

WHAT THE CHURCH CANNOT DO

Luke 4:21-30

Psalm 71:1-6

A sermon given by Larry R. Hayward on the Fourth Sunday after Epiphany, February 3, 2019, at Westminster Presbyterian Church, Alexandria, Virginia.

Luke 4:21-30

Then [Jesus] began to say to them, ‘Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.’ 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?’

He 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.”’ And he said, ‘Truly I tell you, no prophet is accepted in the prophet’s home town. But 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; yet Elijah was sent to none of them except to a widow at Zarephath in Sidon. There were also many lepers in Israel in the time of the prophet Elisha, and none of them was cleansed except Naaman the Syrian.’

When they heard this, all in the synagogue were filled with rage. They 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. But he passed through the midst of them and went on his way.

Psalm 71

*In you, O Lord, I take refuge;
let me never be put to shame.
In your righteousness deliver me and rescue me;
incline your ear to me and save me.
Be to me a rock of refuge,
a strong fortress, to save me,
for you are my rock and my fortress.*

*Rescue me, O my God, from the hand of the wicked,
from the grasp of the unjust and cruel.
For you, O Lord, are my hope,
my trust, O Lord, from my youth.
Upon you I have leaned from my birth;
it was you who took me from my mother’s womb.
My praise is continually of you.*

It is ironic that on the morning we ordain and install twenty duly-elected members as officers for our congregation, I would preach on the subject “What the Church *Cannot* Do.” As these elders and deacons embark on three years of service with all the “energy, intelligence, imagination, and love” of beginners, leave it to me to use such a title one a day like this.

But there is seriousness to the title – and hopefulness as well. Let’s look at both.

I.

First, the seriousness.

In the Gospel lesson for today, Jesus has just begun his ministry by reading before his hometown synagogue words from Isaiah the Prophet which had stirred Jews for centuries and would soon have the same effect on Christians:

*'The Spirit of the Lord is upon me [Jesus said],
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 favour.'*

From the time Jesus adopted this clarion call as thematic for his work and ministry, these words have led Christians of all stripes to movements for social reform; prison ministry; special care for the disabled, the impoverished, the oppressed. In the three years of his ministry, Jesus spoke no more compelling words than these to inspire care on the part of the *church* and on the part of *individual Christians* for “the least, the last, and the lost.” In addition, his words have given birth across the centuries to attempts on the part of the church to reform or even dismantle structures of society that hold people down and back.

Yet as soon as Jesus pronounces these words, he seems to point to limits on what he will be able to do:

- *'Truly I tell you, no prophet is accepted in the prophet's home town...*
- And then he adds:
 - *There were many widows in Israel in the time of Elijah... [yet] when... there was a severe famine over... the land... [Elijah was sent to [only] a widow at Zarephath....¹*
 - *There were ... many lepers in Israel in the time of the prophet Elisha, and none of them was cleansed except Naaman the Syrian.'²*

Jesus seems to be saying that even though “the Spirit of the Lord” has anointed him as God’s Son, he will *not* be able to do his work among the people with whom he is close and that, like the prophets before him, there is *only so much* healing he will be able to bring.

Watching this scene from the vantage point of 2000 years of history, it follows for us that in a world in which sin and evil, death and disease, tragedy, treachery, and tyranny retain a great deal of their power, the church will never be able to reach every human being, heal every illness, eliminate every form of injustice, bring reconciliation to every personal, familial, political, religious, class, ethnic, tribal, national, or global conflict. Just as Jesus – even as the Son of God – lived *within* limits during his lifetime, the church today lives within *similar* limits. We can only do what we can do. The rest will come in the final, providential reign of God.

¹ I Kings 17:1-16.

² II Kings 5:1-14.

II.

But even when we accept, however reluctantly, what the church *cannot* do, there is one thing – one thing – that the church retains the power to do: bear witness to the Word God has given us, a Word which – in the end – is a word of hope.

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As many of you know, an ancient schedule of Biblical texts, called the lectionary, designates four passages for each Sunday of the year: Old Testament, Psalm, Gospel, Epistle. Normally at Westminster, we read only one of these during a service; today we have read two.

