

## GOING HOME

LUKE 4: 14-21

The Third Sunday after the Epiphany/January 24, 2010

University Church of Chicago; Eugene H. Winkler, Pastor

The word has spread throughout the Galilee about this man named Jesus. He, Luke tells us, “was praised by everyone.” This summary affirms the peripatetic teaching ministry of the Man from Galilee.

Then Jesus arrives in Nazareth. This is his childhood home, where he played and worshiped. He enters the familiar synagogue which he attended with his family as a young child. He knows their faces; imagine his shaking hands, working the crowd, affirming the older people who nurtured him in the faith. He calls many of them by name, knows their cousins and asks about their children. Nazareth is a small town; this is a local synagogue.

The ordinary day in the synagogue becomes a very extraordinary day when Jesus come to town. The ordinariness, the usual routine is followed in the worship hour. First, the recitation of the Shema, then praying while facing Jerusalem, followed by the “amen” response of the entire congregation, a reading from sections of the scrolls of the Torah and the prophets, a sermon and a benediction. Any male could volunteer or be asked to pray or read portions from the Torah or the prophets. Likewise, any male could also be asked to give the sermon.

So, on this particular Sabbath, Jesus volunteers to read from the Prophets. He stands to read on a special platform. He is given the scroll he requested or that was assigned for that day—the scroll of Isaiah. Jesus unrolls the scroll, finds the place and begins to read: “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because Yahweh has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. Yahweh has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed” (Isa. 61:1ff.).

This passage, already in circulation throughout Palestine, was used in the Qumran community as an important reference to the work of the Teacher of Righteousness. These words had been attached to the description of the Messiah who was to come, and the people were waiting.

So, here in this small town in the Galilee—a town composed of an area no larger than one modern square city block—the Messianic job description is reinterpreted before the very eyes of the worshipers on this particular Saturday. In a dramatic moment, Jesus rolls the scrolls, returns it to the attendant, and sits down. Luke writes, “The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him” (v. 20). Then Jesus speaks from his place of sitting: “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.”

Consider for a moment the courage it took not only to read those words aloud before your own relatives in your hometown synagogue but then to declare that they can no longer see you simply as a village carpenter or as Mary and Joseph’s boy. He is the one they have been waiting for all their lives, and their grandparents’ lives and the generations before them. The carpenter’s son is the Messiah!

It is instructive to put this narrative of Jesus' "keynote sermon" alongside John Updike's novel *In the Beauty of the Lilies*. This novel is the tale of a turn-of-the-century pastor, the Reverend Clarence Wilmot, who lost his faith in the God he was taught in seminary.

Updike, who died last year, was not only one of our finest novelists/poets/literary and artistic critics but also a devout Christian. He was raised in a Lutheran family in Pennsylvania and in his adult years was very active in his local UCC Church in Massachusetts.

The God Clarence Wilmot was taught—rationalistic, all-powerful and in control—made no sense to Wilmot once he became a pastor. Surrounded by poverty and racism and disease, his seminary education seemed irrelevant. His seminary teachings were like the "twigs of an utterly dead tree," "paper shields against the molten iron of natural truth."

Wilmot came to believe that his genteel professors had sold him on a message that was half wishful thinking, half self-promoting lies. "The doctrine had for these years past felt to Clarence like an invalid, a tenuous ghost scattered invisibly among the faces from sickbeds and Sunday pews and oilcloth-covered kitchen tables of disrupted, impoverished households beseeching him for hope and courage, for that thing which Calvin in his Gallic lucidity called *la grace*."

Wilmot decides against a building campaign to expand his church's structure because he could not justify adding more space to a church building in a community in which poor immigrants slept six to a room down the street. The problem was that his education did not provide him with the spiritual and intellectual strength to make any link between his faith and the world, between his calling and the needs of those he served.

Having studied all the correct theologians and biblical scholars, Wilmot's faith was shattered when the storms of life overwhelmed his doctrines and intellectual superfluities. "*There is no God*" kept repeating in his head. He never saw an alternative to the God of the inflexible doctrines he learned. He ends up in the novel as a peddler of encyclopedias to people who could not afford them but bought them anyway as a sign of erudition.

When Jesus reads from Isaiah, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me because God has anointed me to bring good news to the poor," those words declare the mission of the Church.

Jesus steps forward in Nazareth and declares the truth about his life: God has filled him with the power of the Spirit and anointed him to bring good news to the poor, release to the captives, recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free. And we as followers of Christ are called to the same thing: to know our mission and to understand what God wants us to be and do.

