

Luke 4:16-21 (NRSV)

¹⁶When 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, ¹⁷and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written:

¹⁸“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,

¹⁹to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.”

²⁰And 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. ²¹Then he began to say to them, “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.”

Acts 6:1-7 (The Message)

During this time, as the disciples were increasing in numbers by leaps and bounds, hard feelings developed among the Greek-speaking believers—“Hellenists”—toward the Hebrew-speaking believers because their widows were being discriminated against in the daily food lines. So the Twelve called a meeting of the disciples. They said, “It wouldn’t be right for us to abandon our responsibilities for preaching and teaching the Word of God to help with the care of the poor. So, friends, choose seven men from among you whom everyone trusts, men full of the Holy Spirit and good sense, and we’ll assign them this task. Meanwhile, we’ll stick to our assigned tasks of prayer and speaking God’s Word.”

The congregation thought this was a great idea. They went ahead and chose—
Stephen, a man full of faith and the Holy Spirit, Philip, Procorus, Nicanor, Timon,
Parmentas, and Nicolas, a convert from Antioch.

Then they presented them to the apostles. Praying, the apostles laid on hands and commissioned them for their task.

The Word of God prospered. The number of disciples in Jerusalem increased dramatically. Not least, a great many priests submitted themselves to the faith.

We come today to our fifth holy habit, caring. Caring for others is love in action, indeed it is what Christians mean by love. And it is the enactment of God’s kingdom in the here and now, making God’s promised future a present reality.

It’s a typical Saturday in Nazareth. The sun is up early. It’s warm. Since no work can be done on the Sabbath, many of the villagers sleep a bit later. It is the day set aside to rest, as God had rested after creating the cosmos. After morning prayers and a morning meal, the villagers make their way to the small synagogue where they will hear and then discuss passages from the Torah¹ and from the Prophets. One man will read from the Hebrew while another translates it into Aramaic, as many of the villagers neither read nor speak Hebrew.

On this particular day, a villager by the name of Jesus, the middle-aged son of Joseph and Mary, rises to read from the Prophets. He asks that the scroll of Isaiah be brought to him. Jesus unrolls it to the desired section and begins to read, “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. . . .” All eyes in the synagogue were on their neighbor as he read. A stunned silence fell across the room as Jesus proclaimed that God’s great promises were being fulfilled on that quiet Saturday morning.

The Jews had been waiting for a long time. When would the promises brought by the prophets of old be fulfilled? When would God step in and put things right? And of immediate concern to the villagers, when would God rescue his people from the hated Romans? . . . today????!!!

Luke’s account of what happens after Jesus sits down is perplexing and difficult to understand. Surely this is to be expected. Though everyone in the synagogue that day was

¹Torah, meaning “law” or “instruction” in Hebrew, was also used to designate the first five books of the Hebrew Scriptures, Genesis to Deuteronomy. These books, believed to have been written by Moses, were accorded a special status in the Scriptures.

stunned by what they heard, some probably heard the shocking proclamation with grace and wonder. Could it be that God's prophet, even God's anointed, could come from Galilee,

The Bible and "Love"¹

In our culture, "love" has become a word that is used so freely, to express so many different ideas and feelings, that it has become almost useless. I "love" God, I "love" my family, I "love" my dog, I "love" dark chocolate (ok, I do!). Because we use the word in so many ways, we need to begin with a brief look at the biblical use of the word "love."

In the Old Testament, our love for God is focused on the delight and joy we find in God. Our love for God is our seeking after God himself. Our love for God is bound up with our obedience. Those who love God are those who keep his commandments (Deut 5:10), serve him, and walk in his ways (Deut 10:12). At the same time, our love for God is to be an internal matter, an affair of the heart (Jeremiah 31:33). Much more than simply affection for God or others, love encompasses the whole person – our heart, soul, mind, and strength.

God's love is focused on his people, as a nation or community, more than on any specific individual. God's love for his people is manifested in his relentless pursuit of Israel despite their endless abandonment of him and the covenant. The story of Hosea gives concrete expression to God's unfathomable, incomprehensible love for the people he has chosen! God instructs Hosea that he is to love and marry a prostitute, Gomer, and continue loving her, no matter what she does to shame and dishonor him. God loves Israel and Hosea is to love Gomer – regardless!

In the New Testament, Jesus builds on the Old Testament understanding of love but makes it completely unconditional. Our love for God represents total commitment and trust. Our love for neighbor is extended to all humanity and cannot be separated from our caring for the marginalized in our society. Jesus even makes clear that our love for neighbor is extended to our enemies – all are included!

