

Embodying the Faith

Luke 4:14-21
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First Presbyterian Church
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Mother Teresa was visiting Australia and a new recruit to the Franciscan order was assigned to be her guide and “gofer” during her stay. Thrilled and excited at the prospect of being so close to this great woman, he dreamed of how much he would learn from her and what they would talk about. But during her visit, he became frustrated. Although he was constantly near her, the friar never had the opportunity to say one word to Mother Teresa. There were always other people for her to meet. Finally, her tour was over, and she was (preparing) to fly to New Guinea. In desperation, the Franciscan friar spoke to Mother Teresa, (saying), “If I pay my own fare to New Guinea, can I sit next to you on the plane so I can talk to you and learn from you?” Mother Teresa looked at him. “You have enough money to pay airfare to New Guinea?” she asked. “Yes,” he replied eagerly. “Then give that money to the poor. You’ll learn more from that than anything I can tell you.”¹ Mother Teresa was telling him to embody the faith – not just learn about it or even follow it around, but actually put his faith into practice.

What would that look like for you? What would it be like to embody our faith the way Jesus did, selflessly and sacrificially? I can tell you what it’s not like, what it’s like to mess up when trying to embody the faith.

The story goes that one summer day at Anaheim Stadium, the personal statistics of then-California Angel’s player Bryan Harvey flashed on the screen along with these words:
WISH – To end all the killing in the world. HOBBIES –Hunting and fishing.

Yes, it’s not easy to embody the faith, even with the best intentions. But we keep trying, and for guidance and encouragement, we turn to Jesus. Let’s do that now, looking at the time Jesus first declared himself as the embodiment of scripture and all it brings.

Luke tells us that after the Holy Spirit descended upon Jesus in bodily form, after he was baptized by John in the wilderness, Jesus returned home to Nazareth. While sitting in the synagogue, he stood up to read “and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written:

‘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.’

¹ As told by Noelene Martin in the Upper Room, 15 May 1994.

And he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down. The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. Then he began to say to them, 'Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.'"

Yes, Jesus is the fulfillment of scripture, the embodiment of the living Word. Do you remember what happened to Jesus when he began to bring the faith to life in the world around him? He was rejected. We see this just after the passage I read this morning, where Luke tells us that "... all in the synagogue were filled with rage, ... got up, drove (Jesus) out of town, and led him to the brow of the hill ... so that they might hurl him off the cliff."

That's what happened to Jesus when he first stepped out as the embodiment of the faith. Now, I don't think anybody has tried to hurl you off a cliff for trying to bring the faith to life; at least I hope not! And yet, I bet you have felt rejected or at least ignored when trying to interest someone in the church, or set someone free from what's holding them back, or shine light upon God's blessings and guidance when others just don't see it, or fix some unjust system that's rolling overtop of you or someone else, or reassure someone who is convinced God has abandoned them.

Bringing our faith to life is not easy these days – never has been. And that can leave people feeling powerless and rejected. But we are not powerless; we have the power of the Holy Spirit. And if others do reject us and our message, our invitation, our guidance and comfort as Christian, remember, it's not us who they reject, but rather the one who sent us, Jesus the Christ.

And you know what. Jesus faced the same rejection and never once did he give up. Jesus kept showing up where he was needed and doing what he could. Some people he could help. Others would not receive him or his ministry.

If you ever get overwhelmed or discouraged because the church is not all it could be, because society is heading in the wrong direction, because your life is out of control, remember that the promises of Jesus are for you, too.

When Jesus said he came to bring good news to the poor, release to the captives, sight to the blind, freedom for the oppressed, and the Lord's favor upon all people, he meant it! He meant it – not only for the world at large – but he meant it for you, for your family, for your community.

Do you believe that? I hope so. Because if we truly believe in the promises of Jesus, then we can withstand anything this world throws our way. Jesus spent his entire earthly ministry facing down all the rejection that was thrown at him, and then he overcame it all through the resurrection. By maintaining our faith in Jesus, we can get through anything this world throws our way with confidence and even joy.

Now if you're not feeling it – if this world has you feeling overwhelmed or abandoned, know that Jesus is still here for you. Let him come to you where you are. Jesus dearly wants to touch you, forgive you, heal you, guide you. You are not beyond his reach. Come into his beloved community.

And once there – once you're feeling more like yourself again – look around. Who do see in need of the good news of the Gospel, who is being held captive by circumstances beyond their control, who is being blinded to the truth all around them, who needs set free from an unjust system, who is it in your world that needs the love and acceptance of the Lord. Think about it; the people in your life; how you can minister to them

We have so many people around us living in loneliness and isolation, ready to give up, beaten down by the challenges of the day. Be the hands of Jesus to them and offer them your assistance. Be the heart of Jesus for them and show them unconditional love. Embody the faith of the Lord for them, telling them how it brings joy to your life, even in hard times.

And then – after we've looked within ourselves and let Jesus minister to our needs, after we've looked at those around us and ministered to them in the Spirit of Jesus – that's when we can widen our vision and look for the power of God at work in new and surprising places. Jesus is still active in this world, beyond the walls of this church, out in the community, throughout our nation and around the world. Knowing that – finding examples of that – can help us get through the toughest times we ever face.

By inviting Jesus to come along side us, by extending his love and care to those nearby us, and by witnessing the power of God are work beyond us, we come to have confidence in God's plan and purposes for us and for all the world.

God is still at work overcoming the sins of this world through the ministry of Jesus Christ, the power of the Holy Spirit, and the faith that you embody as one called and sent by Jesus. Amen.

Pastoral Prayer

We pray, Lord Jesus, for you to be made known in our community. We pray for multitudes of interconnections between our church and those around us who don't know you as you are.

We pray that by the power of your Spirit, you would reveal the ways you are working in our friends and families, in our coworkers and classmates.

Use us, Jesus, to represent the truth of who you are to an unbelieving world. Let us earn the right to be heard, and when we've earned that right, may we share words of life, words of relevance, words of truth, words of beauty, words of grace.

Seeking to embody the faith you call us to, we prayer your Spirit of comfort and peace upon those grieving the loss of loved ones. We pray your healing touch upon all those battling illness. We pray all this in the powerful name of our Lord and Saviour, Jesus the Christ, who taught us to pray together, saying:

**Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name.
Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our debts,
as we forgive our debtors; and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.
For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen.**