

## Working Together

I want to point something out about our Old Testament lesson from Nehemiah. When the work started on rebuilding the walls of Jerusalem, Nehemiah wasn't doing it alone. God, of course, was with him. And so were a lot of other, unnamed people, who worked tirelessly to get the job done. I want you to keep the idea – that the work God calls us to requires a lot of people working tirelessly together – in mind this morning, as we look and talk about our Gospel lesson. If you have your Bible or a Bible app, turn with me to Luke 4:14-21. **Read Luke 4:14-21.**

Our Gospel lesson happens right after Jesus has been baptized, and then tempted for forty days in the desert. Luke records, “Jesus returned to Galilee in the power of the Holy Spirit, and news about Him spread through the whole countryside,” (Luke 4:14). Something we don't often talk about is that when John baptized Jesus, some of his followers stopped hanging around the Jordan River, and started following Jesus. And then there's the hometown boys – the fishermen who Jesus would have known from living in Nazareth, near the Sea of Galilee.

We often see the Baptism of Christ as the beginning point of Jesus' public ministry. Following that starting point, this moment when He teaches at the synagogue in Nazareth could be viewed as Him announcing His mission statement, or perhaps to put it another way, His inauguration. He's traveling the countryside where He grew up. “He was teaching in their synagogues, and everyone praised Him,” (verse 15). They like what He's saying. He makes sense. He's smart.

## As Was His Custom

And then we get to verse 16. “He went to Nazareth, where He had been brought up, and on the Sabbath day He went into the synagogue, as was His custom.” I really want you to hear this today New Hope. He was brought up in Nazareth. He shows up in His own hometown. The crowd is expecting a hero. They are ready to see some miracles happen.

Notice, too, that “on the Sabbath day He went into the synagogue, as was His custom.” In other words, He regularly went to worship services on the Sabbath. He went to corporate worship with others who believed in God and in the promises contained in the Bible. Luke goes so far as to say going to worship services “was His custom.” That's huge friends.

Today we often hear people say, “I can worship God on my own.” There are a lot of people not in church this morning thinking they're a-okay because they're “worshiping God on their own.” Look, personal devotion is important – it's necessary.

But we don't fully live out our faith in isolation. When we gather together as the body of Christ, we grow through encouragement, accountability, and a shared mission. Throughout the Gospels Jesus frequently joins other people in worship and in teaching. In Mark 1:21, the writer records, "They went to Capernaum, and when the Sabbath came, Jesus went into the synagogue and began to teach."

### **Jesus Regularly Attended Synagogue**

And in Luke 6:6, "On another Sabbath He went into the synagogue and was teaching, and a man was there whose right hand was shriveled." If anyone has ever had a right or reason to not attend worship services, it would be Jesus – He's God-in-the-flesh! But what we find in the Gospel record is that Jesus regularly attended synagogue. The synagogue was where the word was read, discussed, and applied. It was a pattern for the ancient Church. Luke, the writer of the Book of Acts even records this about the ancient Church in Jerusalem:

They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. Everyone was filled with awe at the many wonders and signs performed by the apostles. All the believers were together and had everything in common. They sold property and possessions to give to anyone who had need. Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved, (Acts 2:42-47).

When I think of worship – especially our worship experiences together – I think of a campfire. When we're together, my flame – your flames – our flames together, burn brighter. When we're isolated, our flame dims and risks going out altogether. I've been through that. Back when I worked at Kroger, there were many Sundays when I worked mornings, and I missed worship services. I know this about myself – if I'm not in a weekly worship service, my whole week is going to flop. It's already shot, because I started it out wrong.

You know, on those few Sundays each year when Kendra and I take vacation, we still plug into a worship service somewhere. It's important for our vitality as Christians to be dialed in with other folks who believe in the great things which only Jesus Christ can do for us. And it pains me to say this, but we have a large part of our church family who have unplugged. And I don't know why in some cases.

### **You Hear Things**

I mean, as a pastor, you hear things. "So-and-so stopped coming because the ex goes there." I've heard that several times – and what's real interesting, is that in at least two out of three of those specific instances, neither divorcee attends here anymore. "I don't like your stance on things, and can tell where the Church is going." I

was actually told that about five years ago, when I put a Facebook post out calling for financial transparency by our representative in the Ohio General Assembly at the time. A few months later, the representative got into some trouble for embezzling campaign contributions. The person didn't like that I had criticized a Republican.

For the record, I'm an equal opportunity critic – I criticize Democrats, too. And Church, don't ever forget this: government officials are given their jobs by the people – and they should always be answerable to the people. I criticize politicians, because I truly believe that most politicians are crooks. And then, I hear other reasons,

Here's a few I've heard over the last five years. "I'm too busy," "I don't feel welcome," "I feel like everyone's trying to pry into my business and be my best friend." "I'm not ready to be around people," "There aren't enough young people," "We don't have a group for \_\_\_\_\_." Fill in the blank with whatever you'd like.