"The church exists for mission as a fire exists for burning," declared Emil Brunner. Mission catches us up in the life and vitality of God, for it is God who draws men and women to act in love and compassion. When we ignore the mission to which God calls us beyond these four cozy walls, there is a corresponding depletion of our very life and vitality.

Jesus risks his reputation, the approval of his family and friends, the comforts of his small town ambience when he takes on the role of the prophet. And the people are stunned! Just as we are when a prophet arises and speaks God's truth to us. "The church's prophets," said Robert McAfee Brown, "must never interfere with the church's profits."

We live in a culture that tells us that we must know our purpose in life, we must clarify our goals, we must consciously work toward fulfilling that purpose. Walk into any bookstore in America and you will find shelves arrayed with books filled with advice about how to succeed in business, sports, politics, relationships and religion. They are written by modern-day gurus and "life coaches."

One of the biggest selling such books is *The Purpose Driven Life* by Rick Warren, pastor of a mega-church in California who gave a prayer at President Obama's inauguration one year ago that was, in my opinion, an embarrassment to the faith. Warren's book is filled with quotations from Scripture, dozens in every chapter. But he never once quotes Luke 4:14-21! Apparently, this succinct and powerful statement of Jesus' own purpose is not considered relevant for informing a Christian's "purpose-driven life."

What do you and I want from life? What do we want to attain? In T Bone Burnett and Robert Duvall's wonderful new movie, "Crazy Heart," the country and western singer, Bad Blake is portrayed by one of our most talented actors, Jeff Bridges. When a woman asks him what is his real name, knowing that it surely cannot be "Bad," he replies, "I will have my real name carved on my tombstone." But after he gets sober and does a 180 turnaround with his life, he is not afraid to eschew "Bad" for his real name, "Otis."

It's not just a matter of moving from being bad to being good. It is crucial that our purpose in life, the individual as well as the ecclesiastical mission to which God calls us, moves us to get beyond our neat middle-class lives and care for the poor, the prisoner, the oppressed.

Victor Lawson was the publisher of the old Chicago *Daily News* for many years. He was a quiet, tight-fisted Christian. If you had lunch with Vic, you certainly would pick up the check. But Victor Lawson caught the vision of Christian love, and his life was changed. His eyes were opened to the needs of the poor and the dispossessed; he was cured of his spiritual blindness. In his will he left Chicago several great legacies: the Lawson YMCA at the corner of Dearborn and Chicago, the Community Renewal Society, countless African American churches endowed on the South and West sides, including Pilgrim Baptist and Fellowship Baptist. When he caught Our Lord's vision of peace and justice, he put his money where his typewriter had been.

Robert Coles told of drawing blood from the arm of Karen Horney when Coles was a resident at Boston General Hospital. Horney was a famous psychiatrist who wrote one of the most important books about neurosis, and she was dying of cancer. She had on her bedside table George Meredith's nineteenth century novel, *The Egoist*. She told Dr. Coles that she had decided in her last days on earth not to read books about psychiatry but to read fiction and poetry. When he asked her why she was reading a novel which was one of his favorites also, she replied, speaking as much to herself as to him: "A patient of mine, a woman kept mentioning this novel; she said it described her former husband 'to a tee.' I kept telling her I would read the novel—I wanted to, but I never had the time. Now I do."

In a subsequent conversation about Meredith's novel, Karen Horney remarked about the protagonist of *The Egoist*: "In this novel we are told about someone who is completely alone in the midst of the company he keeps. That is what happens when you are an egoist—you are deaf to anyone's avowal of love, and you have no voice of conscience addressing you. There is only silence."

Jesus comes home to his home town and everything changes. The silence of our egotism is broken by God's appeal to justice and self-giving love.

The inimitable B.B. King and U-2 have said it in a wonderful song, "When Love Comes to Town":

I was a sailor, I was lost at sea

I was under the waves before love rescued me

I was a fighter, I could turn on a thread

But I stand accused of the things I said.

When love comes to town, I'm gonna jump that train

When love comes to town I'm gonna catch that flame

Maybe I was wrong to ever let you down

But I did what I did before love came to town.

I was there when they crucified my Lord

I held the scabbard when the soldier drew his sword

I threw the dice when they pierced his side

But I've seen love conquer the great divine

When love comes to town I'm gonna catch that train

When love comes to town I'm gonna catch that flame

Maybe I was wrong to ever let you down

But I did what I did before love came to town.