

Sitting in the Gap Study Guide – February 3, 2019

[Luke 4:21-30](#) & [1st Corinthians 13:1-13](#)

(Click on scripture above to link directly to each passage in the *NRSV* on biblegateway.com.)

Suggested Study / Prep

1. Read the passage(s) in several different translations and/or paraphrases (e.g. *NRSV* and *The Message*)
2. Read the provided commentary(s) below
3. Visit and explore some of the additional resources links (and/or explore your own commentaries, resources, etc)
4. Reflect on the provided questions
5. Generate your own questions and “wonderings”

Commentary on Luke 4:21-30 (From *Homiletics*; “Fake News and Fake in the Pews”, February 3, 2019)

Luke 4:21-30 narrates the startling rejection of Jesus by his hometown of Nazareth. Although Jesus offers an explanation for why his neighbors will drive him out, the reasoning is difficult to follow. This passage comes immediately after his reading of the prophet Isaiah and forms the concluding portion of Jesus’ Nazareth Manifesto (vv. 16-30). Moreover, it is vital to take note of Luke’s preceding comment — “The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him” (v. 20b) — before launching into any interpretation of verses 21-30. This literary detail is palpable and highlights the scene’s tension. It also anticipates the narrative’s dénouement and provides a way for Luke to alert his readers to a decisive moment early in Jesus’ ministry.

After making this telling comment, Luke writes, “Then he [i.e., Jesus] began to say to them, ‘Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing’” (v. 21). It appears that the Scripture is Isaiah 61:1-2, and perhaps a portion of Isaiah 42:1-9, specifically verse 7. The Isaiah passages promise “good news to the poor,” freedom for prisoners, “sight to the blind,” and justice for “the oppressed.” All of these were familiar declarations, future possibilities that the Jews had longed for ever since the exile. The prophet’s pronouncements embody the hopes of Israel, and remarkably, Jesus states without equivocation that “Today this scripture has been fulfilled [πεπληρωται; ind. pf. pass.]” In other words, a new Jubilee (i.e., “the year of the Lord’s favor,” v. 19) has arrived, and it has already begun.

Regrettably, Luke does not share anything else that Jesus said. Yet whatever was said, it elicited a favorable response from those in the synagogue, for Luke reports, “All spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his mouth” (v. 22a). Given that Jesus is a hometown boy, they are surprised by his ability to interpret Scripture and the claim he makes, which Luke discloses via their query, “Is not this Joseph’s son?” (v. 22b; cf. Matthew 13:54-58; Mark 6:1-6a). While the *NRSV* translation is satisfactory, a better option is: “He is Joseph’s son, isn’t he?” This wording not only indicates the affirmative answer suggested by the Greek syntax (i.e., “Yes, he is Joseph’s son.”), but also conveys the wonder that the people of Nazareth feel.

At this point all seems to be going well. Jesus has read and interpreted Scripture, and his listeners have responded appreciatively. But their favorable opinion begins to erode when Jesus says, “Doubtless you will quote to me this

proverb [παραβολήν; 'parable'], 'Doctor, cure yourself!' And you will say, 'Do here also in your hometown the things that we have heard you did at Capernaum'" (v. 23).

There are at least three reasons why this riposte is worthy of some extended scrutiny. First, although some interpreters might propose that a visit to Capernaum is implied in verses 14-15, Jesus hasn't yet visited Capernaum. In fact, his first visit to that village is reported, oddly enough, in the next section of Luke's account (i.e., vv. 31-41). Second, the reference to Capernaum appears to suggest that Jesus is somehow being unfair to Nazareth, or that he favors Capernaum over Nazareth. However, such a conclusion is unwarranted because Capernaum, like Nazareth, is not a particularly receptive place. It stands condemned under God's judgment (cf. 10:15). Third, and perhaps most importantly, Jesus' response following the Nazarenes' endorsement underscores his intent to distance himself from counterfeit prophets and align himself with renowned prophetic heroes like Micaiah and Jeremiah (cf. 1 Kings 22:13-28; Jeremiah 5:30-31; 23:16-17). Beyond that, Jesus not only foreshadows some of his later teaching (e.g., "Woe to you when all speak well of you, for that is what their ancestors did to the false prophets"; see 6:26; cf. 6:22-23); he also sets the stage for his subsequent pronouncements.

Following his biting ridicule of the Nazarenes, Jesus offers another saying as a rationale for his piercing observations: "Truly I tell you, no prophet is accepted in the prophet's hometown" (v. 24; cf. Mark 6:4; John 4:44). Then, he refers to two occasions when God showed compassion for a foreigner rather than an Israelite. The first event happened during "a severe famine over all the land" when the prophet Elijah was sent to "a widow at Zarephath in Sidon" (vv. 25-26). The second episode occurred when the prophet Elisha cleansed Naaman the Syrian of his leprosy (v. 27). In both cases, Jesus points out that neither widows nor lepers in Israel — "none of them" — were given provision or healed. "When they heard this, all in the synagogue were filled with rage [θύμου]" (v. 28). If Jesus had spoken the truth (v. 25), why were the Nazarenes furious? What had ignited their rage?

