

Unroll The Scroll

Luke 4:14-21

Then Jesus, filled with the power of the Spirit,
returned to Galilee, and a report about him
spread through all the surrounding country.

He began to teach in their synagogues
and was praised by everyone.

When he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up,
he went to the synagogue on the sabbath day,
as was his custom.

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.”

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.”

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Luke 4:14-21

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I.

Given that it is the middle of January and we have no particular place to go owing to the weather and COVID and, now that all the snow's been shoveled, not much to do except shiver in the subzero temperatures, this morning I thought we might take a little jaunt together backward in time and space. We will begin in the wee hours of the morning at the Mobil gas station on Route 1 just outside the ivy-walled town of Princeton, New Jersey in the early 1990's, travel back to late 14th century England to find ourselves sitting fireside at The Tabard Inn on the road to Canterbury and, then, to the creep and quiet of a monastery in Bethlehem in the year 382. So, come on. It'll be fun. I promise to have you right back here in just a few minutes.

II.

To say my time at Princeton Theological Seminary was "challenging" would be an understatement; but not in the way you might think. Aside from Greek, which just about killed me, I found the coursework quite interesting but rather straightforward; simply a matter of sitting oneself down to learn what had to be learned and do what had to be done.

No, the real test was the social component; well, that and the humidity of central NJ. Fact was, most of my classmates were kind of square; nice, but square. Though I didn't imagine finding many who would talk with me about sled-dogs or Dead shows, I simply wasn't prepared for the bevy of God-Squaders who acted as if seminary was a three year long church camp, complete with S'mores and a "Kumbaya" theological perspective; with most taking themselves *way* too seriously. Hence, I did not have many of what I would consider "friends" among my classmates.

III.

There were a few, however. Bill and Cindy lived in the apartment above me in married student housing; both of whom are now on the faculty at the Austin Theological Seminary. Fred, who served as the pastor in Watertown until abandoning me few years ago to take a church in Metuchen, New Jersey,

just outside NYC (which serves him right). Steve, originally from Indiana, lived in the next building next to me; we each had a dog and we'd talk every day while they played in the field across the road. He has served churches in Colorado, Indiana and, now, in Houston, Texas. Then there was John, who was a little older than me; and he and his wife, Bev, had kids at that point which was a bit atypical. John always wore red Converse high-top sneakers, and frequently nodded-off in class; which at first, I admit, was a little perplexing to me (the snoozing part, not the sneakers).

IV.

One night, I happened to be driving home late and stopped at the Mobil gas station there on Route 1 to fill up the tank in my red, 1970 VW Bus hardtop camper. In New Jersey, at the time, the law was that the attendant had to pump your gas to ensure none spilled. Imagine my surprise when John stepped out of the booth to fill up my tank. Turns out he worked there full time, third shift midnight to 8 a.m., to help support his family while simultaneously taking a full class load. Which earned him points in my book. He was good dude, who ended up for a time as the pastor at the Presbyterian Church in nearby Lowville; leaving there around the same time I came to Canton. He went on to pastor First Presbyterian in Elizabethton, TN, then Southminister Presbyterian in Beaverton, OR and, last I knew, had moved back to Montana where he was from originally. I lost track of him after that.

V.

The literary types among us will recognize The Tabard Inn as the setting for Geoffrey Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*; a collection of 24 stories written in the late 1300s in England. The tales are presented as part of a story-telling contest by a group of pilgrims as they travel from London to Canterbury to visit the shrine of St. Thomas Becket at Canterbury Cathedral. With the prize for this contest being a free meal at the Tabard Inn on their return. One of the lesser known tales is that of Melibee. His wife, Prudence, and daughter, Sophie, suffer an attack while he is out: Prudence is beaten and Sophie dies of her five wounds. Though enraged, Melibee follows his wife's advice to call his council. The majority of the council is for war, but Prudence begs her husband to reconsider. Melibee initially resents his wife's advice but, eventually, listens and finally agrees to seek peace rather than war. After rebuking them, he forgives his enemies and thanks the Lord for his wife's wisdom and good council.