The Gospel lesson we have heard is stirring.

*good news to the poor
release to the captives
let the oppressed go free...*

The Old Testament lesson – which we haven't read – is the equally-stirring call of the prophet Jeremiah.³

Now the word of the Lord came to me...:

*'Before I formed you in the womb I knew you,
and before you were born I consecrated you;
I appointed you a prophet to the nations.'*

...

*to pluck up and to pull down,
to destroy and to overthrow,
to build and to plant.'*

Jeremiah was called to bear a *word* of warning to people he loved but people who did not want to hear such a word.⁴ In this endeavour, Jeremiah was hardly what we would call “successful,” for after much speaking and warning, the people before whom Jeremiah spoke were carried off into exile. They simply refused to heed his warning.⁵

But the word the Lord had spoken to Jeremiah kept Jeremiah going, kept him speaking, kept him issuing warning,⁶ even in his darkest days;⁷ and that word has been passed down *to* and *through* the church and remains ours to live into today.

When we, like Jeremiah, are seeking to *do* the right thing, *say* the right thing, *live* according to the moral code that comes from how we have been shaped and formed by the glimpses of God we have received, we can *hear* and *take to heart* the words Jeremiah heard and took to heart:

*I formed you...
I knew you...
I consecrated you.*

³ Jeremiah 1:4-10.

⁴Jeremiah 1:6-10.

⁵ Jeremiah 39.

⁶ Jeremiah 30-33.

⁷ Jeremiah 18:18-23; 20:14-18; 26; 37:11-21; 38:1-6.

As for Jeremiah so for us: The word we have been given from the Lord is on our lips and in our heart. No matter what.

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Another of the church's words assigned for today but also unread are equally eloquent. You have heard them at weddings, particularly those in which young lovers present themselves at the altar:

*Love is patient;
Love is kind;
Love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude.
It does not insist on its own way;
It is not irritable or resentful;
It does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth.* ⁸

The Apostle Paul didn't write these words for a marriage service; he wrote them for a congregation he had founded which was tearing itself apart over any number of issues:

- *Class differences among their members*⁹
- *Differences in religious backgrounds*¹⁰
- *Clashes over which leader was more eloquent and popular*¹¹
- *Differences over marriage and divorce and sexual mores*¹²
- *Conflict over the roles of men and women in the church*¹³
- *Disputes concerning whose spiritual gifts were superior*¹⁴
- *Conflict over how to relate to the world*¹⁵
- *Differences over whether boundaries should be porous or tight.*¹⁶

Paul was deeply aware of what the church in its fallen state could *not* do. But still he knew the church had the words with which to share the Word of God, so even in the midst of conflict and division he dared to speak these words:

[Love] bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

Love never ends...

There is much the church *cannot* do, but we can always *bear witness* with our *words* to the Word we have been given.

⁸ I Corinthians 13.

⁹ I Corinthians 1:26-31; 11:17-22, 27-34.

¹⁰ I Corinthians 8:7-13.

¹¹ I Corinthians 1:10-17; 3:1-23.

¹² I Corinthians 5; 7.

¹³ I Corinthians 11:2-26.

¹⁴ I Corinthians 12.

¹⁵ I Corinthians 8; 10:1-22.

¹⁶ I Corinthians 9:19-23; 12:12-31.

III.

Thus far we have focused on words we have been given that are eloquent and memorable:

*...release to the captives
Before you were born I consecrated you
The greatest of these is love.*

But sometimes the words we in the church are given do not quite rise to this level of being memorable. The psalm assigned for today¹⁷ is in this latter category. While the choir has sung it well, the words themselves – at least when read – don’t always remain with us as easily as some of the other words we have heard today.

The careful eyes of scholars recognize in this psalm “an assemblage of snippets from other psalms.”¹⁸ Its verses can sound like a hodgepodge of religious phrases we have heard all our life, the kinds of words we “expect” the Bible to contain, the preacher to say.