Perhaps Jesus' allusion to these two incidents from Israel's storied past raised questions about the justice of God, and therefore God himself. After all, how could he callously disregard two classes of people that have suffered much throughout time, especially since they were daughters and sons of Israel? What's more, the apparent injustice only increases when it's recalled that God ordained the drought and leprosy, which are generally not viewed as self-inflicted.

While the preceding suggestion may have contributed to their anger, it's also possible that the source for their fury is found elsewhere. When Jesus reminds his neighbors that "Elijah was sent to none of them except to a widow at Zarephath at Sidon" (i.e., Elijah was sent out of Israel into enemy territory), Jesus openly compares the residents of Nazareth to the degenerate and idolatrous people of Israel under the nefarious King Ahab. In addition, to point out that "none of them was cleansed except Naaman the Syrian" (i.e., Syria, another inveterate enemy of Israel) suggests that the people of Nazareth — like Israel and her kings during the days of Elisha — refused to listen to God's prophet. Instead of receiving Jesus as the way to God — the one who has come "to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor" — Jesus' hometown rejects him and his judgment about their true identity and standing before God (v. 19).

Given that Jesus had revealed the hearts of his neighbors, and likened them to their depraved ancestors whose conduct ultimately led to the exile, it's no surprise that "They got up, drove him out of the town, and led him" to the top of a hill "so that they might hurl him off the cliff" (v. 29). But despite their efforts to kill him, somehow "he passed through the midst of them and went on his way" under the protection of God (v. 30).

Commentary on 1st Corinthians 13:1-13 (From *Homiletics*; "The Agape Update", January 31, 2016)

Paul identifies many of the Spirit's gifts in 1 Corinthians 12:4-11. These diverse gifts flow from one Spirit, and are distributed to all members of the church as the Spirit sees fit, irrespective of one's ethnic or socio-economic background (12:12-13). Furthermore, in the Corinthian church there exists a spiritual hierarchy that ranks spiritual gifts or "spiritually-gifted persons." According to Paul, here's the order: apostles, prophets, teachers, miracle workers, healers, helpers, leaders, tongue-speakers (12:27-30). (The ambiguity of the Greek in 12:1 is noteworthy,

since τῶν πνευματικῶν can be translated as "spiritual gifts," "spiritual things," "spiritual persons," or, as above, "spiritually-gifted persons"). Nonetheless, Paul directs the Corinthian disciples to look beyond these more visible displays of gifts, or openly gifted persons, saying, "But strive for the greater gifts. And I will show you a still more excellent way" (12:31).

Against this setting, Paul initially attempts to move the Corinthians beyond petty disputes concerning which spiritual gift or spiritually-gifted person is more important (cf. 12:14-26). Following a common literary practice (i.e., "the rule of three"), Paul puts forward three examples in order to redirect the church toward the "more excellent way."

The first illustration considers the very last-ranked spiritual gift, namely, "various kinds of tongues" (12:28). This spiritually-gifted person doesn't just speak in one tongue, but is a polyglot. He or she is fluent in multiple languages - that is, speaks with "tongues of mortals and of angels" -- those spoken on the earth and in the heavens. Even so, if this particular member of the church does "not have love [ἀγαπήν], [he or she is] a noisy gong or clanging cymbal," Paul declares (v. 1).

Although Paul's second example specifically begins with prophets, it quickly encompasses other spiritually-gifted persons, such as apostles, teachers and miracle workers. In short, this believer isn't just the recipient of one of the Spirit's gifts, but several. He or she has "prophetic powers, and understand[s] all mysteries and all knowledge, and [has] all faith, so as to remove mountains" (v. 2a). This is an exceptional individual, but if this disciple of Jesus, does "not have love [ἀγαπήν], [he or she is] nothing" (v. 2b).

In the third case, Paul describes a radically zealous believer who has given away all his or her "possessions [ὑπαρχοντα; 'property']," and is even willing to "hand over [παράδω]" his or her body, perhaps to be burned as some ancient manuscripts read (v. 3a). Nevertheless, without "love [ἀγαπήν]," he or she gains "nothing" (v. 3b).