VI.

The tale of Melibee includes two sayings of some renown. The first, "And what is better than wisdom? Woman. And what is better than a good woman? Nothing." The second is: "Do some good deeds that the devil, which is our enemy, won't find you unoccupied."

This last saying, however, is actually derived from St. Jerome, a 4th century priest, confessor, theologian, and historian born near the coast of the Adriatic Sea in what is now Albania. St. Jerome's claim to fame is his re-translation of the Old Testament from the original Hebrew into Greek, called the "Vulgate, which attempted to correct and, eventually, replaced the earlier translation called the "Septuagint." It only took Jerome 23 years to complete; the last stretch of it during a long stay at a monastery in the town of Bethlehem. What St. Jerome actually said, and Chaucer only loosely quoted, is this: "Engage in some occupation, so that the devil may always find you busy."

VII.

As I explained in last week's sermon, I've been quite busy the past month or so. You can imagine my delight, then, when last Sunday I was able to enjoy a day off from my liturgical duties thanks to the congregation's graciousness. You'll be happy to know, for the first time in too long, I simply sat by the fire and did absolutely nothing except watch the NFL Wildcard Games and waste time on the internet during two of the three games which were blow-outs and thoroughly unremarkable. Which was how I was reminded of the old adage, "Idleness is the devil's workshop," and why I sought to discover the etymology of the saying which I've shared with you this morning. If idleness is the devil's workshop, the internet has come to be the most favored tool in the shop.

VIII.

You all know how it works, you read an article, which leads to another and another and another; or, you get whisked off on some tangent by "Click Bait" and end up tumbling down a rabbit hole. Before you know it, hours have gone by. That is, if you are lucky; sometimes it costs a person days, weeks or, even, years of their life.

During the Tampa Bay Buccaneer's romp of the Philadelphia Eagles in the early game, I was reading an article on the CNN website about two contrasting essays in the L.A. Times; with one writer offering a rebuke of those who shame the unvaccinated claiming the practice to be both crass and utterly ineffective in changing choice or behavior, and the other writer asserting that such public shaming is a lamentable but a thoroughly necessary component in the fight to contain the spread of COVID. To be clear, those in question were not everyday people who simply chose not to get vaccinated or wear masks but, rather, those who lobbied against them in some public forum; often social media.

IX.

The article referenced various websites, like SorryAntiVaxxer.com, which lists people from all walks of life who campaigned against the vaccines only, later, to die or be stricken from COVID. Curious, I clicked on the link to that site.

What first struck me was the sheer number of people listed, 100s and 100s; all of whom had made it their business to rebuff the science and succumb to the politics. Next, was just how sad all these stories were. Many in their 30s and 40s, their lives cut short with their kids and families left behind. I was, however, somewhat surprised, at least with regard to this particular site, at the relative *lack* of cruelty brought to bear; frankly, these stories were plenty cruel enough just in their telling.

Then, on the fourth page, I was shocked to find the name of someone I actually know, or once knew at any rate: my seminary friend, John, who worked nights at the Mobil station. I wondered if they buried him in those red high-top sneakers, and what happened to him along the way?

X.

I've been chewing on that question all week, leaving the webpage open as a tab in my internet browser, and coming back to it more than a few times. There was quite a bit about John on that website, here is only a little:

John was a complex individual and quite an enigma. For instance, even though he was an ordained Presbyterian minister for almost 30 years, he believed "that religion is a human construct, Jesus is merely a legend, God is a symbol, the Bible is a human document, and there is no afterlife." He was a staunch supporter of the LGBT community and supported their membership in

the church. He was a strong supporter of the Muslim faith and made trips to Iraq. He claimed to believe in science and thought it didn't allow for a supernatural God. Despite his belief in science, as you will see, he was a huge 9/11 conspiracy theorist and this fed into his stance on the COVID situation. He believed this pandemic was yet another government-manufactured crisis created to gain control over the masses. It's all psy-ops to John.

XI.

