

St Paul's, Concord  
January 26 & 27, 2019  
1 Corinthians 12:12-31a; Luke 4:14-21  
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Our gospel passage tells us that one Sabbath day, shortly after beginning his ministry, Jesus returns to his home town and attends the local synagogue. Nothing very unusual about that except that if we were to read the verse that follows on from our passage, we'd discover that the people were "amazed at the gracious words that (came) from (Jesus') lips" that day. (Luke 4:22)

Something remarkable happened in the synagogue at Nazareth that day alright – and it has some important implications for us. But first I want to point out some relatively *unremarkable* things.

First of all, the synagogue itself. During the time of exile, nearly 600 years before Jesus was born, when they were deprived of their temple and their priests, the Jewish people would gather together, say prayers, read scripture aloud, comment on the scripture readings and take up collections for the poor. Even when they returned to Jerusalem, and the temple was rebuilt, the system of synagogues survived. The policy of lay-leadership survived as well. All male adults were permitted – *encouraged* – to read aloud from Scripture and comment on it publicly.

So it isn't at all remarkable that Jesus goes to the synagogue in Nazareth. He'd grown up there; he probably knew it as well as he knew his own home. And it would be full of old friends and relatives – people who'd known Jesus since he was a toddler.

Luke tells us that Jesus goes to the synagogue on the Sabbath day "as (is) his custom" (Luke 4:16) That's not remarkable either. At that time it was nearly unheard of for a Jew to shirk his religious duties. From the age of thirteen onward, every able-bodied man and boy attended synagogue on the Sabbath without fail.

And nor is it remarkable that Jesus stands up, receives the scroll that's handed to him and begins to read. That's what was expected.

So we still haven't reached the remarkable part. But we *do* have three questions to ask ourselves:

First, are *we* completely at home in our church building? Even if we've been attending church all our lives, the answer is probably no. Today's culture *doesn't* revolve around meeting places – certainly not places of worship! Our society is much more focused on *individual* pursuits, on carving out our own niche in the world. So, even though we do come together for worship and other activities in this building, I doubt many of us would say we're *completely* at home here – not to the extent that we relax and hang out together in preference to, say a friend's home or a favorite coffee shop.

Second, are we attending church regularly? It's unusual these days even for committed church members to attend worship every week without fail. There are some perfectly valid reasons for being kept away from church occasionally. But sometimes we may just not feel like it; or there may be something more attractive on offer.

Here in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, religion often gets lumped together with a whole range of leisure pursuits. It's become one option among many in a society where free choice and self-fulfilment are revered. So there's not much resistance to the pick-and-mix lifestyle – even on a Sunday morning!

Third, are we prepared to read aloud from the Bible when we meet with fellow Christians? Are we prepared to talk about what we read, to discuss the meaning of scripture and apply it to specific situations? Of course lots of people are happy to serve as lectors, to stand up and read our Lectioary passages week by week. But if I were to ask for some volunteers to come up and talk about those readings ... I think you might all develop a sudden interest in your shoelaces!

And yet, if someone were to ask us about our favorite movie, or our grandchildren, or the football team we support, I imagine we'd have plenty to say. But isn't our faith even *more* important to us? When we read or hear words that were inspired by the very God we worship – words that describe the power revealed by Christ in *our* lives – don't we have *something* to say about that?

Jesus demonstrated three unremarkable things in the synagogue on that Sabbath day so many years ago. He showed us that he was at ease with his surroundings, that worship was an integral part of his life, and that he was eager to read and discuss Scripture. I believe Jesus intended his followers to model *their* lives of faith on the example he set. And I believe he wanted those three characteristics to be as unremarkable in *our* day and age as they were in his: three simple, natural extensions of our faith in him.

And if those three expressions of faith are resonating with you, I hope your next question is, "How can I start?" Well, if you look in your Centre Point, or read the Annual Report, you'll find lots of possibilities. When you come to Annual Meeting you'll hear about some more. All you really need is a desire to experience church in its fullness – and to discover *your* role as a part of the body.

I've focused on the unremarkable things Jesus illustrated in our gospel passage, but I want to finish with the *remarkable* thing he did.

After Jesus finishes reading the words from Isaiah, he sits down and announces, "Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing." (Luke 4:21) From this point on, good news for the poor, freedom for the prisoners, sight for the blind and release for the oppressed stop being simply words on a scroll and start being a reality. The Messiah has come.

I want to tell you a story about how Jesus' words became a reality right here in Concord – because a couple from this parish took them to heart. Two members of this family made it possible for good news to be shared with the poor, for prisoners to find a way to freedom, for blind eyes to be opened and oppression lifted.

Around three months ago, two young women were killed in an accident driving home from their jobs in Manchester. Nelly and Butonga were new American Africans who'd made a home for themselves and their children here in Concord. The Monitor published an article about the

tragedy and about the local African community and an organization called “Overcomers.” Overcomers is run by Pastor Clement Kigugu and offers services which help new Americans acclimatize to life in their new home.

A St. Paul’s couple read that article and went straight to Pastor Clement to ask him what they could do to help. He told them he was concerned about teenage boys from the African community, who were falling into bad habits with drugs and alcohol.

Less than a month later, an event was organized at the Community Center in the Heights. The guest speakers were three adults: a police officer, a school counsellor, and an ex-addict. Everyone else was a middle school, high school or college student from the New American African community. The two MCs were girls from Concord High.

Because of the passion, commitment, and generosity of two members of this parish, nearly a hundred young lives were influenced, even transformed, because they heard compelling wisdom from their peers *and* because they had a powerful experience of strangers reaching out to them with genuine concern.

This morning we’ve heard the words Jesus read and spoke on that Sabbath day, just as the people in the synagogue did. And I wonder, are we as amazed as they were?

Perhaps we should be, because his words are still true. The only difference is, on that day, Jesus himself was the fulfilment of scripture – and on *this* day, *we* are. As members of the body of Christ, *we’re* responsible for continuing the work he began.

The parishioners I told you about embraced that responsibility. As people who have benefitted from finding a spiritual home at St. Paul’s, attending regularly over many years, and finding wisdom and inspiration in scripture, they were able to go out into the world and put their faith into action – with miraculous results.

Why don’t we all start with the unremarkable things and just see what happens.