet Isaiah, the time for God’s people to enjoy deliverance, healing, and forgiveness -- the year of Jubilee -- was at hand.

The Jubilee year, or year of the Lord’s favor, was to occur every 50 years or so. It was to be a joyous time during which debts were forgiven, war prisoners were released, the fields lay fallow to be rested for future harvests, and people returned to their homes from wherever in the world they were. It is possible that the forgiveness and resting hoped for in the Jubilee year was never really actualized in ancient Israel, but remained just an aspiration -- Jubilee was hoped for, but not actually practiced.

In Jesus' little sermon, he stated that the time for the Jubilee to actually be practiced had come. What more needs to be said? So, amen and hallelujah!

The verses following today's reading tell of the congregation's reaction to his brief proclamation of good news. It is part of next week's lectionary readings, but as the reading from Luke will not be included in next week's service, I'll tell you now what transpired: The people wondered how Jesus, a guy they all knew well as one of their local craftsmen -- and some knew even better as a family member or as a friend -- was now speaking as a prophet of God. Luke goes on to tell us that those gathered in the synagogue, rather than being filled with joy because of his prophetic word that the year of Jubilee was at hand, were instead filled with rage. They drove him out of the synagogue, out of his own hometown of Nazareth, and some even tried to throw him off a cliff!

Apparently, his little sermon had quite the big impact. New Testament scholar N.T. Wright suggests that the reason for the congregation's rage was not because Jesus' sermon was too short, or that he claimed the role of prophet, or that he proclaimed that the long-awaited time of Jubilee was at hand, but because he left out some of Isaiah's words in his pre-sermon reading. The omitted words from Isaiah were that the day of Jubilee for Israel was also to be a "day of vengeance of our God" against the enemies of Israel. According to Wright, what really got the crowd riled up was that in omitting this line, Jesus was "speaking about God's grace--grace for everybody, including the nations--instead of grace for Israel and fierce judgment for everybody else," that Jesus was drawing on "the larger picture in Isaiah...of Israel being called to be the light of the nations," and of God's Messiah coming not "to inflict punishment on the nations, but to bring God's love and mercy to them" (from *Luke for Everyone* by N.T. Wright).

People wanted Jubilee for themselves and punishment for the others. Jesus, led by God's Spirit, had a different agenda. He came to proclaim that the time of Jubilee has come for *all* people, that at hand was a new day of grace and mercy for the children of Israel, but also for God's children not of Israel, for God's children who were Romans and God's children who were Samaritans. And for this, the people wanted to throw him off a cliff!

So when he later went about doing his work, living out the scripture message proclaiming good news, as it was for him a mission statement, he faced even

more opposition and wrath. But in spite of all of the forces working against him, he continued his work of bringing good news to the poor, proclaiming release to the captives, offering recovery of sight to the blind, and setting the oppressed free. From the time he set down his tools at the bench and hung up his tool belt for good and was baptized, which marked the ending of one way of life and the beginning of a new one, he went about his Spirit-led work of sharing God's grace and mercy for all. Even to the end, when those who opposed him and his message finally got rid of him, not by throwing him down a cliff, but by lifting him up on Roman cross, he remained steadfast in proclaiming and living the good news of God's love for all.

Jesus was able to live out his little sermon, bringing forth a new, world-changing day of Jubilee for all, because he was filled and led by God's Spirit, the same Spirit that fills, leads, and unites us! And not only do we have the same Spirit that empowered Jesus, we have the same mission. Like our teacher Jesus, we are to proclaim with Spirit-powered boldness the good news of Jubilee through our own words and work. This was his purpose and this is our purpose.

Let us live, then, with this purpose. May our sermons be little and our purposeful actions be big. May we ever work towards helping the poor and seeing those experiencing any kind of oppression be released. May our work of extending Jubilee grace and mercy be not limited to those are like we are, but be offered to all. May we use each day, which is itself a gift, to share with intention God's much-needed gifts with the world. In the words of Jesuit priest Walter Burghardt, "Child of God, live this day as if it were your first day, as if it were your last day, as if it were your only day" (from "What We Don't Have Is Time" in *Best Sermons, Vol. 3* by Walter Burghardt). Amen.