During the late game I filled my idleness with one of my regular, albeit infrequent, guilty pleasures: perusing the Opportunity List posted on the PC USA website, Church Leadership Connection <https://clc.pcusa.org/OpportunitySearch.aspx>.

Here you can do a search for churches seeking a pastor, using any manner of criteria from geography, church size, salary range, type of position, as well as the attributes or gifts (called “Leadership Competencies”) that each church is seeking in their next pastor like “Change Agent,” “Spiritual Maturity,” “Life Long Learner,” “Preaching and Worship Leadership,” and “Risk Taker” to name just a few.

To be clear, I’m not looking for another church; certainly not now, and quite probably never. At this point, I’m just fixin’ to ride off into the sunset. However, I do like to see what is out there more as a way to gauge the state of the denomination and, occasionally, to send an encouraging word to a Pastoral Search Committee.

XII.

I do, though, focus in on churches that would, theoretically at least, hold some appeal for me. So, I entered my search parameters which yielded about 30 or so churches from all over the country. Of those, only four really caught my eye, each from a different region, and I commenced to read through what is called their “CIF” or “Church Information Form”; something every PC USA church completes and utilizes to undertake a pastoral search. Strangely enough, when I got to the list of “Leadership Competencies” each church listed the very same attribute as the top priority in their new pastor: “Compassionate.”

Frankly, I found that rather odd. First of all, with regard to a pastor, I would assume that being compassionate is implied and the need to list it a redundancy. Second, each church was absolutely clear this was THE most important thing they were looking for in a pastor; probably based on past experience, though good or bad I could not venture to guess. And, third, that I inexplicably honed in on each of these.

XIII.

Today's scripture reading from Luke 4:14-21 finds Jesus in the synagogue in his hometown of Galilee. Jesus stands up, is handed a scroll to read from the prophet Isaiah and, unrolling it, hones right in on what is chapter 61 in our bibles, which is based on the Vulgate of St. Jerome: "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."

It is almost certainly true that this story is included in the Gospel narrative in order to establish the authority of Jesus, as Jesus concludes with the statement, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." However, the additional take away for us, as it regards our purposes here today, is that what Jesus, himself, claims as his top "Leadership Competency": that is, to be compassionate.

XIV.

Sitting atop the crest of 28 years in ministry, it is inevitable that one evaluate what sustains and moves a congregation forward and, conversely, what hinders or erodes a congregation. For me, the difference is cut and dry: being compassionate, or not.

In examining today's scripture reading, it should occur to us that Jesus could have unrolled the scroll and selected any number of verses which spoke to his authority as King, Savior, Messiah or Son of God. Instead, the verses he selected spoke only to his authority in being anointed by the Spirit as compassionate servant; to bring good news to the poor, proclaim release to the captives, recovery of sight to the blind, freedom to the oppressed and to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.

XV.

I can tell you right now, as a pastor, proclaiming and offering compassion to others, and keeping a compassionate heart within yourself, requires all the time and energy that one can muster. I have no idea what happened to John, but when you find time, or make time, for the idle pursuits of fear, judgment and recrimination, you've rolled up the scroll on compassion and ceased learning what Christ calls us to learn, and stopped doing what Christ calls us to do.

The decision to not be vaccinated is certainly each person's choice to make and responsibility to bear. However, actively and purposely encouraging risky behaviors in others is a sign you are taking *yourself* way to seriously and others *no where near* serious enough. The compassion to which Christ calls us is the same as the counsel dear Prudence offers to her husband Melibee: to seek peace and reconciliation rather than war and division. Anything less than this is an invitation to the idleness which serves as the doorway to the devil's workshop.

XVI.

When we begin the journey of faith, be it as a child or as an adult, each of us is handed the scroll which calls us to busy our hands, our hearts, our minds with the occupation of compassion. From that point on, and in each new moment as we jaunt together across time and space, we, ourselves, must chose to stand up and unroll the scroll; for among all the tools in *God's* workshop compassion is by far the most important, and the one for which we should always be reaching. Amen.



The Tale of Melibee



St. Jerome