

***What's In It For Us?
Luke 4:14-30
31 January 2021
sermon by Rev. Jessica McCrae***

I read something on social media the other day that said “If you do something for someone because you expect something in return, you are doing business, not kindness, not relationship building.” It made me think of our scripture lesson today. Today we meet Jesus in his hometown of Nazareth. He has begun his ministry and has been preaching, and teaching throughout Galilee. He finds himself back in his hometown of Nazareth. As was his custom, he heads to his home church, his synagogue, on the Sabbath. One imagines that in their delight at having him home, after all the ministry he has been doing in the area, the leaders invite him to do the reading and teaching there that day. The scripture he reads is from the prophet Isaiah. Apparently, he read well, and everyone was very appreciative and amazed. There were murmurs of awe, that a lowly carpenter’s son could speak so well. Then he begins to really preach.

Jesus, as if sensing the will of the people, says, “I know you are going to want me to do the things here that you have heard I’ve done

in other towns ... you will want me to heal, create miracles, you want proof. You think I have an “in” and you want what you can get. Well, it doesn’t work that way.” Jesus went on to explain that in the time of Elijah, there were many suffering, but God sent him only to one widow in the wilderness. During the time of Elisha there were many lepers, but God sent him to heal only one – a Syrian named Naaman. “If God wants me to do great works here, I will be returned here, but you can’t demand it. It won’t happen just because you think you have a one up on everyone else, because of our connection to each other.”

It isn’t about you, and you wants, it is about God and God’s will.

Obviously Jesus hit the nail on the head with that, because we are told everyone in the synagogue was filled with rage. So much so that they chased him to the edge of a cliff so that they might throw him off it, but he simply walked away. It was quite the welcome home.

It is easy to criticize the people in the synagogue that day, but before we do, it is important I think to consider what motivated them, what their struggles were. It is important to understand they aren’t really any different than any of us. The last time I went back to the area I grew up, I was shocked to learn that the United Church had

closed there. It is a town of about 30,000, right on the border with the United States, and the economy is stagnant. There are churches there, just not with a theology to which I ascribe. There are many new churches, proclaiming a prosperity gospel. It is a version of the gospel that preaches that God wants us to be rich. That if we have enough faith, we will receive material wealth. It takes the message “God will provide” in a very different direction. And I hate that – I hate that this is the version of the gospel that is being preached, I hate that this is the version of church that is surviving there. But I see how it happened. People are feeling desperate. This message is an easy fix. And they want to believe their life will be better – and frankly, it is hard to focus on a lot else when the wolves are at your door, you are in debt, afraid of losing your home, and unable to find work. And a lot of unscrupulous leaders know it, and will preach a false message and take what little money is left, and sell a snake oil hope.

But Jesus wouldn't.

And that really is the sort of thing that Jesus was up against in Nazareth that day. The people had heard about all the things he is doing around them, and they had needs too, had diseases too, were hungry too. If he could help people in other towns, surely Nazareth

would reap the biggest blessings. They were pretty excited by Jesus' ministry, because they saw an opportunity, they saw what they could get from it. And when it became clear that faith doesn't work that way, they rebelled.

It is a pretty human reaction though. We are living it right now, with this pandemic. We pray and pray for an end to the suffering, for people who are sick to survive, for our hospitals to not reach capacity and our front line workers to stay strong. But the pandemic is still overwhelming us. It is so hard when we pray and pray for someone's healing and comfort, or for peace, or positive resolution to a problem, and it just doesn't happen. How does it feel when you watch someone who is kind and loving and faithful, everything we think of when we label someone "good", suffer? How does it challenge your faith in a loving and present God, when everything around you seems to be falling apart and so uncertain? When hope seems fleeting and the future so uncertain.

It happens.

We all have experienced those times when we think, somewhere in our hearts, that things will, or should, work out differently because someone is "a really good person", or we have a

special “in” with God, because we have faith, or pray really well. And it is really hard when those prayers seem to go unanswered. A 20th century novelist once wrote, “Are we only talking to ourselves in an empty universe? The silence is often so emphatic, and we have prayed so much already.”

We all find ourselves praying for our wants sometimes, without adding, “if it be your will.” Without praying for the strength to endure, whatever the outcome. Without praying for the faith to still believe, when we don’t get what we want, when others get what we need. It is human to want a quick fix, and instant cure, an easier road. But when it comes to our prayer life, to our faith development, we need to remember to adjust our prayers to be not so much about what we want but asking for the strength to endure, the wisdom and courage to support others, the faith to see God, even in the darkness. It is wonderful to talk with God and share our concerns and our deepest hopes, as long as we remember that God isn’t a magic genie granting our wishes. Faith doesn’t work that way. This isn’t about what we can get out of it. It is about learning, and growing ... it is about relationship. It is about loving others, and working for a better, more

hopeful, more compassionate world. It is about learning to live in the storm and know, even then, we are not alone.

Listen to what Jesus said again,

“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 freed,

to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favour.”

It isn’t about wishes being granted, it isn’t about wants being met. It is about God working to transform the world.

The people in Nazareth that day had a lot of high hopes that Jesus would be their saviour – but not necessarily in the theological sense of the term. They had wants, and likely a lot of needs too. Many of them were feeling left behind and desperate. Nazareth was a little backwater town, with far less opportunity and wealth than the cities nearby. So when Jesus came along, in him they saw a ticket to prosperity, someone to fix their problems and cure their diseases and make life easier. Someone who could put their town on the map. Who wouldn’t want that? But Jesus made it very clear, faith isn’t

business, faith isn't a transaction. We cannot simply cash in our chips – or say our prayers - and get everything we want ... at least not in the way we want it.

Faith is living, breathing, growing relationship. And sometimes it is a challenge and sometimes it walks hand in hand with a lot of doubts and challenges. But when we truly invite God into our hearts, into our lives, when we are prepared to invest in a life of a faith, we will find ourselves part of a process of renewal. We will find answers to our prayers, but often in ways we didn't expect. We will find hope, where things seem hopeless, we will find release from the things that held us captive, we will find a freedom that we did not know. We will view the world differently, and, as we engage God we will find our wants, and our needs change.

May your heart be filled with good news. May we receive freedom from our wants, strength from the many prayers we make during these difficult pandemic days. May we trust in God to be with us through this difficult time. May our eyes be opened to the peace and hope God's love offers. May the empty places in our lives be filled. Amen.