To be sure, the qualifier, "so that I may boast" in verse 3 is somewhat inconsistent with Paul's two preceding illustrations where the focus is on Corinthian believers who have received the Spirit's gifts. (The "I" here should not be restricted to Paul. He is employing a rhetorical device, which allows the "I" to refer to "anyone.") The prior examples also omit any discussion of the gifted person's interior life or motive(s). Simply put, giving away everything and sacrificing one's body "so that I may boast," reads more like one of the seven deadly sins (i.e., pride), and reflects a rather egotistical attitude, rather than the attitude of one who has received the Spirit's gift. Arguably, Paul's final case as written echoes the account of Ananias and Sapphira, who boasted that they were giving all the proceeds from the sale of their property in an attempt to receive the accolades of the Jerusalem church (see Acts 5:1-11).

Setting aside the interpretative challenge of verse 3, Paul's overall position is unmistakable. Whoever lacks love, irrespective of the number or type of spiritual gifts received, is "a noisy gong," "clanging cymbal" or absolutely "nothing" at all. In short, Paul's portrayal of the loveless believer is repellent. Any disciple who acts without love serves as a warning and speaks to the futility of participating in the body of Christ without a humble heart that is directed toward God and neighbor.

But what exactly is love? If anyone is effecting change and making sacrifices on behalf of others via the Spirit's gifts, how can Paul assert that these Spirit-prompted actions are devoid of love?

While it's enticing to equate the outward demonstration of spiritual gifts and love, Paul's understanding of love is more verdant. From his perspective, love isn't about any specific act. Love is not necessarily busy or an outcome-driven endeavor. On the contrary, Paul sees love as a vibrant tapestry reflecting an array of wonderful hues that flow from God's Spirit, transforming and ultimately mending broken human relationships. Love is characterized by patience, kindness, humility and consideration of others. It is not jealous, envious, proud, ill-tempered or bitter. Love weeps over evil and celebrates goodness. "It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things." In fact, love itself is enduring -- it "never ends" (vv. 4-8a). In contrast, spiritual gifts of prophecy, speaking in tongues and knowledge "will come to an end." These three gifts -- along with all the other spiritual gifts -- "will cease" (vv. 8b-9).

For those in Corinth who claim that their gift of knowledge or prophecy somehow grants them complete understanding, Paul offers the following counsel: "For we know only in part, and we prophesy only in part" (v. 9). In

short, even the Spirit's gifts are fractional; consequently, no one should claim any special personal privilege on the basis of one's capacity to prophesy or comprehend divine mysteries. After all, these abilities are ultimately a gift, not an acquired skill. Their aim is not individual elevation, but the promotion of maturity within the church, for "when the complete [το τελειον; 'mature,' 'perfect'] comes, the partial will come to an end [καταργηθησεται; 'abolished,' 'nullified,' 'made obsolete']" (v. 10).

Paul employs two brief metaphors in verses 11-12 (i.e., the transition of a child into an adult, and a mirror's imperfect reflection of reality versus actually seeing someone "face to face") in order to support his assertion that spiritual gifts are a sign of immaturity. The principal markers of a mature church aren't spiritual gifts, but enduring "faith, hope and love ... and the greatest of these is love" (v. 13).

Additional Resources

- [The Text this Week](#) – a huge archive of commentaries, blogs, sermons, etc. Note – this site collects resources related to ALL of the lectionary texts for a given week...not all will relate to the passage(s) being studied, but many will. You will have to sift!
- Check out other commentaries available for these texts (and others!) at [WorkingPreacher.org](#).

Reflection Questions on Luke 4:21-30:

1. Why do you think Jesus was really rejected in this story? Was it the content of his message? His rather provocative commentary after their initial approval? The simple fact that they couldn't see him as anything more than the little boy that had grown up among them with Mary and Joseph? The implication in the stories to which he alluded that God favors outsiders over the Israelites? What could have changed the initial wonder and approval of the crowd into a mob ready to throw Jesus off a cliff?
2. Read this verse in its context with the preceding verses, especially starting at v. 14. Jesus reads from Isaiah, and speaks of Elijah and Elisha in his commentary. How does this grounding in the stories and traditions of his Jewish faith color our interpretations of this incident? It is mere background, or is it a more active catalyst in the events that unfold?
3. Where is the "good news" in this story? How do factors like privilege and relationship affect how we are able to hear it?

Reflection Questions on 1st Corinthians 13:1-13:

1. "Love" is one of those words that we use all the time without generally defining what we really mean in using it. This tendency may be magnified in reading this passage, where our perspectives are colored with the baggage of having heard this passage read at approximately 8000 weddings in our lifetime. So what kind of love are we talking about here? How would you define the word?
2. One of my favorite commentaries on this passage suggests that one way to look at this passage is to recognize that if we affirm that God=love, then we could reasonably substitute the word "God" in place of "love" everywhere that it occurs in this passage. Try it out. Do you gain any new insights from such a shift in perspective?

What questions do you have? What do you "wonder" about when reading these passages?