

On the Edge of Belonging
The Monroe Congregational Church, UCC
Rev. Jennifer Gingras
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Luke 4:14-30

Once you get a few paragraphs deep into the classic 1951 novel by J.D. Salinger, The Catcher in the Rye, it becomes painfully clear that there's something deeply wrong with its main character Holden Caulfield. He's angry, depressed, scattered, desperate. Holden looks at the world and its people with a deep skepticism and cynicism. He longs for something real, something authentic, something worth holding on to.

Holden saw phoniness in all kinds of people and it made him crazy.

the prep school kids who spoke in high falutin' tones during Broadway show intermissions,

the smooth-talking guy at the bar trying to get a date,

and even the ministers who preached at the various boarding schools he had attended:

"If you want to know the truth, I can't even stand ministers," he says. "They all have these Holy Joe voices when they start giving their sermons ... I don't see why the hell they can't talk in their natural voice. They sound so phony." (pg 100).

And though most of us would not share his quirks or crude language, there is something about his analysis of the world around him that still strikes a chord.

Holden Caulfield, the angst-ridden and terribly flawed commentator on all things phony, became a sort of American prophet, calling out our phoniness while broadcasting our seemingly contradictory yearning for authenticity.

Though he admitted that he was probably an atheist, Caulfield said that he liked Jesus. I imagine that Jesus would've liked him, too. Jesus became known for calling out the religious leaders and super-pious types who thought they had a corner on the market of righteousness. No one was immune... the proud, the rich and influential, even his own hand-picked disciples, took their God, their status, their fellow human beings for granted from time to time.

Jesus exposed their hypocrisy, compared them to none other than the devil, told clever tales subtly revealing their wickedness. Today's reading is the first time Jesus dares to be a prophet in Luke's gospel, dares to put himself in a perilous place.

And I wonder if when Jesus gave his first sermon to that home crowd, was he as nervous as they were? Whether it was our first job interview, our first expression of love, our first failure ... we know something about what that feels like, when we have to say something with our heart and our fists clenched.

Jesus had been living right under their nose since moving to the Galilean hills as a child. They knew all about that time he made his parents near crazy with worry staying behind at the Temple in Jerusalem. Apparently, he had gotten involved in some kind of faith healing in the next village over, Capernaum. They'd also heard some talk about him hanging out with wild John at the Jordan and how this illegitimate son of Joseph had a strange kind of spiritual encounter.

He'd gone off the radar for a while – some say there'd been some trouble out in the wilderness - but now here he was, gallivanting about the countryside making a name for himself as some kind of itinerant teacher and preacher.

They weren't sure what to make of it all, but the home crowd wasn't going to miss the chance to hear, what we sometimes call it in my profession, his "preaching chops". And it went well at first, really well! Until suddenly, it didn't. And they wanted him gone.

It's been more than two thousand years since that day in Nazareth when Jesus tried to invite his own people to join him in a ministry that would take them all to the edge of belonging.

I wonder what that first sermon would sound like in our ears...

I imagine Jesus standing here, his jeans too loose from 6 weeks living on Webb Mountain without even as much as a bag of trail mix, saying that the Spirit of the Lord has anointed him to bring good news to the poor;

- To bring gifts of fine wine and rich food to those who exist only on McDonalds and Taco Bell because it's the only food within walking distance of their neighborhood
- To forgive all your student loans which you're not sure you'll ever get out from under, and close down the payday loan sharks
- To bring living water to the people of Flint and Rwanda and LaPlant and Haiti and the West Bank
- To dismantle our system of profits at the expense of people, so that none of our elderly residents need choose between medication and food
- To restore the dignity of the 99% AND the 1%
- To close the casinos where folks who can't afford it spend their last dollars in hopes they'll finally win
- To endow us with a sense of worth that has nothing to do with our bank accounts

Because the Spirit of the Lord had sent him to bring good news to the poor.

I imagine Jesus standing here and saying that The Spirit of the Lord has sent him to bring release to the captives;

- To free the addicts from the bottle and the needle and the laptop
- To remove the feeling of hopelessness from the depressed, and fear from the anxious
- To bring rest to the sleep-deprived parents of babies
- To free those wrongly imprisoned by a justice system that is so often lacking in actual justice
- To remove all desire for the kind of cheap goods that can only come from child labor
- To give a sense of belonging to the alienated
- To remove all resentments from those who can't let go of the past and move on

Because the Spirit of the Lord has sent him to bring release to the captives.

And then I imagine me shifting my weight around in my seat – when I realize his sermon is going over 10 minutes and that Jesus might not know how we do things here. I catch myself wondering what the heck he thinks my role is in all of this. I don't gamble, I hate fast food, and I slept just fine last night. And then I imagine him looking at me with the most loving "get over yourself" look before continuing and saying that he has also come to bring recovery of sight to the blind;

- To forever change the way we see those whose abilities differ from our own
- To illuminate to us the ways that human sin tears at the fabric of all humanity, and what cost war and violence really have on our individual and gathered souls
- To allow us to see who we really are, so that we might again glimpse the image of God in ourselves and others
- To give us a sneak peek of heaven in the here and now
- To show us that the Kingdom of God really is at hand and what its like to love what God loves
- To allow us to see ourselves as God sees us, so that we see how there really is no longer a "them" there is only an "us"
- To help us see how the sin of racism keeps us from living as the beloved community Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. envisioned when he wrote to moderate southern clergymen from a Birmingham Jail and asked "*Will we be extremists for Hate or extremists for Love?*"

Because the Spirit of the Lord has sent him to bring recovery of sight to the blind.

The Spirit of the Lord has sent him to bring freedom to the oppressed, the over worked, the under-appreciated, the last chosen for the team, the unlovely and bullied, the despised and unseen, the overly-proud, and the parts of ourselves that are so, so small.

And maybe that is what our ears might hear were Jesus to stand at this pulpit and say: "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 then he sits down. And no one moves. Or even breathes. Not even the kids. And then he says,

"Guys, stop looking at me – you have what you need. It's all here. Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."

That's the thing... Jesus fought with the devil, saw all the easy answers and false promises for what they were. And even though the first thing he says is that quotation from Isaiah, the first of his own words was the word "TODAY".

Today this has been fulfilled in your hearing. Today. This moment. And so I imagine our minds and hearts and eyes opening. I imagine our brows becoming un-furrowed, our doubts seeming less important, our critical mind that judges and assesses every single thing in our lives silenced, our resentments let go of and the good news, and vision and freedom of God fulfilled in our hearing – not fulfilled in our believing, not fulfilled in our acting, not fulfilled in our striving...simply fulfilled in our hearing. Today.

So come, Lord Jesus, even to us phonies. Open us to your authentic life and love. Change our hearts. Change our minds. Change our world.

Even though, if we're quite honest about it, maybe we'd rather you not.

May your Kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.
Amen.