

Luke 4:14-30

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.”

All spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his mouth. They said, “Is not this Joseph’s son?”

He said to them, “Doubtless you will quote to me this proverb, ‘Doctor, cure yourself!’ And you will say, ‘Do here also in your hometown the things that we have heard you did at Capernaum.’” And he said, **“Truly I tell you, no prophet is accepted in the prophet’s hometown.** *But the truth is, there were many widows in Israel in the time of Elijah, when the heaven was shut up three years and six months, and there was a severe famine over all the land; yet Elijah was sent to none of them except to a widow at Zarephath in Sidon. There were also many lepers in Israel in the time of the prophet Elisha, and none of them was cleansed except Naaman the Syrian.*” When they heard this, all in the synagogue were filled with rage. They got up, drove him out of the town, and led him to the brow of the hill on which their town was built, so that they might hurl him off the cliff. But he passed through the midst of them and went on his way.

Last year I was asked to submit my name to the nominating committee as a possible commissioner to the General Assembly. I thought OK, why not, I had been only once to the GA as a commissioner and after more than 30 years of ordained ministerial service to the church, I thought I was entitled to go again at least once more before I retired. Most of my experience in the selection of GA commissioners was based on selecting the one who had been longest from going to GA, along with the one who had served the longest as a pastor. Besides, I'd had similar feelings about the denomination when I went to my one and only GA back in '92 and I returned reinvigorated and full of optimism. Lately I've been needing some booster shots of that with respect to the governing bodies-- except for session.

In short, I thought I was a shoe in. And based on my experience, I thought I was entitled. Never mind that compared to some, my service in the presbytery, on committees and that sort of thing was admittedly limited. Add to that some unwise remarks that had probably fallen on the wrong ears that Presbytery meetings were basically a function of egos on parade (I have said that many times, so it probably didn't help my cause); plus my attendance at said meetings was its own clear statement and the fact that I left early, more times than not, probably added to the fact that I was not selected.

Remember what I said about ministers being selected who had served longest without attending GA as a commissioner? I thought I deserved it. I thought I was going. You know what? Not only was I not selected as a commissioner, I wasn't even selected as an alternate. Not even an "Attaboy!" I was hurt, and more than a little humiliated. Did I say I thought I deserved it?

This year when the nominating Committee called to ask if I wanted my name in the hopper for the next GA, I turned them down flat. My attitude hadn't changed much, and I wasn't going to subject myself again to the humiliation of not being selected, especially when I felt I deserved it.

When I was reading this story about Jesus' appearance in Nazareth, his hometown and read the response of his fellow citizens after he had made the remark about Elijah and Elisha, I decided that I knew exactly how the crowd at the synagogue in Nazareth must have felt; after all he was the carpenter's son. He had grown up among them. If there is any truth to the oft quoted African proverb, that "it takes a village," surely they had taken part in raising Jesus, as they had all of the other children, and as their fathers and mothers had done for them. And just as the people of Nazareth had paid homage to their elders, they expected that Jesus would pay particular homage to the people in the town where he had been raised.

They felt entitled. He was, after all one of them; and not one from the village down the road, or on the other side of the big lake. He was theirs, they had raised him, they deserved special, or at least equal treatment. When he didn't deliver the predicted goods, they were angry and almost angry enough to kill.

One of them might have said, "Who does he think he is? We changed his dirty diapers.

We picked out the gravel when he skinned his knee.”

And another, “We taught him in our synagogue. He’s the carpenter’s son for goodness sake! When we heard he was coming home we got excited; we figured that we’d get at least what everybody else got, and probably a lot more.”

And another, “When I think about all of the blind and lame, the widows and the orphans, the old and alone, and he didn’t lift a finger, literally did not lift a finger to help any of them. Of course I’m angry! We deserved better.”

And now we’re hearing this stuff on TV, about what we deserve, about getting the credit we deserve, even if we have lousy credit. Or about how we should check out this or that auto dealership because they can put you in a car even if you have bad credit because you deserve a car. Or there’s the company that will help you get all the money “you deserve” out of the structured settlement of an inheritance or a lawsuit. “It’s your money...” You’re entitled!

I think that the difference between my generation and my parent’s generation has a lot to do with how the people of Nazareth felt when Jesus came home for his visit. Actually I don’t know if either generation would have acted much differently than the people of Nazareth did on that occasion. But as I reflect on the difference between those two generations, I think that the difference between us, apart from our age, is our sense of entitlement. One of my favorite ads of several years ago was the brokerage house Smith-Barney (No relation unfortunately) who boasted that they, “made money the old fashioned way, “ they “earned it.”

When did making money by earning it become old fashioned?

When did sitting back and waiting for our ship to come in become so fashionable? I used to do that until one day I realized that nobody gives you the ship, you have to build it, and load it with cargo, and launch it, and then you can wait for your ship to come in.

Now what I wish is that Jesus had done mighty works in Nazareth even though they had no faith. Because in both Matthew and Mark, where this story appears both make a point of saying that Jesus did no mighty works there because of their lack of faith. Only Luke, who wrote a much longer and more detailed account of this event did not specifically state that Jesus had judged them because of their lack of faith; even though the argument could be made that he implied that they had no faith.

But I wish he’d done mighty works there anyway. I know that their expectations were out of synch with what Jesus offered, but again, I wish he had done it anyway, because isn’t that the way grace is supposed to work? Isn’t it unmerited and frankly, undeserved? And I know they thought they deserved it. Sometimes we believe we deserve it, but of course if we did, it wouldn’t be grace, would it? It would just be payment for a job satisfactorily done.

What distinguishes us from other religions-- for better or worse-- is the recognition of our imperfections, and how despite those, God loves us. I know it is hard to believe, but deny it at your peril, and I am not talking about a burning hell here, I'm talking about the psychological torment that can feel like hell. I'm talking about wandering around for thirty or forty or seventy days or weeks or years bearing the guilt of a lifetime of mistakes with no relief in sight.

But the problem with Nazareth was that they thought that they deserved something they did not deserve. Last time General Assembly met, I thought I was going to be there, was looking forward to visiting my uncle in San Jose, I thought I deserved it, but I didn't. And you know, it would have been nice and real graceful if the nominating committee had said, "Let's send Smith anyway, BECAUSE he doesn't deserve it." But you know, I'm glad they didn't because I wouldn't have gotten it. I would have thought that they had picked me because I deserved it, and I wouldn't have had the first clue about the degree of grace involved.

This grace of God is wild; that is to say it is untamed and attempts by us to tame that grace results in frustration and dashed expectations.

The grace of God is undeserved and no one of us is entitled to it.

The grace of God is the blind man who caught Jesus' attention as he begged at his accustomed corner. It is the man who sat for 38 years by the edge of the pool at Bethsaida. It is a woman who had been bleeding her life away, taking hold of the hem of Jesus garment. It is the man who cried out Lord, I believe, help my unbelief.

It is everyone of us...

Who believe, not because we deserve it, not because we are entitled, but because God loves us in spite of ourselves.