### **Rattling Some Chains**

And then there are the people who have just fallen off the radar. They left during COVID, and never came back. Or they went on a walk to Emmaus, and instead of returning to help revitalize the local church, they start attending a different one. That's happened. I see things on Facebook. The fickleness and lack of dedication to our baptismal vows – the membership vows – that some people have is alarming.

And so New Hope, in the next few months, I'm going to rattle some chains. I hope you're alright with that, because I want you to feel free to rattle some chains, too. Look around here, at who's missing. Something's keeping them away – they're enslaved by something. Otherwise, they ought to be here. Pre-COVID we had an average attendance of sixty people every week in here. Now we're somewhere between thirty and forty.

Our active membership roster shows roughly ninety people on it. But they aren't here. We don't know where they are. Maybe still in bed sleeping on this Sunday morning. I'm not a mathematician, so I can't entirely explain the apportionment funding formula to you, but the gist of it is this: roughly one-third of the apportioned amount is calculated based on the number of members on the active member roster. So I'm going to rattle some chains.

Cindy and I are going to sit down in the next couple weeks while Janice and Bruce are out west. We're going to look at that list, and I'm going to find out who's on that list that we haven't heard from in the last two to five years. And I'm going to be calling them. You can do this, too, if you know people we're missing here.

### **Jesus' Mission = The Church's Mission**

Let's tell them we miss them. We would love to see them back here with us regularly. And in some cases, I know a few of them are going elsewhere. So I'm going to ask those specific people if they'd like to transfer their membership to where they're going now, or be moved over to a "Friends of New Hope" roster, and off our active roster. My intention is that our membership roster is an accurate reflection of who we are by Annual Conference at the end of May.

I'm sure, after I've made some calls, some chains will be rattled. I'd like to think that whatever has them chained up away from worshiping with us, gets broken, so they return back to our church family here. I'm just trying to keep all of us honest and accountable – to each other – and to make sure the Conference office understands who we are, and where we're at now. Accuracy is important for us to carry out our mission here. Jesus outlines in the Gospel what His mission is:

Jesus stood up to read, and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was handed to Him. Unrolling it, He found the place where it is written: "The Spirit of the Lord is on Me, because He has anointed Me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent Me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to set the oppressed free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." (Luke 4:16b-19).

See, Jesus outlines His mission statement in the synagogue at Nazareth nearly 2,000 years ago. It's the mission of the Church – but we can't do it in isolation. And we can't do it, if we aren't all willing to work together to carry out Christ's mission. Shelby County has a lot of great resources as a community. There's Agape – the churches work collaboratively to support that ministry. Alpha Center – it's a collaborative effort that was started by the Roman Catholic Church. Mercy Mission House – it's located in an old church building. The body of Christ, working together as the Body does great, amazing, and praiseworthy things all for His glory!

### **How Do We Live Out His Mission?**

When we find ourselves in the valleys of life – when we face grief, illness, doubt – we have an easier time facing those times when we have the support of our church family. Our church family also helps prepare us to participate in, and glimpse, the harmony of heaven. Listen to this. In Revelation, John writes:

After this I looked, and there before me was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the Lamb. They were wearing white robes and were holding palm branches in their hands. And they cried out in a loud voice: "Salvation belongs to our God, who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb," (Rev. 7:9-10).

I'm looking forward to Super Bowl Sunday. That's one of the most fun Sundays we have here at New Hope. You all cook great soups and stuff, and then we have a

blast with the football toss. All the canned goods – we’re shooting for 2,000 non-perishable food items – and the money raised on that Sunday goes to Agape to help people right here in Shelby County. I can’t do that on my own. In isolation. You can’t either. We do it together – collect all the food, raise all the money – because it’s Jesus working through us as His hands and feet in the world.

We are called to proclaim and live out the mission together. “Then He rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant and sat down. The eyes of everyone in the synagogue were fastened on Him. He began by saying to them, ‘Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing,’” (Luke 4:20-21). See, Jesus laid claim to His mission. We do His mission together.

We stay connected to the body of believers for spiritual growth, mutual encouragement, and to have a collective impact that transforms the world into a better reflection of God’s kingdom. And so, in closing, friends, how can you and I commit to being part of the gathered Church? Not just as attendees, but as active participants? How are we gathering and participating in being His hands and feet, “proclaiming good news to the poor, freedom for the prisoners, recovery of sight to the blind, setting the oppressed free, and proclaiming the year of the Lord’s favor?”

**Prayer:** O God, we do not understand Jesus, the prophet and Redeemer. We do not want to get our hands dirty with the poor, the oppressed, the prisoners. Forgive us for being insulated and isolated. Open our hearts to the poor and help us to love them as You love them, working to bring in the Good News of the reign of God. In Christ’s name, we pray. Amen.