¹ Much of this material is adapted from Kittel's *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* (abridged by G. Bromily)

from Nazareth? We can be sure that many others responded with derision. Wasn't this just the boy from down the block!? In the end, wonder and derision both turned to anger as Jesus explained that his anointing would be not just for the Jews, but for the Gentiles also.² Not just for the Jewish poor, but for the world's poor. In Jesus, all the blind would see and all the captives would be freed, irrespective of race, gender, or nationality – or even their covenantal status with God. And his neighbors ran Jesus out of town for it.

This story is one of the most significant in the gospels. From that Sabbath day onward, everything Jesus said and did had to be understood in the light of his anointing by God and the arrival of God's kingdom.³

Jesus' countless healings, his welcoming of tax-collectors and prostitutes, and his forgiving of sins were all acts of caring compassion, but they were far more. Jesus made the blind see because in the kingdom of God there are no blind. Jesus ate with outcasts because in the kingdom of God there are no outcasts. He made the lame walk, because in the kingdom of God there are no lame. He forgave sins because with the arrival of God's kingdom, the prisoners had been set free.⁴

Jesus enacted the kingdom of God in all that he said and did. And he called his disciples to such caring acts as well. In them, we not only care for those who need caring, we pull God's future into the present. Every act of love we perform is an eschatological moment, giving a glimpse of the coming marriage of heaven and earth.

The first community of Christians lived out this understanding. The Jerusalem community had been created by the Holy Spirit during the festival of Pentecost (see Acts 2). And they were now empowered

²In the rest of the passage, (4:16-30), Jesus reminds them, for example, that Elijah and Elisha had both gone to the Gentiles. Also, Jesus' first miracles were in Capernaum, not Nazareth. Capernaum, the town on the Sea of Galilee that Jesus would make his ministry headquarters had a sizeable Gentile population. "Who was Jesus to go the Gentiles?," the villagers thought to themselves. God's anointed, the Christ/Messiah, belonged to the Jews! As Luke emphasizes throughout his gospel, Jesus was not only the Jewish Messiah, but the Savior of the world. It makes you wonder how often we try to put exclusionary claims on Jesus.

³The arrival of God's anointed (the Messiah), the liberation of the captives, recovery of sight to the blind, the defeat of sin and death, and the resurrection of the dead were all part of one single package: the Day of the Lord, the day when God would step in and put things right, keeping the promises God had made long before. It is the day that the prophets from centuries before had envisioned and the day for which the Jews had long waited. Jesus announced its arrival.

⁴I couldn't help but be reminded this week of Martin Luther King's great "I Have a Dream" speech delivered at the 1963 March on Washington. This great preacher ended with these words from an African-American spiritual: "Free at last, free at last . . . thank God Almighty, we are free at last." The meeting of heaven and earth.

by God's Spirit, preaching the Good News and caring for one another. They did their best to live out the reality that they were Spirit-filled. They shared what they had for the good of all. They prayed with boldness in telling the Good News even when faced with hostility. And the community grew.

Like all growing communities, they had to learn new ways of doing things. As Luke tells us in today's passage from Acts, the leaders found themselves torn between their proclamation of the word of God and the needs of the community. So they chose leaders who could see to the caring ministries of the community, to the feeding of the poor and the needs of the widows. The apostles prayed for these ministers and laid their hands on them. They would not merely be doing good, though good it would be, they would be building for the kingdom of God. God calls us to adopt this holy habit of caring.

Loving as Caring

Luke tells us that Jesus was once approached by a lawyer who asked him what he must "do to inherit eternal life." Jesus asked the lawyer what was written in the law and the lawyer replied, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself." (see Luke Chapter 10) Jesus told the lawyer he had answered correctly. But of course, being a lawyer, the man asked Jesus, "Who is my neighbor?" Jesus replied by telling a story, the parable of the Good Samaritan. In this story, a Jewish man, lying injured by the side of the road, was refused help by a priest and then a Levite (the priestly tribe of Israel), only to be helped by a Samaritan, who was the true neighbor. It is hard for us to grasp how shocking this story would have been to the good Jews listening to Jesus. It would be as if Jesus told the story in an Israeli café today, with an Israeli schoolgirl lying injured, refused help by a Rabbi and an Israeli soldier, only to be helped by a member of Hamas!¹ You see, the Jews of Jesus' day despised the Samaritans, holding them to be little better than dogs. Jesus' listeners would have been angered by the story, but they might have also grasped the depth and universality of God's command to love their neighbors.

