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Luke 4:14-30
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Lepers, Gentiles, Samaritans – Lend Me Your Ears!

Well ... here we are again. We've touched on Mark and Matthew.

This week is Luke's turn.

As we have discovered, although the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke tell basically the same story, there are important differences between the Gospels that help identify the special interests of each author.

Two weeks ago, we saw how Mark told the story of Jesus' ministry in such a way that his audience, themselves suffering under Roman persecution, needed to see a Jesus who had suffered, as well, and who could meet them in their suffering.

And so do we. None of us are immune – Jesus has been there ... he gets it! And that is comforting.

Last Sunday, as we looked at the Gospel of Matthew, we understood his lens to be through his Jewish roots, writing to the Jewish people. They expected a king ... and they got one – just not the one they expected. And although we don't have kings today (although it may seem like it), it is comforting to know that our Savior, our Christ, is King!

This morning, we will see that Luke focuses on a Gentile audience. Actually, neither Matthew or Luke's gospels are purely Jewish or purely Gentile in their account of the life and teachings of Jesus.

But, it is fairly obvious that the authors were influenced by the point of view with which they were associated.

That being said, let's try and answer the question, "who is Jesus according to Luke?"

Each week I have started with the first verse of each gospel because it helps us to answer just that question. That is especially true in Matthew and Luke.

Matthew's opening line, "An account of the genealogy of Jesus the Messiah, the son of David, the son of Abraham..." (Mt. 1:1), puts Jesus squarely in the right place, with the appropriate bloodline. A king's bloodline!

The prologue of Luke's Gospel reads quite differently.

It doesn't start with a genealogy at all, but reads very much like the prologues of ancient histories of his day.

Establishing Jesus' bloodline right off the bat, is not that important to Luke, nor to his readers.

But when we do get to Luke's account of the genealogy of Jesus, which doesn't occur until the end of chapter three, we find Luke tracing Jesus' ancestors all the way back to ... well ... Adam.

So why is that so revealing?

Well, it is because he wants to portray Jesus as the representative of the entire human race rather than simply a member of the Hebrew race. Luke's Jesus is for all of us.

We see that clearly in his attitude towards the Samaritans, the Romans, and others outside the Jewish fold.

Luke also is understood to have been a companion of Paul, who came to be known in Christian circles as the Apostle to the Gentiles.

Interestingly, Jesus is less of a rabble rouser in Luke's gospel, suggesting that the church was concerned about the way that they will be perceived by the Roman authorities.

They wanted to co-exist, rather than butt up against Rome.

Luke is the longest of the four gospels, and together with Acts of the Apostles, the pair make up a two-volume work from the same author.

It is assumed that originally they may have been one book but were separated when the New Testament was put together.

Together, Luke and Acts account for 27.5% of the New Testament, the largest contribution by a single author.

The *Gospel of Luke* is the unit's first half and narrates the birth, ministry, death, and resurrection of Jesus.

The second half, which contains *Acts of the Apostles*, is one of the first works to chronicle church history, tracing events from the resurrection of

Jesus, to the time when the apostle Paul has been arrested in Rome, yet still is proclaiming the Gospel “with all boldness and without hindrance” (Acts 28:31).

Another thing we notice in the Gospel of Luke is that Luke knows how to tell a story. He is obviously educated and so his gospel is injected with a high dose of literary artistry.

And he goes about it very, very methodically as a good Roman author would. He sets the stage historically, and then he tells a perfectly wonderful story.

In fact, it's such a good story that many scholars have interpreted Luke and Acts as a kind of early Christian romance, with all the ingredients of romance, down to shipwrecks and exotic animals and exotic vegetation, cannibalistic natives ...

All kinds of embellishments that one would find in the romance literature of the time.

The Gospel of Luke covers most of what the Gospel of Mark covers but *with the addition* of so many famous parables only found in his Gospel, like the one about the *Rich Man and Lazarus* (16:19-31), and loads of unforgettable sayings, like "If anyone strike you on the cheek offer the other also" (6:29).

And don't forget—he's the man behind such staying symbols as baby Jesus lying in the manger (2:7) and *the Good Samaritan* (10:30-36).

So, as we examine the Gospel of Luke, let me ask again, who is Jesus? To get the answer, we turn to chapter four (the text I just read a few minutes ago)

Imagine the scene. Jesus has come to his hometown of Nazareth and is reading in the synagogue.

His audience most likely would have been hearers of the word than readers of the word, so it was important to tell the story in a way that could be remembered.

And Luke does.

The context is important. Jesus is there in his hometown synagogue, on the Sabbath, in a Jewish worship service, reading the Jewish Scriptures.

All the markers of the story emphasize a Jewish context.

Now listen for the movement in the story: Jesus *stands up* to read. When he does someone *hands him a scroll* and he *unrolls the scroll* and finds the reading from the prophet Isaiah. You can just see it happening before you.

He reads the words of Isaiah:

“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” (Lk. 4:18-19).

Having read these prophetic words, he *rolls up the scroll; hands it back; and sits down.*

As everyone pays rapt attention, Jesus then tells them, “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing” (Lk. 4:21).

It is a prophetic word from Isaiah that lays out a ministry that upends all the status quo: offering good news to poor, sight to the blind, freedom for the oppressed.

No wonder everyone is amazed.

But, in order to get a full view of how Jesus is portrayed as prophet in Luke’s Gospel, we must look to the rest of the passage.

As the story began, we can almost hear the hometown crowd murmuring with both admiration and surprise, perhaps mixed with skepticism, poking one another with their elbows as they whisper:

“Isn’t that Joseph’s boy? Wow. Just listen to him.”