*In you, O Lord, I take refuge;
let me never be put to shame.*

*In your righteousness deliver me and rescue me;
incline your ear to me and save me.*

*Be to me a rock of refuge,
a strong fortress, to save me,
for you are my rock and my fortress.*

If when hearing this psalm it seems like we have “heard it all before,” it may be because we have.¹⁹

But even though the phrases may not be *original* with this psalm, neither are they *casual* or *shallow*. Listen to some of them again slowly, one by one:

*Rescue me, O my God, from the hand of the wicked,
from the grasp of the unjust and cruel.*

*For you, O Lord, are my hope,
my trust, O Lord, from my youth.*

*Upon you I have leaned from my birth;
it was you who took me from my mother’s womb.*

¹⁷ Psalm 71:1-6.

¹⁸ Robert Alter, *The Book of Psalms: A Translation and Commentary* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2007), 245.

¹⁹ Psalm 71:1-3 “In you, O Lord, I take refuge; let me never be put to shame. In your righteousness deliver me and rescue me; incline your ear to me and save me. Be to me a rock of refuge, a strong fortress, to save me, for you are my rock and my fortress” is very close to Psalm 31:1-3a “In you, O Lord, I seek refuge; do not let me ever be put to shame; in your righteousness deliver me. Incline your ear to me; rescue me speedily. Be a rock of refuge for me, a strong fortress to save me.” Likewise, Psalm 71:5-6 “For you, O Lord, are my hope, my trust, O Lord, from my youth. Upon you I have leaned from my birth; it was you who took me from my mother’s womb. My praise is continually of you” echoes Psalm 22:9-10 “Yet it was you who took me from the womb; you kept me safe on my mother’s breast. On you I was cast from my birth, and since my mother bore me you have been my God.” Later in the psalm, there are parallels between 71:12a and 22:1, 11, and 19; between 71:12b and 38:22 and 40:13; and between 71:13 and 35: 4 and 26, and Psalm 22:30. But Alter (245) also points out that “the use of such stereotypical phrases and even whole clauses is characteristics of the poetry of psalms.”

These are not the most *eloquent* words in scripture, but they can speak to us, because they matter.

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One of the great Protestant hymns speaks to the power of the words we have been given. In English translation, it reads:

*The Prince of Darkness grim,
We tremble not for him;
His rage we can endure,
For lo, his doom is sure,
One little word shall fell him.*

*That word above all earthly powers,
No thanks to them, abideth;
The Spirit and the gifts are ours
Through [Christ] who with us sideth...²⁰*

A few summers ago, I stumbled across, of all people, Machiavelli, describing what he got out of reading classical literature each evening:

When evening arrives [he wrote], I return home and go into my study, and at the threshold, I take off my everyday clothes, full of mud and filth, and put on regal and courtly garments; and decorously dressed anew, I enter the ancient courts of ancient [people] where, lovingly received by them, I feed myself on the food that is mine alone and for which I was born, where I am not ashamed to speak with them and to ask them about reasons for their actions, and they, in their humanity, respond to me. And for four hours at a time, I do not feel any boredom, I forget every difficulty, I do not fear poverty, I am not terrified at death: I transfer myself unto them completely.²¹

Whether the words we have been given come to us in “a series of snippets” we have heard before, a charge “to build and to plant,” a commission to “preach good news to the poor,” or a hymn extolling God’s love which rings true to human love, what we study and speak is the Word.

- These words are “food that is [ours] alone and for which [we were] born,” food unto which we “transfer [ourselves]...completely.”
- These words are what “fell the Prince of Darkness grim.”

No matter what else is going on around us, their study and speaking is what the church *can* do.

Amen.

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²⁰ Martin Luther, “A Mighty Fortress Is Our God,” available at <http://www.hymntime.com/tch/htm/m/i/g/mightyfo.htm>.

²¹ *A Letter from Niccolo Machiavelli to Francesco Vettori*, December 10, 1513, in *The Prince and Other Writings*, translated by Wayne A. Rebhorn (New York: Barnes and Noble Classics, 2003), 151.