Our love is to be a practical love, a love not only of the heart, but of the hands! In the NT, the word most commonly translated "love" is *agape*. *Agape* does not necessarily connote warm affection. Instead, it conveys sacrificial love, focused on acts of mercy and caring.

Jesus' announcement in Nazareth was a proclamation of the arrival of God's kingdom, a kingdom built upon a foundation of sacrificial love. Of course, the kingdom's arrival seems an odd claim to make. Evil was then and is still a present reality. In light of suffering and hatred, how could Jesus proclaim the coming of God's kingdom? How could Paul speak of Jesus' victory on the cross (Colossians 2:15)? Richard Hays of Duke Seminary answers such questions this way, "Why do the powers of wickedness continue to operate effectively in this world? Because the story is not over. The climactic victory has been won on the Cross, but there is still much residual resistance. So we live in a tension-filled interval where skirmishes are still under way." But do we really have a role to play in the full realization of the kingdom of God? If so, what is it?

God's plan to transform, renew, and restore all of creation is to be worked out through us. Jesus asked his disciples how they could possibly be the light to the world if they kept the light hidden from others. He told them to go out and make disciples across the entire planet. As selfish, prideful, and weak as we humans tend to be, God, in his wisdom, sends us out to do his work. And he has sent his Holy Spirit to guide us and strengthen us, so that we will not insist upon turning inward to our own needs, but will turn outward in compassion and caring.

¹ The shocking nature of this parable is driven home in John Crossan's, *The Dark Interval*. 1988. Sonoma, CA: Polebridge Press

READING WITH HEART & MIND, FEB 3 – FEB 9

How do these passages inform our understanding of caring, the fifth holy habit?

Monday, Leviticus 19:1-18 God instructs Israel on love as caring. See esp. v.18

Tuesday, Isaiah 54:4-10 The compassion that is God's everlasting love.

Wednesday, Luke 6:27-36 Jesus talks about loving those who are the hardest to love.

Thursday, Acts 9:36-46 Tabitha is the one who has cared for the widows and now she has died.

Friday, 1 Timothy 5:4-8 Caring for widows (the most marginalized group in ancient cultures) and for one's own family

Saturday, Job 31: 16-23 Job claims that he has treated others with loving care

Sermon Notes

Continuing This Sunday! *Exploring World Religions*

Taught by Scott Engle at 11:00 in Festival Hall on Sunday morning

This series is an introduction to the major world religions – but with a twist!

Join us any week that you can, as each week will stand on its own.

This week: Buddhism Next week: Judaism

A Book Recommendation: *The Divine Conspiracy*

By Dallas Willard

From time to time, I'll make book recommendations that are related to the current sermon series. This book by Dallas Willard is certainly one of the most influential books on discipleship in recent decades. It will repay a thoughtful reading many times over.

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

1. In the New Testament, love is not a feeling or even an idea. It is the concrete expression of Jesus' self-sacrificial death on the cross. "We know love by this, that he laid down his life for us – and we ought to lay down our lives for others." (1 John 3:16) We look to Jesus' life to see what love really is. True love for God and neighbor is an expression of our repentance, transformation, discipline, and sacrifice. How can Jesus' example of sacrificial love transform our own notions of what it means to love and care for others? How is your love for others seen in your own concrete actions; i.e. in your concrete caring? How is your love for God seen in your actions? Do we ask enough of ourselves or is our love limited to that for which we can find some extra time and effort in our busy lives?
2. Our Crosstraining Commitment Card expresses the holy habit of caring as "Taking action when I become aware of others in need." What are some stories of times when you took action in the face of need? What are some stories of occasions when you did not? All of us have plenty of stories for both lists. What holds us back from taking action? What are some concrete means by which we could make caring a holy habit?
3. When Jesus rises in his hometown synagogue, he proclaims that the day has arrived, that the kingdom of God is at hand. This is hard for most of us to grasp, but it is important to see the larger significance of our caring acts. The kingdom of God is not just about the future but it is also about the present. It is still coming, but it is present now! In his book, *Rumors of Another World*, Philip Yancey urges us to see this as much like two "parallel universes" that, even now, do overlap from time to time and place to place. When you look at St. Andrew right now, what do you see? Do you at all see God's kingdom present here? In what ways? When? What are some concrete examples? See if you can come up with a list of ten. When have you felt like you've stepped into God's kingdom?