But Jesus doesn’t sit down and the remainder of the passage tells the rest of the story.

He confronts them with the idea that “no prophet is accepted in the prophet’s hometown” (Lk. 4:24) and goes on to tell them stories of how God has sent prophets in the past, to places and people outside of Israel, even when there was great need in Israel.

When the crowd realizes what he said, the previously awestruck folk turn on him and they:

“Got up, drove him out of the town, and lead him to the brow of the hill on which their town was built, so that they might hurl him off the cliff” (Lk. 4:29).

Talk about turning on someone!

This, in a nutshell, is the story of Jesus in Luke, a prophet of God, rejected by his own, as so many other prophets of old had been rejected.

What we see here, and what we will see throughout the Gospel of Luke, is a Jesus who comes in line with the prophets who have come before him and whose ministry reaches beyond the Jews.

Luke portrays a Jesus who is for ALL of us: Those who society sees as winners and those who are labeled losers ... and everyone in between.

All too often people are shoved to the margins of our society because they don't live up to standard norms, and their outsider status leaves them vulnerable to some pretty nasty results.

Unfortunately, all you have to do is look at what is happening in our nation today!

In Luke's gospel, Jesus draws attention to the plight of outsiders.

And, he gets a lot of heat from the religious leaders for hanging out with "sinners" (like tax collectors), but he declares that his mission is directed especially toward them.

In fact, he wants to bring all outsiders forgiveness, release, liberation, healing, and welcome (4:18-19; 7:22; 14:12-14). This includes the poor (4:18; 7:22; 14:13, 21), "captives" (4:18), the blind (4:18; 7:22; 14:13, 21), the oppressed (4:18), the crippled (7:22; 14:13, 21), lepers (5:12-16; 7:22; 17:12-19), and the deaf (7:22).

Our list today might be a little different, of course, but there's no question it exists.

Luke's Jesus also urges *others* to perform the vital task of welcoming outsiders—it's not Jesus's job alone.

In place of friends and neighbors, the poor and disabled should fill the table of a dinner party (14:12-14).

We should be issuing the invitation!

Luke's demand that people love their neighbors—even the ones they don't like—doesn't just mean dropping a few nickels in the Salvation Army's buckets during the holidays.

He's talking about the good Samaritan, for example, who dares to cross and challenge hostile ethnic and religious boundaries for the sole purpose of *helping someone who's suffering* (10:30-36).

Or he's talking about the father who forgives his "prodigal" son, who returns home in poverty after squandering his entire inheritance on some R-rated activities (15:11-32).

Maybe, we should think about enjoying this year's Easter dinner with a bunch of "sinners" instead of friends and family.

Oh wait a minute – in my family they are one and the same!

At a time in which most women were excluded from participating in public life in Rome, and were considered ritually impure for a substantial portion of their life according to Jewish custom, Luke's special concern for women and other outcasts of society is truly remarkable.

Two thousand years ago, women were almost non-persons. They were rarely educated, and had virtually no rights.

Prostitutes were loathed sinners (although their patrons were not condemned). Leaders associated with men.

In contrast, Jesus is as comfortable with women as with men.

He is comfortable with tax collectors who were regarded as traitors, all too willing tools of the oppressor.

Scribes and the people hated them. But, Jesus did not!

Worse in Jewish eyes were the Samaritans. The Samaritan was even publicly cursed in Jewish synagogues.

But, Jesus refuses to accept the prejudices of those around him. He praises Samaritans.

In Luke 10:33, he gives that loving parable of the Good Samaritan.

And then in Luke 17:16, only the Samaritan leper returns to give thanks. We all have prejudices, whether we acknowledge them or not. Luke's Jesus challenges us.

Luke also makes it clear that he believes there is no better test of a man than to note his use of money.

Want to know what happens to rich men? Jesus has examples galore.

There's the one farmer who is so productive that he builds bigger barns to store all of his produce.

With "ample goods laid up for many years" the man decides that it is time to retire, eat, drink, and be merry (12:19).

But right when he's ready to enjoy himself, God takes his life and asks him who's going to enjoy the fruits of his labor now?

Soberly, Jesus concludes, "So it is with those who store up treasures for themselves, but are not rich toward God" (12:21).

A few verses later Jesus speaks to his followers, building on this lesson:

"Do not be afraid, little flock, for your Father has been pleased to give you the kingdom. Sell your possessions and give to the poor.

"Provide purses for yourselves that will not wear out, a treasure in heaven that will not be exhausted, where no thief comes near and no moth destroys.

"For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also" (Luke 12:32-34).

The pursuit of wealth does not fare very well in Luke's gospel.

It distracts from devotion to God and leaves you short-changed when death comes a-knocking.

So, Luke's Jesus might ask, if he were here today: Where is your treasure?

The answer, as true now as it was then: It is where your heart is.

It could be your business, your investments, your career, your home, or any place where moth destroys and thieves come near.

The bottom line ... We all too often put our priorities on things that will not last.

All too often we ignore those who need our love, our resources, our compassion.

That's not the way Luke's Jesus would have us behave. Jesus considers all human beings as valuable, worth his time and attention.

He willingly spends time with women, children, tax collectors, prostitutes, and even non-Jews (Samaritans).

Maybe the question we need to reflect on this week is:

How do you and I live today? Do we indulge prejudice? Do we think our time is best spent with others like ourselves?

OR, do we follow our Master's example and serve the poor, children, women, and even those who are openly sinful or might be considered unacceptable to the convenience of society?

A great question to consider this Lenten season, don't you think?

Amen!